

Jonathan Becker, Lisa Bratton, Yael Bromberg, Jelani Favors,
Simon Gilhooley, Melanye Price

Afterword: Reflections on the Course “Student Voting: Power, Politics, and Race in the Fight for American Democracy”

1 Jonathan Becker, Bard College

In 1976, as a 12-year old, I volunteered on the congressional campaign of Illinois congressman Abner Mikva, knocking on doors and tracking voters as a part of ‘get out the vote’ efforts. Mikva won in what was an incredibly tight race: he was declared the winner two weeks after the election by a mere 201 votes. His victory was affirmed a year and a half later when the Illinois Supreme Court rejected a “Petition for Recount” by his opponent, Samuel Young, who had alleged errors, irregularities, and fraud. One of the keys to Mikva’s success was the strong support of college students. His election was just five years after the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age to 18. Indeed, Mikva, who was a strong advocate of the 26th Amendment, strategically cultivated the college vote and relied heavily on student voters from Northwestern University and the absentee ballots of college students studying out of district to carry him to victory.

I spent much of the subsequent 20-plus years abroad, studying in Canada and the United Kingdom, doing research in the Soviet Union, and working in Ukraine, the Czech Republic, and Hungary after ‘people power’ had torn down the Berlin Wall. In Central and Eastern Europe, I was part of a cadre of idealistic young Americans aspiring to forge a world that respected human rights, abided by the rule of law, and recognized the will of the people as expressed in free and fair elections. I witnessed some amazing things in my time abroad, including Russia’s first competitive elections in 1989, where turnout was nearly 90 %.

I returned to the United States where I began to work at Bard College. With the 1998 mid-term elections approaching, Bard’s director of student activities, Allen Josey explained to me that the Dutchess County Board of Elections (BOE) did not allow Bard students to vote locally. This did not immediately resonate with me: I had lived abroad since I was 17 and had only voted absentee. Then I met with student organizers who were determined to fight for their right to vote locally. Many were passionate about their place in the community, volunteering for local organizations and identifying the Hudson Valley as home. Some literally had nowhere else to vote because they were born nearby or because

their parents had moved from where they grew up. But none of this mattered to the BOE, which acted with impunity and simply rejected student registrants. Thus began a nearly 25-year journey to fight for democracy at home.



Figure 1: Students and faculty from “Student Voting: Power, Politics and Race in the Fight for American Democracy,” in front of statue of A&T (Greensboro) Four, October 16, 2024. Photo courtesy Seamus Heady.

The idea for the course “Student Voting: Power, Politics, and Race in the Fight for American Democracy” emerged from the lessons learned during this quarter century. The structure of the course was modeled on courses Bard had conducted with international partners in which faculty from around the globe co-designed a course and students did common assignments. Although a discrete course is offered at each institution, all of the students and faculty gather together in an on-line classroom multiple times during the semester so that students can learn with and from each other and benefit from the diverse knowledge of the course faculty. Students enrolled in these courses regularly report that the learning environment allows them to gain unique insights because they are exposed to different perspectives. In the case of student voting, although all of the institutions are situated in the United States, the diversity of students and faculty produced a vibrant learning environment. In informative and stimulating dialogue that linked young people across the country, students presented each other with insights gleaned from interviews with older family members about their voting experiences, described their voting rights role models, and more.



Figure 2: Faculty from “Student Voting: Power, Politics and Race in the Fight for American Democracy,” HBCU Democracy Day at North Carolina A&T State University, October 16, 2024 (from left: Jelani Favors, Melanye Price, Lisa Bratton, Yael Bromberg, and Jonathan Becker). Photo courtesy of Seamus Heady.

The most stirring moments were classes in which students were exposed to the amazing work of past generations of student leaders who fought for their right to vote. Students were taught that they can be more than passive observers. This is especially important today, as the United States falls further into the grip of authoritarianism and the right to vote is challenged more than at any point since the Second Reconstruction. The most important things that we can teach our students today is that they have agency and that their capacity to make an impact as citizens is enhanced when they act collectively.

The current moment represents, in many ways, the antithesis of the idealistic spirit which marked the start of my professional career. One can only hope that the lessons from the class and in this book, culled from generations of engaged and determined students, faculty, administrators, and their allies, will help highlight the path to a better and more democratic future.

2 Lisa Bratton, Tuskegee University

This class on voting was more than just a class to me—it was personal.

I have missed two elections in my life: one when I lived in Taiwan and one when I was unexpectedly delayed out of town on family business. Voting was also person-

al for my parents. I grew up in Vallejo, California and when I was a child, voting took place in private homes. My parents took me to vote with them in the home of our family friends, the Norrises. While I did not understand that they were exercising a newly won constitutional right, I knew it was important from dinnertime conversations.

