

TRANSFORMING THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF FUTURE GENERATIONS

A Pilot Evaluation of the Impact of the ENACT Course
on Alumni Civic Engagement and Career Trajectories



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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Overview..... | 2 |
| Key Findings..... | 2 |
| Methods..... | 3 |
| Results..... | 3 |
| ENACT Alumni have Political Efficacy | 3 |
| ENACT Alumni Demonstrate Civically Engaged Behavior | 4 |
| ENACT Alumni Retain Knowledge and Skills..... | 6 |
| ENACT Impacted the Professional Journeys of Alumni | 8 |
| Conclusion | 8 |
| About the Authors | 10 |



“[The class] showed me that citizens can be strong public advocates. Sometimes people think you need to be in the system and know people to go an advocate for bills that you care about but you really don’t... Knowing that anyone can do it was really impactful for me.”

Overview

The Educational Network for Active Civic Transformation (ENACT) is a national, non-partisan program based at Brandeis University that engages undergraduates at colleges and universities in state-level legislative change by teaching them to work with legislators, staffers, and community organizations to advance policy. By engaging young people around the country in civic activism built on knowledge, cooperation, justice and integrity, ENACT is becoming a major voice in addressing challenges to American democracy. In ENACT courses, students learn about participating in the legislative and advocacy process at the state level, with a substantial hands-on component in which they engage directly in that process.

The first ENACT course was taught at Brandeis University in 2011, titled “Advocacy for Policy Change”. It has been a full decade since these inaugural students completed the course, and since the first of them entered the post-college work force. Over the years, anecdotal stories have been shared about the impact that the course had on alumni’s career paths and their civic engagement. In the summer of 2021, a Brandeis research team launched a study to survey and interview these students to more systematically understand the role that ENACT has played in the lives of some of its graduates.

Key Findings

- ENACT Alumni feel competent to participate politically and feel that their participation can have an impact on political outcomes. This political efficacy translates to heightened levels of civic engagement.
- ENACT Alumni are more civically engaged than a national sample of U.S. residents. They vote in national, state, local, and primary elections at very high rates, as well as participate in various other forms of civic engagement such as attending public rallies and demonstrations and donating money to campaigns or causes that are important to them.
- ENACT Alumni retain knowledge and skills from the Advocacy for Policy Change course. The knowledge of the political process they learned in the ENACT course allows them to continue to engage with it. They use the skills they learned through hands-on advocacy projects in their professional careers.
- ENACT Alumni credit the course with impacting their professional journeys in various ways. Alumni have gone on to graduate school, and many have pursued law degrees. They note the impact of what they learned in the class, the networks they developed, and the mentorship of ENACT faculty.

Methods

In the summer of 2021, all former students who completed the ENACT course at Brandeis University (“Advocacy for Policy Change”) between 2011 and 2020 were invited, by email, to participate in a survey asking about their civic engagement and career trajectories. At the end of the survey, they were invited to share their contact information for a follow-up interview. All participants were entered into a raffle to win one of three \$100 gift cards. Between July-October, 51 alumni (approximately 20% of the 247 total former students) responded to the survey and eight of these former students participated in semi-structured interviews to further illuminate the impacts of the class.

As noted above, survey respondents completed the Brandeis ENACT course between 2011 and 2020. Approximately a quarter (12) of participants who remembered what year they took the class did so in the first five years of its existence (2011-2016). Half took the class between 2016-2019, and a final quarter took it in the spring of 2020. Most participants identified as female or women (71%), about 20% identified as male or men, and one as nonbinary. More than half of survey participants identified as white. Participants also identified as multi-racial, Jewish, Asian, Latino/Hispanic, Black, Middle Eastern, and Portuguese. Only 23% of participants indicated that they received no financial aid to attend Brandeis University. Participants had a myriad of different declared majors and minors as students at Brandeis, ranging from Politics (13) and Legal Studies (26) down to computer science (1), Urban Studies (1), and Business (2).

