

The American Electoral Process: A Never-Ending "Teachable Moment"

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Author Note

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Abstract

Elections at all levels of government offer an excellent context for enhancing students' political learning and serve as opportunities to foster not only political knowledge but also civic skills and attitudes. This reflection piece offers examples of how the author has utilized recent primary contests as springboards for such instruction—both inside and outside the classroom. With the 2016 general election looming on the horizon, the article promises to offer ideas to educators who wish to integrate evidence-based pedagogical techniques into their coursework and make the most of the election as a "teachable moment."

Keywords: civics, elections, pedagogy, youth, political learning

For civic engagement practitioner-scholars, elections are always "teachable moments." Educators use their classrooms—and sometimes their surrounding communities—as "laboratories of democracy," employing evidence-based methods of instruction to foster informed and engaged citizenship in their students. All elections offer such political learning opportunities, and the most recent primaries and caucuses were no exception. In this reflection, I will share ways in which I have utilized elections, including the recent primary contests, as springboards for political learning, including work both inside the classroom and throughout the campus itself. As the 2016 general election fast approaches, I hope this article offers ideas for other educators who wish to enhance their instruction, connect students to the political process, and prepare their students to be active citizens now and into the future.

Background

The mission of Rutgers University's [Eagleton Institute of Politics](#)—now celebrating its 60th anniversary—is to link the theory of politics with the practice of politics. In many ways, this mission aligns with the scholarship and practice of teaching and learning. The Institute's outreach efforts, whether training women to run for office through the [Center for American Women in Politics' Ready to Run](#)[®] program or administering civic engagement workshops in high schools through the [RU Ready](#)[™] program, are rooted in research. Likewise, these efforts often serve as opportunities to rigorously assess their effects on political interest, attitudes, and behavior.

As I often tell my students, although the Institute is nonpartisan, it values and prioritizes political participation. In fact, the [Youth Political Participation Program](#) (YPPP) that I direct at Eagleton has adopted the rallying cry "Politics matters to you, and you matter to politics" in an effort to support and encourage the political learning and engagement of young adults. Toward that end, the program engages in a mix of research, education, and public service initiatives. One such initiative is [RU Voting](#)[™]. Funded by various Rutgers offices, [RU Voting](#)[™] is a nonpartisan, campus-wide effort designed to encourage students to pay attention to politics, to register to vote, and to get to the polls on Election Day. By integrating the [RU Voting](#)[™] effort into my 1.5-credit American Politics Topics course, I have been able to link for my students how politics is conceived and how it is practiced.

Civic Engagement Topics Course

Each semester, I offer a topics course entitled [Experience Politics: The Darien Civic Engagement Project](#) (see Appendix for the syllabus). The course comprises one component of a larger effort, supported through a fund created by Rutgers alumni Susan and Steven Darien, to enhance students' appreciation of the U.S. Constitution and tenets of American citizenship. The purpose of the course is to explore how well the ideals of American democracy and the core principles of American political thought align with the realities of American politics, and my students and I explore this topic through the lens of youth political participation. Through readings, discussion, reflection, experiential and project-based learning, students consider the ways in which the ideals of American citizenship are realized and the ways in which they conflict in contemporary elections. The fall course typically centers on youth voting and involves students directly in the voter mobilization efforts of RU Voting™. The 2015 fall course, for instance, took place during the highly charged and very visible lead-up to the primary elections and presented multiple learning opportunities. In this section, I outline how the course is organized and offer additional considerations that came into play in light of the aforementioned primary contests.

Readings, Discussion, and Reflection

Much like the process of encouraging young adults to vote, the readings I offer in this course familiarize students with the literature addressing the registration process, political interest and awareness, and voter mobilization, with particular emphasis on the experience of young adults' political participation. The students and I begin the semester by reviewing current research about the demographics, attitudes, and political behavior of the Millennial Generation. We consider the generation's great potential for power given its unique size, diversity, educational attainment, and its members' status as "digital natives." We also explore young adults' attitudes toward politics and institutions of all sorts, Millennials' unstable connection to traditional forms of political engagement, and their apolitical sense of civic duty compared to older generations.

Readings and discussions about their generation provide a necessary foundation for considering the structure of the American political process and how it impacts the nature and degree of young adults' political participation. For example, we consider the academic literature on America's voter registration

process relative to comparable democracies and the extent to which it depresses turnout in the United States. Furthermore, we consider how the practicalities associated with America's registration process, such as early registration deadlines, inconsistencies between states' registration practices, and the pervasive lack of online registration, can impede youth turnout.