My great-great-grandfather, Green Bratton, was born enslaved at Historic Brattonsville in York County, South Carolina. While writing a book on resistance at Brattonsville, I found a document indicating that he was a registered voter in 1868. My father, who was born in the same county in 1917, could not vote until 1965.

When Shirley Chisholm made her bid for president in January 1972, I was ten years old. I vividly recall asking my mother if she was going to vote for her. She replied, “America is not ready for a Black president.” Fast forward to 2008, and both she and I have lived to see the election of Barack Obama.

This class gave me the opportunity to share my passion for voting which I hope has inspired my students to become lifelong voters. Students learned of Tuskegee’s extraordinary role in securing voting rights for all. The class was offered during the Harris/Trump election, one of the most contentious in U.S. history, and we were able to discuss some of the implications of each outcome. Students have shared with me the impact that this class has had on them—including their decisions to become lifelong voters. I am humbled to have been a part of their experience.

3 Yael Bromberg, Esq.

Designing and teaching “Student Voting: Power, Politics, and Race in the Fight for American Democracy” has been a dream. The course brought together professors and students from different departments across four colleges and four states. This resulting book is better for the thought-provoking questions posed by our students over the last two years teaching this course together, and by the ongoing interrogation of the subject matter by my fellow faculty members.

Over 20 years ago, I was an active student and community organizer, spearheading and supporting various voter registration and advocacy campaigns. Those involved in similar efforts, no matter the locale, know the truism all too well: freedom is an endless meeting. The work is hard, and the labor required is far from glamorous and often unseen. But the difficulty and bitterness of loss is staved off by the rewards of the participatory process. The sweetness of wins is long-lasting. It demands celebration, no matter how small or how large. The process itself shapes us. I had no idea how foundational this early exposure to demo-

cratic engagement would be for me or my peers, and have since witnessed and supported generations of young people navigating their own democratic practice.

When I was a young constitutional rights attorney, I worked in the D.C. headquarters of Common Cause, and then taught and supervised voting rights litigation at the Georgetown Law Civil Rights Clinic. The absence of the 26th Amendment vexed me. Mention of the issue was bare—if mentioned at all—in election law textbooks and materials. I found myself poring through the archives at the Library of Congress, leading to my legal scholarship on the 26th Amendment, *The Unfulfilled Promise*. Through these efforts, I had the privilege of befriending, and endlessly interviewing, the then-youth organizers (now in their 70s) who led the successful ratification of the Amendment in 1971. Those organizers and congressional staffers went on to do great things, joining the Carter administration, international peace and democracy efforts, and other causes for the public good. While most people may not know their names, they were the young sheroes and heroes who made the seemingly impossible happen.

Through these various works, I also befriended David Goodman, brother of slain Freedom Summer civil rights worker Andy Goodman, who encouraged me to start my own law firm. Seven years later, the firm continues to support practitioners of democracy, securing ballot reform and voter access in multiple prece-dential litigations in New Jersey, and engaging young voters, faculty, and administrators across the country in search of solutions for electoral access. One of my first clients was The Andrew Goodman Foundation, whose mission is to make young voices and votes a powerful force in democracy, with its vast network of over 60 campuses across the country.

Over 50 years after ratification of the 26th Amendment, obstacles to the youth vote persist, intentionally or otherwise. These are described in further detail in the first legal volume on the Amendment, published by *The Rutgers University Law Review*, for which I worked alongside student-editors as a faculty advisor. The volume features contributions by a range of critical voices in the field. A part of this systemic problem is academia's shortcoming, ripe with opportunity, to ready and support young voters as they inherit the franchise.

To my surprise, the students primarily attracted to this course were not activists and organizers. So why did they sign up for the course? Word clouds generated on the first day of class in Fall 2023 and Fall 2024 revealed similar responses: *democracy, elections, rights, power, ideals, sacrifice, choice, president*. Our classroom discussions unearthed a deep curiosity about the democratic and political process, especially as it relates to their own demographic group on the question of youth political power. Thus, even though they were not all (or perhaps, not yet) democracy practitioners, they sought to study the process and the history, in the context of contemporary struggles. More, as the semester progressed, and as

we heard back from students who had completed the course, they found ways to engage, several in leadership capacities.

We endeavored, as much as possible, not to idolize civil rights heroes and litigators whose work we studied in class, but to humanize them and emphasize agency and community. In addition to our course readings, we brought into the classroom the past, and the present, hearing in Fall 2023 from North Carolina Supreme Court Justice Allison Riggs and Georgia youth organizer Evan Marlborough, and in Fall 2024 from organizer of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Judy Richardson, and David Goodman. In Fall 2023, David Hogg joined us, a young man launched into youth organizing by a tragic gun massacre at his high school, who champions young candidates to run for office. These speakers brought our readings to life, and motivated students to carry their learnings outside of the classroom.

