

RAISE the Vote: Political Scientists Reflect on Civic Engagement in 2020

Introduction

Tanya B. Schwarz, American Political Science Association

In November 2019, the American Political Science Association introduced a new civic engagement initiative to highlight political science research, teaching practices, and campus engagement techniques related to student voting and political participation. The RAISE the Vote campaign, which stands for **R**esources to **A**mplify and **I**ncrease **S**tudent **E**ngagement, in accordance with APSA's Statement on Civic Engagement and Voting, is a nonpartisan effort to provide political science faculty with the tools needed to effectively encourage student civic engagement. In particular, the campaign's main goal is to increase college student registration, voting, and civic engagement through two key mechanisms:

- Providing concrete steps and best practices that faculty can use in the classroom and on-campus to encourage student engagement;
- Highlighting the research, teaching, and service of political scientists related to civic engagement and voting, and encourage faculty to use these resources in their classrooms.

Over 100 political science faculty members and students have contributed blog posts and other resources to RAISE the Vote. We feature four exemplary contributions here. In their respective posts, Sekou Franklin (Middle Tennessee State University) and Melissa Michelson (Menlo College) discuss how they integrate civic engagement assignments, experiences, and principles into the political science classroom. In her piece, Lilly Goren (Carroll University) provides an overview of the 25th Amendment and shows how it has been represented in popular culture. Finally, we round out our highlights with a piece from Davin Phoenix (University of California, Irvine) and Maneesh Arora (Wellesley College), providing an overview of their research on the effectiveness of #BlackLivesMatter protests on police reform. The posts featured here are representative of the excellence exhibited in the broader pieces featured in the RAISE the Vote campaign. Any political science faculty or students interested in contributing a blog post should reach out to Dr. Tanya Schwarz, APSA Director of Teaching & Learning, at tschwarz@apsanet.org ■

Teaching the Power of Local Political Participation

Melissa Michelson, Menlo College



My Menlo College students are generally concerned with current events and politics at the federal level—including Supreme Court decisions and actions taken by Congress or the president—and it can be challenging to convince them that their local participation matters on that larger stage. I have found that

once students learn more about what local government does and how to get involved, local politics provide a great opportunity for turning hackneyed phrases about the importance of participation and voting into real-world experiences that have longer-lasting impacts on their civic engagement. Last spring, a local political issue offered an opportunity for my students to learn about the political process while also taking direct action.

In March 2019, a city very close to campus, Redwood City, was threatened with a lawsuit if it did not revise its election procedures to switch from an at-large system to a district system. The basis for the threat was that only one of the seven members of the council was Latino, while Latinos represent 39% of the population. This dilution of the Latino vote was in violation of the California Voting Rights Act. The council put together some map options and was preparing to vote. This was a key time to have our voices heard.

First, I shared with my students what was happening, including background information on at-large vs. district elections, the demographics of Redwood City (52% non-Hispanic white), and the proposed maps. This was an academic lesson that included the history of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the California Voting Rights Act, and the pros and cons of at-large vs. district systems. Then I gave them an assignment:

Imagine you are speaking to the Redwood City Council (or writing an op-ed for the local paper). In your own words but being as persuasive as possible, why should the city approve [your preferred map]?

Students wrote their statements and then shared them with the class. It was a satisfying and successful class that engaged students' creativity while maintaining academic integrity.

Things shifted to real-world politics soon afterwards, when it looked like the council was going to approve a map that created only one majority-Latino district. Local residents were outraged. Groups representing the Latino and Asian American communities organized a rally to precede the March 25, 2019 council meeting.¹ Several of my students met me there to participate in the rally and sit in on the council meeting.

Inspired by the rally to have their voices heard, two of my students—Victor Garcia and Rasmia Shuman—decided to fill out cards to speak, and they read their prepared statements from our class assignment. In the end, the council voted to change their decision and adopt a map creating two majority-minority Latino districts. This was the outcome preferred by my students, and they were invigorated by their role in the process.