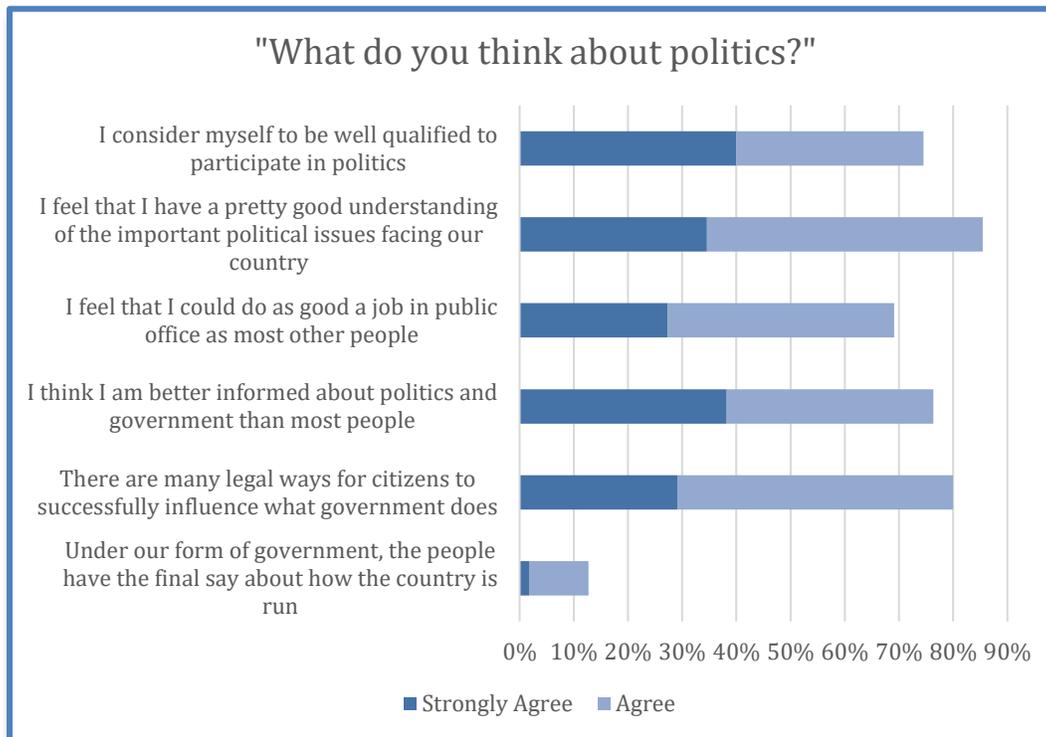
Results

ENACT Alumni have Political Efficacy

Political efficacy is a necessary condition for civic engagement.¹ When people feel competent to participate politically and feel that their participation can have an impact on political outcomes, they are more likely to be civically engaged. ENACT alumni are confident in their own political efficacy. Respondents indicated that they feel they have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing the country (85%), think they are better informed about politics and government than most people are (76%), consider themselves to be well qualified to participate in politics (74%), and feel they could do as good a job in public office as most other people (69%). They also believe, in most situations, in the power of individuals to have political impact. They indicated that they believe there are many legal ways for citizens to successfully influence what government does (80%) and that people like them have a say in what the government does (71%). Notably, very few survey respondents (13%) indicated that, under our form of government, the people have the final say about how the country is run, no matter who is in

¹ Almond, G. A., and Verba, S. (1963). *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Princeton University Press.

office. It is noteworthy that, in today's political climate (in the U.S.), even people with such high political efficacy do not feel the people have the final say over democratic government decisions.



The fact that ENACT alumni feel they are competent political participants and that their participation can have an impact on political outcomes leads them to be more likely to be civically engaged, even years after completing the ENACT course.