New Jersey's recent primary election certainly offered some practical examples of the intricacies (and frustrations) associated with registering to vote. Although student interest was high (particularly in the fall of 2015 when this course took place) and the state stood to impact the nomination outcome, New Jersey's primary wasn't held until June 7, weeks after the end of the academic year. Students who were no longer going to be on campus and wanted to vote in the primary needed to make the appropriate arrangements long beforehand. In addition, New Jersey requires voters to be affiliated with the political party of the candidate for whom they want to vote. If they are unaffiliated, they can declare their party affiliation on the day of the primary, but if they want to change their party affiliation in order to vote in a party's primary, they must do so 55 days before the election—a teachable moment indeed.

Along with discussions about the registration process, students enrolled in this course consider how electoral laws, such as those pertaining to voter identification and early voting, might affect young adults' participation rates. On Rutgers' very geographically dispersed campus, special consideration is also given to the location of the polls and their accessibility via campus transportation. Not only do these topics introduce new ideas to students, they offer opportunities for discussion; in fact, the heated discussions that often take place offer added opportunities for students to practice the skills of direct but civil discourse.

Throughout the course, students are encouraged to connect the practice of politics today with the ideals of politics. Primarily through guest lectures by Professor Andrew Murphy from the Political Science Department, students over the years have been exposed to readings ranging from Increase Mather's *The Day of Trouble is Near*, to Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, to the writings of John Adams, and have been asked (both in discussions and reflection papers) to consider whether conceptions of democracy expressed by these theorists conform or conflict with how politics plays out today. For example, given the intricacies of registering to vote and accessing the polls on Election Day, students are asked to consider how the reality of voting aligns with the theories of the social contract.

In journal responses gathered via research gauging the course's effects, some students categorically agreed that electoral laws, especially those that have been found to dampen youth voter turnout, are inconsistent with democratic ideals. One student, citing nineteenth-century African-American thinker David Walker, held that such practices contrast with American notions of representation:

A democracy is the ideal manifestation of representation by all members of a society. David Walker reminds us of this characteristic in his *Appeal* when he says, "America is more our country, than it is the whites—we have enriched it with our blood and tears. The greatest riches in all America have arisen from our blood and tears" (Walker). All Americans should be encouraged to vote. An ideal democracy includes the voices of all citizens, whether they are more likely to vote one way or another.

Another student argued that such laws contrast with the notion of the social contract advocated by the Founders:

John Adams stated that "rulers are no more than trustees for the people" and because of this I believe that leaders should be more accountable to their people and look out for their best interest. Making it easier for them to vote is in the citizens' and country's best interest. John Adams' sentiments have not been forgotten by many citizens, but I do believe that government officials need to be reminded of his words.

In response to this prompt, other students disagreed that the realities of targeted mobilization and electoral law contrasted with democratic ideals. Recalling Mather, one student argued that mobilization tactics of campaigns make perfect sense given the reality of youth engagement:

The role of a prophet is to urge one's listeners to change their behavior. Increase Mather specifically targeted Boston not solely because he supported Winthrop's vision for a religiously-motivated community; had that been the case, he could easily have spent his life aiming to bring others to his cause. Instead, he chose to target Boston, a city with a traditionally Puritan population, which was most likely to respond to his sermon. Likewise, politicians will target age groups who have consistently displayed higher levels of political participation. Just as Increase Mather had no reason to call upon the profiteering Virginians with his specific message, politicians today have no logical reason to cater to the Millennial

... generation that has displayed historic levels of political apathy and lack of traditional civic and political engagement.

In the context of the recent primaries, in which large numbers of young adults were tuned in, a number of students argued that the rules and regulations surrounding the nomination process did not reflect democratic principles or the ideals of popular sovereignty. These concerns were only enhanced by the assertions of candidates from both political parties that the system was “rigged” and responsive to elites rather than the people.

Experiential and Project-Based Learning

The realities of youth political participation are made more real for my students by actually getting them out of the classroom onto campus administering voter registration drives. In the spirit of John Dewey, a core principle of the scholarship of teaching and learning is that individuals “learn by doing.” Students’ reactions to registering their fellow students have run the gamut from dismay over how many students either don't know there is an upcoming election or don't care, to annoyance when students try to avoid them as they urge them to register, to pleasant surprise when students are enthusiastic about registering. The challenge students faced in the fall of 2015 was that, although the news was dominated by the primary debates and the candidates, the 2015 general elections actually involved elections for New Jersey’s general assembly; on more than one occasion, my students and I had to remind other students that they would not be voting for the primary candidates in November and that the primary contest actually was taking place in June 2016.