It's easy to spend our time talking about federal politics; it dominates the news cycle and can feel like where the important decisions are being made. But local politics are equally important and often more accessible. The surge of interest in police reform is a good reminder that local politics can catalyze change, whether through police reform, redistricting decisions, or plans for how to bring students back to campus safely. My students learned a powerful lesson about how to participate locally and have their voices heard. As my colleague Emily Farris says, "local politics are the best politics."

NOTES

1. Mark Simon. 26 March 2019. "Political Climate with Mark Simon: Council changes course on district map amid opposition." *Climate Online Redwood City*. Available at: <https://climaterwc.com/2019/03/26/political-climate-with-mark-simon-council-changes-course-on-district-map-amid-opposition/>

Civic Engagement as Critical Pedagogy at Middle Tennessee State University

Sekou Franklin, Middle Tennessee State University



The expansion of civic engagement initiatives in US colleges and universities has diversified the curricula of political science departments. Civic engagement includes a broad array of activities, including: experiential learning activities and externships; volunteer and community service projects that are integrated in course requirements;

participant observation of legislative proceedings, city council meetings and hearings by government agencies; independent study and applied research projects; and participation in social movement campaigns. These activities can be developed as in-class or stand-alone activities coordinated by

political science faculty and departments. In general, civic engagement can be institutionalized as broad-based programs by universities and political science departments, or they can be integrated into undergraduate courses to supplement class instruction.

A decade ago, my university—Middle Tennessee State University—established the Experiential Learning Scholars Program (also referred to as an EXL program). The program allows faculty to create EXL courses (or reclassify traditional courses into EXL ones). These courses must comply with learning outcomes that give students hands-on involvement in civic engagement activities, which for the most part allows them to interact with public officials, politicians, and community advocates. EXL faculty can even apply for small grants to supplement course projects. Students who take six EXL-designated courses can graduate with "distinction"—they are formally recognized by the university president as EXL scholars at graduation ceremonies.

Several of my courses were designated under the EXL program: Sustainability and the Cities; Civil Rights Policy and Politics; and Democratic Participation and Civic Advocacy. For my sustainability course, I placed students with an environmental organization or government agency. They also had to develop an "action plan" that municipalities could use to reduce carbon emissions and create clean energy jobs. I converted my civil rights course to a voting rights immersion class in the summer of 2015. With funds from the EXL program, I took three academic years of students to Birmingham, Selma, and Lowndes County, Alabama. Students then created photovoice projects visually documenting past and contemporary barriers to voting. On several occasions, students in the civic advocacy course conducted voter registration drives in low-income neighborhoods where incarceration, language barriers, and disabilities inhibit political and voter participation.

I now include at least one civic engagement activity in most of my courses including those not classified under the EXL program. For example, in spring 2019, students in my African American Politics course participated in an official hearing organized by the Tennessee Advisory Committee to the US Civil Rights Commission. The hearing focused on legal and financial obligations (LFOs) that prohibit formerly incarcerated persons from voting and obtaining affordable housing. Students even provided written testimony that became part of the official record of the hearing.

If leveraged correctly, civic engagement can be a tool for advancing what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire called "critical pedagogy."¹ This pedagogical framework reduces hierarchies between teachers and students as well as universities and communities, while allowing faculty to create curricula that promote participatory democracy and challenge institutional inequities. Along these lines, students can be resourced to work on civil rights and advocacy campaigns. My political science department even has a "Community-Based Practicum" course that allows students to conduct research projects supervised by advocacy groups and government agencies. For the course, students created a documentary on transit justice for a bus riders union and blogged for a community-labor coalition working on community benefits agreements.

Political science departments have much to gain by expanding their curricula and course options to include civic engagement initiatives. First, they can teach students about the mach-



Above: Dr. Sekou Franklin's students prepare to knock on doors in the Mercury Court public housing development in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Photo by Sekou Franklin.

inations of political institutions. For example, in several of my courses, I require students to observe committee hearings at the Tennessee General Assembly or hearings at school boards and municipal commissions. I challenge students to document what goes on behind the scenes at these meetings such as interactions between lawmakers and whether the hearings are receptive to people from poor neighborhoods.