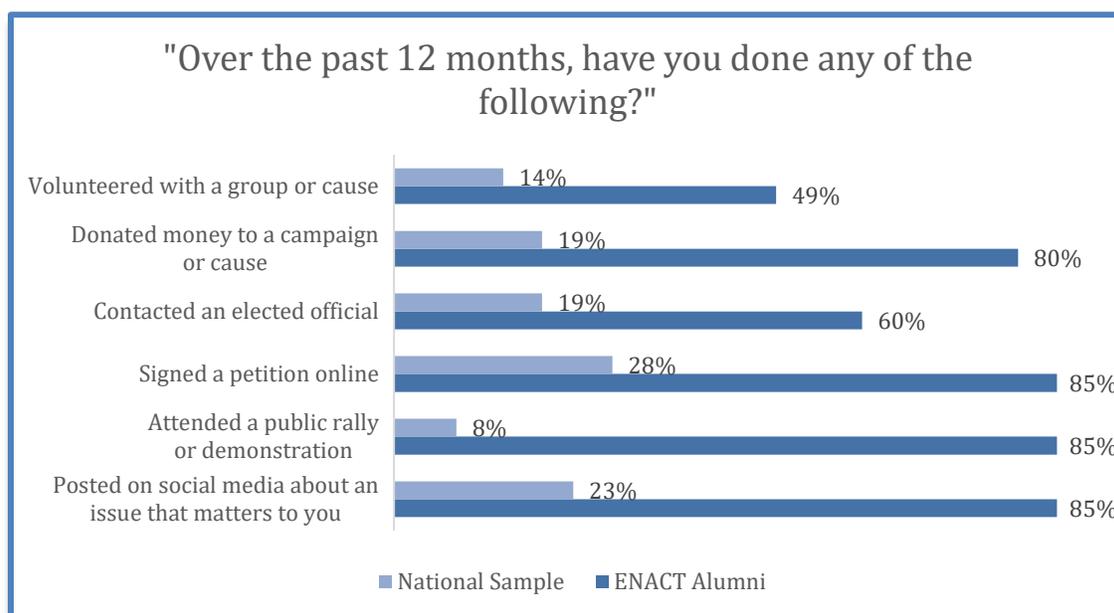
ENACT Alumni Demonstrate Civically Engaged Behavior

"[The Advocacy for Policy Change class] was the first time I had ever visited the State House [and] lobbied public officials. It demystified the whole process. I now feel confident reaching out to public officials. I feel like I know how to frame issues in terms of values... I tease out what is important to folks... I might talk to them from the fiscal responsibility angle, the fairness/transparency/democracy angle, or the environmental angle."

ENACT Alumni are likely to have engaged in social, civic, and political activity since completing the course. In the past year, more than three-quarters of survey participants had attended a rally or demonstration (85%), donated money to a campaign or cause (80%), signed an online petition (85%), or posted on social media about an issue that mattered to them (60%). More than half had contacted an elected official (80%) and just under half had volunteered for a group or a cause

(49%) in the same time frame. While not within the past year, approximately one-third of respondents had worked for a political campaign (36%) and/or written a letter to a newspaper editor (38%) at some point. Additionally, when asked for examples of political activity and engagement, survey respondents noted a variety of ways they engaged including working for government or social justice organizations full-time, volunteering with campaigns or to get out the vote, and belonging to unions.

This level of engagement is above average, based on other national surveys. In 2018, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and The Atlantic conducted a survey with a random sample of over 1000 adults living in the U.S. about their civic engagement. The PRRI/The Atlantic Civic Engagement Survey found that a minority of participants had attended a rally or demonstration (8%), volunteered with a group or cause (14%), donated money to a campaign or cause (19%), contacted an elected official (19%), posted on social media about an issue that matters to them (23%), or signed an online petition (28%), in the past 12 months.²



ENACT alumni also indicated a very high rate of political engagement through voting. Every single survey respondent indicated that they are currently registered to vote and voted in the 2020 election. The majority of survey respondents who were eligible voted in the most recent state (95%), local (85%), and primary (87%) elections, while 93% plan to vote in the next general election (2022) and 96% plan to vote in the next Presidential election (2024). This is in stark contrast to state and national averages. Only 74% of citizens, ages 18-24, voted in the 2020