The numerous primary debates that took place last fall as well as the media attention surrounding the candidates also prompted YPPP to launch a new research initiative entitled “RU Talking to Me?” that was integrated into the 2015 fall topics course. Working in groups, students enrolled in the course charted candidate and media attention on young adults and considered the extent to which—and how—candidates were talking about issues that matter to young adults. Some students observed the Republican debates, some studied the Democratic debates, and others reviewed candidates’ websites and social media platforms. The project not only exposed students to content analysis and qualitative research methods, but it offered another opportunity to link theory with practice.

Reflections

Teaching this course for the past few years has consistently been a rewarding experience for me as a scholar-practitioner, reflecting perfectly the Eagleton Institute's mission of linking theory with the practice. Although the basic structure of the course has remained the same, adjustments are made each year to meet the electoral context. For example, in years in which much of New Jersey's state legislature is up for re-election, the course focuses more on state and local politics. Consequently, the shift in focus often impacts the nature of the projects students undertake. For example, in years when the focus is on state and local elections, students have conducted research on candidates for local and state offices and prepared voter guides for fellow students. Certainly, this fall's presidential election will be reflected in the course's content. In addition to registration efforts and debate viewings, students enrolled in the topic course will work on initiatives to support and encourage Rutgers students to vote in this historic election. Projects will include filming public service announcements to encourage students to vote and preparing infographics and cartoons that walk students (many of whom will be voting for the first time) through the process of casting their ballots.

The nature of the electoral context often affects not only the course content but the students who enroll and the quality of class discussions. The high degree of interest in the primary contests last fall attracted a group of very politically interested and ideologically diverse students—which led to lively classroom discussions. Comments from the most recent course evaluation demonstrate the positive impact of the course:

- I really liked the lessons and discussions. I learned a lot about political engagement. I also really liked registering people to vote. I enjoyed encouraging people to participate in our democracy.
- This course has taught me a great deal about my generation, which I will carry with me for the rest of my life.
- The course was really interesting and engaging. I learned a lot and really enjoyed the class and the experience of registering people to vote.

Needless to say, elections at all levels, from City Hall to the State House to Capitol Hill, offer invaluable learning opportunities for students—an occasion not only to enhance students' appreciation of the academic understanding of politics but also to develop the skills and inclinations of citizenship. The experience of encouraging peers to register to vote or raising awareness about campaigns through public forums or debate watches or organizing get-out-the-vote drives minimizes the gap between thinking about politics and practicing it. Certainly the upcoming general election and the political processes surrounding it provide a plethora of such opportunities, from the first woman serving as a major party's presidential nominee, to the unconventional campaign of Donald Trump, to the current vacancy of the Supreme Court and its implications for the race for president. Given the generation's size, unique demographic profile, and tenuous connection to traditional politics, it is a group worth engaging while they are still in the classroom. Luckily, the political process continues to provide plenty of material and an abundance of teachable moments.

Appendix

Course Syllabus

Darien Civic Engagement Project (DCEP)

Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement

790:250

Instructor/Contact Information:

Elizabeth C. Matto, Ph.D.
Assistant Research Professor
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Silver Laur
Darien Civic Engagement Project Coordinator
Graduate School of Education & Eagleton Institute of Politics
silverl@scarletmail.rutgers.edu

RU Voting™ Student Coordinators
Antoinette (Toni) Gingerelli (amg385@scarletmail.rutgers.edu) &
Damilola Onifade (odo3@scarletmail.rutgers.edu)

Meeting Time/Location:

Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement
Thursdays, 10:55AM-12:15PM
Eagleton Institute of Politics, Library

Office Hours (all office hours held at the Eagleton Institute of Politics):

- Dr. Matto
 - Wednesdays, 10AM-11:30AM
 - By appointment

- Silver Laur
 - Wednesdays, 11:30-1:30
 - Caucus Room, Eagleton Institute of Politics

RU Voting™ is a nonpartisan effort administered by the Eagleton Institute of Politics. Its mission is to prepare and encourage Rutgers students to pay attention to politics, register to vote, and turn out on Election Day. The objective of this course and the *Darien Civic Engagement Project (DCEP)* is to link how we think about American politics with the practicalities of politics by focusing attention and effort on youth political participation via **RU Voting™**. As such, it offers an opportunity to gain a rich understanding of the realities of youth political action and its connection to the theoretical underpinnings of American democracy.

Grading/Course Expectations:

Through **RU Voting™**, *DCEP* students will support the project's mission to encourage students to register to vote, get informed about the political process, and turn out on Election Day. A list of important dates related to **RU Voting™**'s efforts is provided below. It is understood that students have other classes, work commitments, etc. that may preclude attendance at some of them. Clear and consistent communication between students and Dr. Matto and Silver Laur is encouraged.