Civic engagement activities that center the experiences of under-resourced communities can also allow students to evaluate their own assumptions about the workings of political institutions. As part of course requirements, my students participated in an organizer training led by housing justice advocates fighting gentrification; attended a parole hearing of a person who spent 27 years in prison for a wrongful conviction; and participated in a legislative redistricting training sponsored by the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. In these settings, students had a chance to evaluate the applicability of constitutional principles to marginalized communities.

Moreover, civic engagement creates reciprocal learning exchanges between university personnel (faculty and students) and community advocates. Students and faculty mentors can assist community advocates, who in turn, may coproduce instructional activities for political science courses. Students in my African American Politics course teamed up with an advocacy group led by formerly-incarcerated women that was working on a class-action civil rights case at the time. The students canvassed a public housing development to enlist residents in the lawsuit, which provided monetary damages for people adversely affected by the county's parole system.

A year after the class-action suit, I asked the same advocacy group to help me develop a court watch activity for my "Race and Criminal Justice" course. Court watch is a participatory defense exercise that allows the families and friends of incarcerated persons to serve as watchdogs, and in some cases, to assist criminal defense attorneys in disputes involving indigent defendants. I required students to observe court proceedings in Tennessee's Sixteenth Judicial District. The students then wrote letters to the Tennessee Administrative Office of Courts offering recommendations on how criminal courts can better respond to under-resourced communities.

Overall, civic engagement should be a critical component of the political science discipline. It should not be solely rele-

gated to internships or specialty courses that focus exclusively on racial politics and civic advocacy. Rather, civic engagement should be integrated into undergraduate courses in US Politics and International Relations and seminars for graduating seniors.

NOTES

1. Paulo Freire. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 30th Anniversary Edition.

The Presidency and the 25th Amendment in Popular Culture

Lilly J. Goren, Carroll University



Within the American popular culture landscape, the president and the presidency has long been a unique presence, in part because this office and the individual who holds it are often within the popular gaze of the citizenry. From the very early days of the republic, the populace was quite captivated by George Washington—initially as a general and then as president. Literary writers of the 19th century like Mark Twain and Walt Whitman integrated the president and the presidency into their work. The 20th century has seen the rise of the imagined president and presidency in both film and television, as we also note the personalization of the presidency through the media, where presidents can speak directly to the entire country, through radio, television, and now through social media. One of the most notable characteristics of the presidency in popular culture today is the frequent appearance of the 25th Amendment. In the aftermath of Donald Trump's COVID-19 diagnosis and the storming of the Capitol by his supporters on January 6th, 2021, it is worth exploring

why this amendment is such a staple of contemporary popular culture.

I often refer to the 25th Amendment in my classes as the “Hollywood Amendment” because Americans are much more familiar with the workings of the 25th Amendment, especially Section 4, from television narratives and films than they are from the actual application of the 25th Amendment in real life. There is a particular reason why this really is the Hollywood Amendment, and it has a great deal to do with Hollywood’s use of it in narrative productions, but it is also the result of the amendment’s essential dormancy since it was created and the constitutional questions that remain in regard to how Section 4, in particular, would be invoked and executed, without having it seem like a coup executed by the vice president and the cabinet. In October 2020, the 25th Amendment’s reach and implication were getting even more attention because of the concern about the vice president or other members within the line of succession also falling ill with COVID-19.

The 25th Amendment, along with the constitutionally outlined process for impeachment, are the mechanisms provided to remove a president for some particular extant reason, outside of the four-year election cycle. Sections of the 25th Amendment have been delicately used on rare occasions and not necessarily when it might have been expected, most specifically when President Ronald Reagan was shot in 1981. There was no implementation of Section 4 of the 25th Amendment at that time, though it seemed like the situation called for it, given that the president was shot, and then disabled while in surgery and under anesthetic. This particular image, of a president shot and thus disabled, and the process for the implementation of Section 4 of the 25th Amendment can be seen in a number of popular culture artifacts, including the recently concluded CBS show *Scandal*. This is why I refer to it in my classes as the Hollywood Amendment, in large measure, because Hollywood has implemented it, and thus imagined how it might work, far more often than we, as citizens have seen it in actual action. Political Scientist Jay Wendland has argued that popular culture has indeed contributed to our understanding of the 25th Amendment and presidential succession, far more from fiction than from fact.¹