² Jones, R., Cox, D., Griffin, R., Najile, M., Fisch-Friedman, M., and Vandermaas-Peeler, A. (2018). *American democracy in crisis: Civic engagement, young adult activism, and the 2018 midterm elections*. <https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Civic-Engagement-NovB.pdf>

election.³ According to the Massachusetts Secretary of the Commonwealth, only 60% of voters turned out for the last non-Presidential state election (2018) and only 37% for the 2020 primary election.⁴ Local election engagement is markedly lower, on average. Cities with high local turnout (such as Boulder, CO and Columbus, OH) see average rates from the high 20-40%, while cities with low local turnout (Las Vegas, NV, and Ft. Worth, TX) are as low as 6-9%.⁵ In comparison to these more typical numbers, ENACT alumni have an excellent voting record.

| | ENACT Alumni | Comparison Groups | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|-------|
| Voted in 2020 | 100% | National average, ages 18-24: | 74% |
| Voted in 2020 primary | 87% | Massachusetts voters: | 37% |
| Voted in 2018 state election | 95% | Massachusetts voters: | 60% |
| Voted in last local election | 85% | High and low turnout cities: | 6-40% |

Respondents also described being able to engage with people around controversial topics, and to connect with people who have opposing political views. In a time when politics in this country is so divided, it is increasingly difficult for people to engage meaningfully across these differences. Nearly a quarter of respondents (24%) indicated they very often had discussions with people whose political views differed from their own over the past year, and all but one (98%) had done so at least once. At the same time, 75% indicated that they feel at least somewhat strong about their ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues. They reported engaging in discussions about topics that included: public health issues surrounding COVID-19, police reform and Black Lives Matter, President Trump, the Israel-Palestine conflict, capitalism, transgender rights, homelessness, immigration, abortion, foreign policy, sexual violence, critical-race theory, and climate change.

“Pre-pandemic, I often encountered people with different political views while canvassing. Sometimes we would sit down in their homes, share our views and ask/answer questions. It felt honest and civil, and we usually had more in common when it came to deeper topics like our values.”

ENACT Alumni Retain Knowledge and Skills

Even years after completing the ENACT course, alumni retain much of the key knowledge they were taught about the policymaking process. This knowledge helps them remain civically engaged and, for many, is useful in their professional lives. Over 90% of survey participants indicated feeling that they know how to find out about a policy issue they are interested in (96%), that they would feel comfortable writing to their member of the legislature (93%), and that they would know how to find out the current status of a bill before the state legislature (91%). Over three-quarters of

³ According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s record, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2020”: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-585.html>

⁴ <https://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/elevoterturnoutstats/voterturnoutstats.htm>

⁵ According to “Who Votes for Mayor”, a project of Portland State University: <http://whovotesformayor.org/>

respondents noted feeling comfortable speaking to their member of the legislature (85%), explaining complex policy issues in a concise way (80%), writing a policy brief (78%), and understanding the steps a bill goes through between being proposed and being passed into law (76%). Additionally, over the past 12 months, 92% of participants reported explicitly connecting what they learned in the ENACT course to societal issues. They use what they learned in the ENACT course to engage with their own political work, their non-political professional careers, expanding their personal knowledge of policy issues, and in community with friends and family.

"I worked at an overnight summer camp this summer [2021] and was able to explain the policy decisions surrounding state public health requirements (both COVID and non-COVID related) to campers and staff because of my knowledge of the legislative process."

"I had my 9th grade students do a letter writing campaign to [their Senator] on issues that were important to them. I drew extensively on Advocacy for Policy Change."

ENACT alumni also noted the ways that the course contributed to professional skills unrelated to the policymaking process that continue to be important in their lives. A majority of survey respondents found that the course contributed somewhat, quite a bit, or very much to their ability to work with others (93%), write clearly and effectively (89%), speak clearly and effectively (87%), and evaluate a point of view, decision, or information source (87%). The course does this by pairing students in teams to engage in project-based advocacy for the majority of the semester. Students are coached to engage in face-to-face verbal advocacy with state legislators using the EPIC format (**E**ngage the audience, succinctly describe the **P**roblem, **I**llustrate a solution, and make a **C**all to action). Students write letters to policymakers, op-eds to relevant journalistic sources, and a policy report. They are given feedback on their writing, and then use these products in real-world advocacy work. Similarly, they create print and video media to be shared with legislators and coalitions working to pass bills so that these materials, too, can be used broadly. These assignments, as well as the support and feedback students receive in completing them, help to build the skills that alumni report, years later, retaining from the course.