➤ **Grading**

- **"RU Talking to Me?" Research & Presentation (40%)**
Working in groups, students will participate in this **RU Voting™** initiative to chart candidate and media attention to young adults during the 2016 campaign. In 2012, 18-29 year olds made up 21% of the eligible voter population. As the primary season commences, to what extent are candidates talking about issues that matter to young adults?, how are they talking about these issues?, are the media covering issues related to young adults and how?

Each group will be assigned a certain portion of the campaign including: Republican primary debates, Democratic primary debates, candidates' websites, newspaper/television coverage. Students will follow and analyze their assigned content, write 2-3 page individual reports on what they found, and prepare and deliver a PowerPoint presentation on their group's findings.

- **15%** content analysis of assigned content (individual)
- **15%** 2-3 page report (individual)
- **10%** PowerPoint presentation (group)

- **Reflection Papers (40%)** Over the course of the semester, students will be assigned two reflection papers (3-4) pages in length. The papers will be based on course readings and discussions and will not require additional research on the part of the student. Dr. Matto will announce the reflection paper topic via sakai, and students will be expected to submit the paper in their sakai dropbox folder one week later. **Three points will be deducted for each day the paper is late.**
- **Participation (20%)** Student participation is an important component of the DCEP experience and includes:
 - Attending class regularly, arriving on time, and being a prepared and active participant in class discussions.
 - Participating in the in-class voter registration training and participating in **2 voter registration and/or get-out-the-vote drives organized by RU Voting™**. Students will work with Silver Laur and the RU Voting™ Student Coordinators to identify these opportunities.
 - Attend and be an active participant in the end-of-the-semester DCEP luncheon and "RU Talking to Me?" presentations.
 - Students will be informed mid-semester (as well as other times throughout the semester) how well they are performing regarding participation in order to make any necessary improvements by the end of the semester.

- **Expectations**
 - Students are expected to adhere to Rutgers University's policy regarding academic integrity. To view the policy, go to <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/>.
 - To report an absence, go to: <https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/>.
 - *DCEP* students will play an integral role in the success of **RU Voting™**'s outreach efforts and are expected to represent themselves in a professional and respectful manner and uphold the mission of **RU Voting™** and the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Important Dates to Put in Your Calendar

- September 16th - *Popcorn and Politics - Republican Primary Debate Watch*
- September 17th - Constitution Day, campus-wide voter registration drives

- September 22nd - National Voter Registration Day - campus-wide voter registration drives
- October 13th - *Popcorn and Politics - Democratic Primary Debate Watch*
- October 1 - *Pizza and Politics*
- October 28th - Republican Primary Debate
- November 14th - Democratic Primary Debate
- December 10th - DCEP Luncheon & Presentations

General Election

- **October 13th - Voter registration deadline for general election**
- October 27th - Deadline to apply for a mail-in ballot by mail for general election
- **November 3th - General election**

Course Schedule (Please note that the course schedule is subject to change**)**

Please note that, once students' schedules are set, DCEP will be scheduling a special discussion with Professor Andrew Murphy from the Department of Political Science.

Week of September 1

- Classes begin
- September 3: First meeting of Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement
 - Introductions & course overview

Week of September 7

- September 10: Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement
 - What is the Millennial Generation, Who are Millennials?, & What do they care about?
 - Voter registration training - Toni Gingerelli . . . finalize assignments for "RU Talking to Me?" project
 - **Assigned reading(s):**
 - Overview & Chapter 2, *Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends*:
http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2014/03/2014-03-07_generations-report-version-for-web.pdf

- Executive Summary & Topline Data, *Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service 26th Edition: September 26 – October 9, 2014*:
<http://www.iop.harvard.edu/likely-millennial-voters-grabs-upcoming-midterm-elections-harvard-youth-poll-finds>

Week of September 14

- **September 16th - Popcorn and Politics - Republican Primary Debate Watch**
- **September 17th - Constitution Day Campus-Wide Voter Registration Drives - Class Will Not Meet - DCEP Students Register Rutgers Students to Vote!**

Week of September 21

- **September 22th - National Voter Registration Day- Campus-Wide Voter Registration Drives - DCEP Students Register Students to Vote!**
- September 24: Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement
 - What do we mean by "engaged" and how "engaged" are Millennials in politics? Introduction to content analysis
 - **Assigned reading(s):**
 - Entire report, *Millennials Civic Health Index*:
<http://www.ncoc.net/MillennialsCHI>