Constitutional Law scholar David Pozen has noted some of the plot points that have made use of the 25th Amendment, explaining that “on popular TV series such as *24* and *House of Cards* and in thrillers such as *The Enemy Within*, Section 4 has been at the center of elaborate plots to steal the presidency. If, as some scholars have argued, the more realistic risk is that Vice Presidents and Cabinet officers will be too timid about calling out presidential inability when it exists, these associations of Section 4 with Machiavellian maneuvering are unhelpful.”² And while it is true that these visions show us how the 25th Amendment can be used deceitfully, to essentially steal the presidency, the television show *Madam Secretary* demonstrated the complicated moral and political dilemma faced by the fictional cabinet members as they approached relieving President Conrad Dalton of his office in the episode “Sound and Fury” (4.12). The cabinet and vice president become quite alarmed at the president’s cognitive capacity and behavioral shifts—they had all noticed dramatic changes in his disposition and personality—but he showed no physical signs of any kind of disability. This again highlights the complicated aspects of the 25th Amendment as a means to relieve the president of his or her office without a

clear physical incapacitation (like Woodrow Wilson’s stroke) or emergency (like the concern that JFK would be permanently disabled by the assassination attempt).

On the ABC/Netflix series *Designated Survivor*, we actually saw the challenge process of Section 4 unfold. In this multi-episode arc, President Tom Kirkman’s cabinet follows the 25th Amendment’s process to remove a sitting president whom they determined to be unable to execute the duties of the office because of a number of factors, including the recent and sudden loss of his wife in an automobile accident. The president’s mental health, grief, and his family’s genetic predisposition towards depression are brought forward as the basis for what are deemed to be his incapacities to perform his job. President Kirkman contests these conclusions and, as allowed by the 25th Amendment, he



Henry E. Chen

makes a case for his continued capacity to execute the job. He is successful in his challenge and remains in the Oval Office. The point of contention is not being physically unable to carry out the job, but a character’s limitation due to mental or psychological disability. This challenge aspect, like the cabinet and the vice president’s capacity to remove the president from office, have never been implemented in real life, though it does come up in fictional narratives.

These are just two recent examples of television series integrating the 25th Amendment into their narrative arcs. In the spring of 2003, NBC’s *The West Wing* explored the 25th Amendment in the episode “Twenty Five” when President Jed Bartlet voluntarily steps aside because he realizes he cannot fully execute the duties of his office while his daughter, Zoey, is kidnapped and missing. The episode also wrestles with the line of succession and the complicated nature of the US system of government, since the vice president had been forced to resign and there was no new vice president in place, thus the office of “interim president” fell to the Republican Speaker of the House, a political foe of the president. That same spring Fox’s *24* also explored the 25th Amendment in another multi-episode arc that also interrogated the president’s capacities in the job, in this case, President David Palmer, who was skeptical of the evidence provided as the basis for air strikes against potential terrorists. Because of what was seen as a lack of commitment to exact punishment for attacks, President Palmer’s cabinet moves to remove him from office because they deem him unfit—in part because members of his cabinet and senior staff disagree with his decisions. *24* goes on to make use of the 25th Amendment a few more times throughout its multi-season run on Fox Television.

Thus, the problem with the 25th Amendment is that it remains

SPOTLIGHTS

untested in the more crisis-oriented situations—situations that we often see on screens in our homes or in movie theaters but, thus far, never in fact. Hollywood has had such free reign with this amendment because it can propel plots and shift allegiances, it can be used for nefarious ends, to steal the presidency from the duly elected character, and because of the complication surrounding how it is both implemented and how it is then to be reversed, screenwriters have a lot of latitude when they integrate it into a narrative. This is good for screenwriters since it provides an oft used means to move a narrative along, but it may be more problematic for citizens since we only know the way this amendment works from our fictional experiences. In considering how this amendment works in practice, we are often relying on historians, constitutional law scholars, political scientists, and the understandings we have from legislative history surrounding the passage of the 25th Amendment as well as the Constitutional Convention's discussion of succession and the role of the vice president.