This book cracks the shell, revealing the yolk America's college communities have served in furtherance of democracy. It is written primarily for an undergraduate and academic audiences, and provides a legal framework to explore the historic role of college communities, and especially youth, as constitutional architects in shaping the right to vote.

4 Jelani Favors, University of North Carolina A&T

In 1948, Dr. Rodney Higgins, a newly hired political scientist at Southern University, a historically Black college in Baton Rouge, was asked to outline his goals for leading his academic unit on campus. In his letter to the campus president, Higgins declared, "The university must set the standards of individual freedom, national development and world citizenship. Adequate education of its youth is the life blood of democratic society." Higgins' comments amid the background of a socially and politically oppressive Cold War illustrate how potent Black colleges were in the fight to expand and defend democracy while also planting seeds for the modern civil rights movement. Since 1837, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have 'set the standards' in promoting civic engagement among their students by cultivating a pedagogy rooted in the deliberate interrogation of America's political shortcomings. Through the advancement of a 'Second Curriculum,' that emphasized race consciousness, cultural nationalism, and idealism, HBCUs served as the epicenter of social movements that have radically reshaped the social and political contours of our nation.

I am honored to have served alongside my colleagues at Bard, Tuskegee, and Prairie View A&M as we engaged our students in our collaborative course entitled "Student Voting: Power, Politics, and Race in the Fight for American Democracy."

This class examined the challenges and barriers to galvanize the youth vote and centered its focus on the 26th Amendment to the Constitution that lowered the voting age to 18 in 1971. There have been direct challenges and attempts to undermine the voting rights of our students on these respective campuses, and our ability to find synergy and commonalities in these experiences has presented a unique opportunity to further explore the power and significance of student voice. Through a series of classroom projects, guest speakers, and robust discussion, this class has been one of the most important highlights in my career as a college instructor and has been thoroughly enjoyed by students who enrolled. These comparative case studies provided our students with a new understanding of how critical the fight for American democracy is, and how the university still ‘sets the standard’ for civic engagement and remains an essential battleground in the preservation and expansion of these ideals.

5 Simon Gilhooley, Bard College

... Bard offers unique opportunities for students and faculty to study, experience and realize the principle that higher-education institutions can and should operate in the public interest.

Bard College Mission Statement

As part of its self-understanding as a private institution operating in the public interest, Bard College has taken a particular interest in student voting rights. Over the last quarter century Bard College has participated in four successful lawsuits, one federal and three state, grounded in the 26th Amendment, that have established student voting eligibility and a polling site on campus, and contributed to the adoption of a New York state law mandating polling sites on college campuses with more than 300 registered voters and outlawing campus gerrymanders. Beginning in Fall 2023, it has directly connected these efforts to curricular offerings through its iteration of the undergraduate course, “Student Voting: Power, Politics, and Race in the Fight for American Democracy,” in which I have taught.

We are fortunate at Bard College to have an administration that is highly supportive of efforts to embed civics education across the College, valuing the ideal of the College as a civic actor. Prior experience through a struggle for student voting rights and an institutional center in the form of Bard’s Center for Civic Engagement has provided an experiential and institutional foundation for addressing the contemporary challenge of civics education. It is indicative of this tendency that I have co-taught the course at Bard with our executive vice president—and it has been to the class’s benefit to have someone who has spearheaded the strug-

gle for voting rights on our campus lead the course. I also think that in our case, having a ‘regular’ American faculty member co-teach with faculty in a senior administrative role has opened up discussion on these issues in unique ways—at times conversations in the classroom have represented the perspectives of three distinct groups of ‘stakeholders’—students, faculty, and administration—allowing for the convergences and tensions between different interests to be identified and explored. For the students, that has exposed the workings of the university as an institution in ways that I don’t think students often appreciate. It was interesting for them to see that what they often regard as a singular institution is a complex of distinct interests, and striking to think about how that complexity can play out in the historical moments that we examined in the class.

It has been a highlight of the last two years to be involved in the design and instruction of this course. Its undoubted strength is the opportunity for students to interact with figures who have direct experience and/or expert knowledge of the struggle for voting and civil rights. The joint meetings between the campuses are the jewels of this course, enabling students to hear from those who can share an expertise that is not readily replicable in the act of reading a text. A highlight of the Fall 2024 semester was a session with Judy Richardson, David Goodman, and Johnavi Rao. Students heard from two individuals who were active in the civil rights movement and from a contemporary youth activist, and were able to learn how those individuals came to be involved, what challenges they identified, and what they thought were the areas of challenge today. The session provided a bridge between history and the current moment, enlivening the struggle for students and highlighting the thread that joins the past and today. Students are hungry to understand what successful activism requires and looking for spaces of hope in the current moment, and the ability to hear from those who have faced and overcome challenges to civil and political rights is in that sense priceless.