Week of September 28

- October 1: Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement
 - Voter registration & youth
 - **Assigned reading(s):**
 - *State Election Law Reform and Youth Voter Turnout*,
http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/State_law_and_youth_turnout_Final.pdf
 - *50 State Student Voting Guide*, Brennan Center for Justice:
http://www.brennancenter.org/content/student_voting/
 - *CIRCLE's Interactive, State-by-State Map*:
<http://www.civicyouth.org/maps/elections/>

Week of October 5

- October 8: Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement
 - Guest Speaker: Jim Vokral, Middlesex County Board of Elections Administrator

Week of October 12

- **October 13th - Voter Registration Deadline & Popcorn and Politics - Democratic Primary Debate Watch**
- October 15: Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement
 - Youth political participation
 - **Assigned reading(s):**
 - Chapter 1, *Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends*:
http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2014/03/2014-03-07_generations-report-version-for-web.pdf
 - "State by State Youth Voter Turnout in 2012":
http://www.civicyouth.org/state-by-state-youth-voter-turnout-in-2012/?cat_id=6
 - "2014 Youth Turnout and Youth Registration Rates Lowest Ever Recorded; Changes Essential in 2016":
http://www.civicyouth.org/2014-youth-turnout-and-youth-registration-rates-lowest-ever-recorded-changes-essential-in-2016/?cat_id=6

Week of October 19

- October 22: Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement
 - Getting out the vote – best practices
 - **Assigned reading(s):**
 - *Young Voter Mobilization Tactics*, Young Voter Strategies (PDF provided on sakai)
 - *The Effects of an Election Day Voter Mobilization Campaign Targeting Young Voters*,
<http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP21Green.pdf>

Week of October 26

- **October 27th - Mail In Ballot Application Deadline for General Election**
- October 28th - Republican Primary Debate

- October 29: Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement
 - Getting out the vote - voter identification legislation
 - **Assigned reading(s):**
 - Voter Identification Requirements, National Conference of State Legislatures, <http://www.ncsl.org/legislatures-elections/elections/voter-id.aspx>
 - *The Case for Voter ID* (Wall Street Journal editorial, 5/23/11)
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704816604576333650886790480.html>
 - *A Poll Tax by Another Name* (New York Times editorial, 8/26/11) <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/27/opinion/a-poll-tax-by-another-name.html>
 - "Did New State Voting Laws Affect the Youth Vote in 2012?": http://www.civicyouth.org/did-new-state-voting-laws-affect-the-youth-vote-in-2012/?cat_id=6

Week of November 2

- **November 3th - Election Day**
- November 5: Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement
 - Debrief of Election

Week of November 9

- November 12: Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement
 - Preparing for "RU Talking to Me?" Presentations
- November 14th - Democratic Primary Debate

Week of November 16

- November 19: Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement
 - Class will not meet - students expected to prepare for "RU Talking to Me?" Presentations

Week of November 23

- November 26: Happy Thanksgiving

Week of November 30

- December 3: Class will not meet - students expected to prepare for "RU Talking to Me?" Presentations

Week of December 7

- **December 10: Topics in Political Science: Citizenship & Civic Engagement**
 - **Final class meeting and "RU Talking to Me?" Presentations**

Author Biography



Assistant Research Professor, Eagleton Institute of Politics & Director, Youth Political Participation Program

Elizabeth C. Matto is an Assistant Research Professor at the Eagleton Institute of Politics and the Director of the Institute's Youth Political Participation Program (YPPP). She earned her doctorate in American Politics at George Washington University and, prior to her work at Eagleton, taught a variety of courses at Princeton University, Temple University, and George Washington University. As director of YPPP, Matto leads research as well as educational and public service efforts designed to celebrate and support the political learning of high school and college students and civic action among young adults – including those holding and running for office.

In addition, Matto edits the web-based companion to the American Political Science Association's publication *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*, a resource for educators who want to include political learning techniques into their curriculum, available [here](#). She currently is working on a book entitled *Citizen Now: Engaging in Politics and Democracy* to be published by Manchester University Press.

Dr. Matto recently was awarded the Craig L. Brians Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research & Mentorship by the American Political Science Association. Established in 2014, this award is given annually by the APSA Political Science Education Section at the Teaching and Learning Conference, with recognition also given at the APSA annual meeting. This award is given to faculty members who demonstrate commitment to and excellence in encouraging and developing scholarship among undergraduate students, and in mentoring undergraduate students in preparation for graduate school or public affairs related careers.

Matto lives in Hunterdon County with her husband and two children.