As we consider the presidency in our popular imaginations, we also find ourselves puzzling over aspects of the constitutional system that may be confusing or obscure. In the case of the removal of the president via the 25th Amendment, for many citizens, the only conceptualization that we have of this amendment and how it functions is from these imagined narratives, again demonstrating unanticipated ways that popular culture shapes our thinking and understanding of politics and government in the United States, especially as it has to do with the presidency. This is actually a way in which voters are connected to the office itself—through their imagined ideas of the office and the individuals either inhabiting it or running for the White House.

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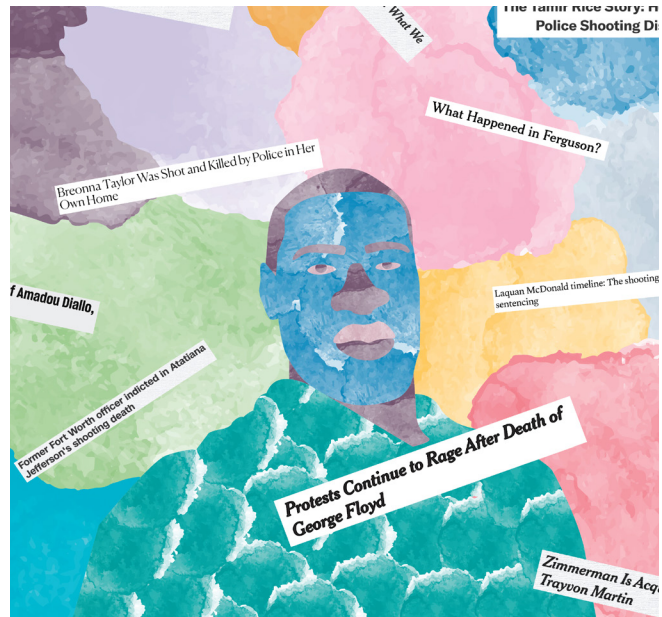
1. Jay Wendland. 2020. "A Heartbeat Away: Popular Culture's Role in Teaching Presidential Succession." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* 7(2).
2. David Pozen. "The Deceptively Clear Twenty-Fifth Amendment." Interactive Constitution: National Constitution Center. <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/interpretation/amendment-xxv/interps/159#the-deceptively-clear-twenty-fifth-amendment-by-david-pozen>.

Will the Recent Black Lives Matter Protests Lead to Police Reform?

Davin Phoenix, University of California, Irvine
Maneesh Arora, Wellesley College

On May 25th, 2020, a police officer killed George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. Since then, protests, marches, and demonstrations have taken place around the country, bringing renewed attention to police brutality and racial injustice. A major question among movement participants, supporters, and casual observers is: will these protests lead to meaningful police reform? More broadly, can the protests that have taken place since 2013 as part of the Movement for Black Lives spark infrastructural change? Our research, along with early signs from local, state, and federal governments, provide some indication that the protests will be effective in changing policing practices.

States like Connecticut, Iowa, and New York, as well as cities



Above: After the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and others in Spring 2020, protests against racial injustice erupted across the nation. Illustration by Henry E. Chen.

including Houston, Louisville, and Phoenix have taken steps to reduce police violence or race-based targeting in recent weeks. Legislation is moving through legislative chambers in several other states.¹ Early evidence suggests that legislators are, at least somewhat, responsive to the demands of protesters and movement leaders. These anecdotes also align with our own work² and other scholarship³, which shows a relationship between movement activity and policy reform.

BLM PROTESTS ARE EFFECTIVE

Working with an outstanding team of undergraduate research assistants, we created two original data sets. The first data set includes every police reform bill introduced by every state legislature since 2013. The second data set includes every article on policing and police-related protests written in the largest newspapers since 2013. This starting point is significant because it predates the Ferguson uprising of 2014 after the murder of Michael Brown, which sparked heightened focus on police brutality among media and political figures.