"This course helped me build confidence in my analytical and public speaking skills, and taught me that by showing up and speaking out you have the ability to make an impact."

ENACT Impacted the Professional Journeys of Alumni

"I consider my profession to be political advocacy – I am a public school teacher in Brooklyn. I also have participated in various marches throughout the years, including several BLM [Black Lives Matter] and climate marches."

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of survey respondents indicated that the ENACT course contributed to their professional journey. The course led students to pursue social justice focused work in non-profit organizations and directly in policy and advocacy venues. A few students noted that the class helped them determine that politics and government are not fields they are interested in working in professionally. At least nine survey respondents have pursued law degrees, and some credit the course for setting them on that path. Eleven more alumni reported that they have pursued other graduate degrees. Other alumni have used materials they created in the course in portfolios and on their resumes. Still others have talked about their experiences advocating in the class in job interviews. Additionally, survey respondents noted the networks that they developed through their work in the class turned into professional opportunities. They also attributed the mentorship and opportunities shared through ENACT faculty as contributing to their current career trajectory.

"[The class] helped me realize ways that I could use my social science background in a professional setting and to help effectuate change."

Conclusion

The ENACT course was designed to teach undergraduate students to engage in state-level legislative change. When students are in the course, they are actively engaging with the political process and learning skills that they can use for future engagement. Anecdotally, alumni have shared their continued advocacy efforts and the impacts that the ENACT course has had on their own professional journeys. This survey of ENACT alumni validated those anecdotes and demonstrated that many alumni have had similar experiences.

ENACT alumni have high levels of political efficacy. They feel well-qualified to engage with the political process and believe that doing so can have an impact on political outcomes. As a result, they are much more civically engaged than the average U.S. resident. They vote at substantially higher rates and engage in various other ways. ENACT alumni retain the knowledge they learned in the class about the political process, even years after completing it. They also retain skills (speaking and writing clearly, working effectively with others, and evaluating data sources) that have helped them in their professional work – whether that work is policy-related or completely unrelated. In addition to these skills, ENACT alumni credit the networks they developed and the mentorship of ENACT faculty with the trajectories their careers have taken since leaving Brandeis.

It is clear that the ENACT course has positively impacted the civic engagement and professional journeys of its alumni. Future evaluations of this program can investigate this further by examining the impact of ENACT courses at other institutions, developing an understanding of how much the effects this survey found are a result of individuals being predisposed to these outcomes as opposed to being a direct result of participating in the class, and measuring predictors of long-term outcomes in the immediate aftermath of completing ENACT courses. Beginning in 2022, ENACT courses at institutions across the country will be participating in a national evaluation of civic engagement impact. This effort can further illuminate the impact of the course on civic engagement predictors such as political efficacy. These research efforts will allow for continued understanding of the mechanisms through which ENACT positively impacts students and, through their civic engagement, American democracy.



About the Authors

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Melissa Stimell, JD

Melissa Stimell is a Professor of the Practice in the Legal Studies Program at Brandeis University. She is the chair of the Program in Social Justice and Social Policy. She serves as the Director of The International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life. She also is the Academic Program Director of ENACT, The Educational Network for Active Civic Transformation. She currently teaches Advocacy for Policy Change, Conflict Analysis and Intervention, and Global Justice and Societies in Transition. She also has led Brandeis Summer in The Hague and the seminars accompanying the internship programs. She received her undergraduate degree from Cornell University and her law degree from Boston University School of Law. She has been a public interest attorney for over 30 years, focusing on the representation of vulnerable populations in such areas as, criminal law, discrimination of individuals with disabilities, and child welfare.