But if that cross-historical connection is invaluable, so too is the cross-national connection between campuses. The ability of students to see that a struggle for voting rights is not limited to one region or state, and that despite distinct conditions, similarities in the forms of suppression are evident in different spaces, offers them a way of thinking about the struggle that would not be possible if we were to attend to only one case. Here, I cannot overstate the contribution of my colleagues who bring an expertise to each discussion that is irreplaceable. However, it is the students themselves who bring a feel for, and investment in, their own campus’ struggles who make vivid that cross-national connection. Having recently graded the final projects for our own class, it is striking the degree to which students have become the owners of a campus struggle that pre-dates their presence—both in terms of their deep consideration of that struggle as a historic artifact

and in terms of their willingness to further and secure the gains that such struggles have produced.

That is perhaps, for me, the ultimate success of this course—that students leave the class understanding their own positionality within an ongoing struggle for voting rights; that they see themselves as historical actors who have the opportunity of stepping into a role of fighting for greater voting rights. It is unfortunate that at this moment history calls out for such actors, but a source of real hope to see a crop of students ready to pick up the mantle of those who came before them.

6 Melanye Price, Prairie View A&M University

In 1992, I was a sophomore at Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU) and preparing to vote for the first time and *I was extremely excited*. I had been told my whole life that my ancestors had died for my right to vote and now it was my moment to fulfill that obligation. I possessed both hubris and naiveté about how impactful my vote would be when I first engaged the political process.

Additionally, it was Bill Clinton's first election. Voting for Bill Clinton meant that a Democrat would be President for the first time since I was very young, *and I* could help make that happen. For students at my HBCU and Blacks across the nation, he was viewed as having a particular affinity to African Americans. I registered to vote at Prairie View because there were students canvassing the dorms and tabling around campus. In the most anticlimactic fashion possible, I cast a ballot for Bill Clinton using a pencil and bubble sheet in a forgettable building near campus. Imagine my surprise days later when 19 PVAMU students were indicted for voter fraud. In the weeks that followed I would learn about a history of antagonism between university students and the political leaders of Waller County, where PVAMU is located, that started before I was born. I learned about voter discrimination in real life and in real time. The fights that I thought ended with the civil rights movement were happening right in front of me. I learned that we—PVAMU students—were engaged in a fight about whether the students at my historically Black college were legitimate residents of a county where we lived for nine months of every year for at least four years of our lives.

Nearly 30 years after my voter experience, in 2019, I became a professor at my alma mater and taught a Black politics class where one of the students, Jayla Allen, was the lead plaintiff in a voter discrimination case (*Allen v. Waller*) against Waller County that emerged from the 2018 election cycle. With representation from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, five students petitioned the government over infringement upon their ability to equally access early voting. In 2020, just before the presidential election, the students were deposed about an election two years earlier.

They explained to lawyers and court officials how their rights had been violated in an election that had already been decided and certified, and for which people had been doing the job for nearly two years.

In the 1979 *Symm* case, PVAMU students opened the door for future PVAMU students and all students across the country to register to vote as legal residents of the jurisdiction where they attend college, including from their dormitories and other on-campus residences. Though few people know much about Prairie View students' voting history, their battle for voting rights is one of the most important examples of student voting activism in this nation's history, and certainly since the passage of the 26th Amendment. This case is essential to establishing youth and students as a protected class in voter discrimination law. Unfortunately, this triumphant end for students nationally masks the continued struggle for voting rights by the students at Prairie View. Every successive generation since the *Symm* case has had to fight a new or recycled form of discrimination and assault on their voting rights. The hard truth is that neither the Voting Rights Act nor the 26th Amendment could shield students at Prairie View from the dogged hostility aimed at them by county officials, but at least someone was watching and periodically intervening.

I have taught Black politics for decades but it is only in the last ten years that I have begun to incorporate this history into my lectures. More people should know our story. More of our own students should learn it before they experience voter discrimination. This is why the course "Student Voting: Power, Politics, and Race in the Fight for American Democracy" has been invaluable. The impact of this course for my students has been immense. Universities often do a great job of expanding students' worldview, but we should also be more adept at helping them understand their potential to be change-makers in their immediate environment. Prairie View students have played an outsized role in expanding ballot access for students; however, there is no systematic way for successive generations of students to learn this history. This course has filled a void in our curriculum. As we work to infuse Prairie View history into more of our curriculum, these students get to learn that history and connect it to other campuses while also meeting new students and faculty. The fact that the course last year overlapped with a presidential election season also gave it more meaning. Students were able to study this history and develop strategies to mobilize and energize other students based on what they had learned in class. At the end of the course, they were excited about how they would apply what they had learned for the rest of their time on campus. They also had ideas about what the PVAMU administration could do to help facilitate student participation. I see all of these outcomes as a win for the students and a sign that the goals of the course were achieved.