Building from prior scholarship, we theorized that media coverage of protests could be a mechanism through which protesters can transmit their preferences to legislators, which may then lead to policy changes.⁴ Our findings (2019) support this hypothesis. Indeed, we find substantial correlation between media attention on policing-related protests and legislative activity on



policing. Among a set of major newspapers, the total number of articles related to policing published in 2014 was a dramatic 14 times greater than in 2013. This heightened media attention was sustained in 2015. We found similar spikes in legislative activity, with all 50 state legislatures introducing some form of police reform legislation. Overall, state legislatures passed three times as many police reform bills in 2014 as they did in the previous year, 12 times as many in 2015 and five times as many in 2016.

These findings indicate that protests, and particularly media coverage of protests, can put pressure on political decision makers to act on the protesters' demands. There are several indicators that the current protests may be even more effective in influencing policy.

THE CURRENT PROTESTS MAY EVEN BE MORE EFFECTIVE

First, Michael T. Heaney's work shows that the media focused on protests in June of last year 60% more than at any other point in the last 20 years.⁵ There was about four times as much attention on protests in June than at any point during the history of the Black Lives Matter movement. This matters because it signals to legislators the salience of police reform to constituents across the country, which can lead to greater policy responsiveness from elected officials (Gause 2016).

Second, Americans are becoming substantially more supportive of police reform policies and BLM more generally. Recent polling finds that a majority of Americans now support BLM and, for the first time ever, a plurality of white Americans support the movement. Roughly 55% of Americans support major changes to law enforcement or to redesign the system completely. Importantly, in an era of intense political polarization, there is common ground across the political spectrum on several police reform policies.⁶

Third, as LaGina Gause argues, the costs of participating in these protests are higher due to the COVID-19 crisis, and the grievances expressed over rampant police brutality are compounded by concerns over burgeoning unemployment and a worsening economy. Gause argues that elected officials may be more responsive to the interests of groups who have to overcome considerable barriers to express their interests. In sum, because of the particularly high stakes of participation in these protests amidst the backdrop of a global pandemic, they may bring about greater policy responsiveness than previous protests against police brutality.

Of course, it's important to note that many police reform policies passed in recent years are merely symbolic. Indeed, many of the bills in our database involved token gestures such as increasing community service of officers. Even the substantive reforms, such as body camera policies and building public databases, are often not congruent with the institutional transformation advocated for by the Movement for Black Lives.⁷ Nevertheless, participation in the current protests appears to be an effective method of shaping public opinion and bringing about policy changes that better hold police departments and police officers accountable for their use of force. ■

NOTES

1. See, for example: <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/which-states-are-taking-on-police-reform-after-george-floyd/>
2. Maneesh Arora, Davin L. Phoenix, and Archie Delshad. 2019. "Framing police and protesters: assessing volume and framing of news coverage post-Ferguson, and corresponding impacts on legislative activity." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 7 (1): 151-64. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0721565503.2018.1518782>.
3. Daniel Q. Gillion. 2013. *The Political Power of Protest*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
4. LaGina Gause. 2016. *The Advantage of Disadvantage: Legislative Responsiveness to Collective Action by the Politically Marginalized*. Dissertation, University of Michigan.
5. Michael T. Heaney. 2020. "The George Floyd protests generated more media coverage than any protest in 50 years." *The Monkey Cage*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/07/06/george-floyd-protests-generated-more-media-coverage-than-any-protest-50-years/>.
6. See: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-poll/public-agenda-hidden-common-ground-police-reform>
7. See: <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms>

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Davin Phoenix is associate professor of political science at the University of California, Irvine, researching how race interacts with various spheres of US politics to shape the attitudes, emotions and behavior of both everyday people and elites. His book *The Anger Gap: How Race Shapes Emotions in Politics* is the winner of the 2020 Ralph J. Bunche Award by the American Political Science Association.

Maneesh Arora is assistant professor of political science at Wellesley College and an affiliate of the Taubman Center for American Politics and Policy at Brown University. His research focuses on race and ethnicity politics, public opinion, and political behavior. His articles have been published or are forthcoming in *Political Research Quarterly*, *Politics Groups and Identities*, and *Journal of Education and Social Policy*.

The views expressed in the posts and articles featured in the **RAISE the Vote** campaign are those of the authors and contributors alone and do not represent the views of APSA.