

ENACT-ing Leadership at the State Level:

A National Educational Network for Engaged Citizenship in State Legislatures

by Robert W. Glover, Kathleen Cole, and Katharine Owens

Abstract

The Educational Network for Active Civic Transformation (ENACT) is a nationwide network that serves as a hub for the pedagogical efforts of educators in 16 different states, with the ambitious goal of having an ENACT Faculty Fellow in all 50 states. However, ENACT courses go a step further by engaging students directly in experiential learning exercises designed to affect policy change by working with policy advocacy groups, preparing policy briefs, engaging in strategic outreach and messaging, and meeting directly with policymakers in their state capitals to advocate for political change. In this paper, we argue that state politics represents a fruitful, yet often neglected, space for the development of political leadership skills. Accordingly, we will present ENACT as a pedagogical model for empowering students, enhancing their capacity for political leadership. Yet we also remain attuned to localized variation in the policy-making environment and state political culture.

American democracy is under threat. Elite capture of institutions has resulted in extreme levels of economic inequality and policy making that favors the rich (Bartels 2016; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Wolin 2008). Perhaps as a result, the United States is awash in a wave of populist anger (Mounk 2014). Young people say they are not interested in politics (Foa and Mounk 2016), and their participation rates over the last two decades confirm it (Harvard and Shea 2013). Alarming, the number of Americans who support democracy as a system of government is in decline, while support for authoritarianism is on the rise (Foa and Mounk 2016). Democracy, once considered a permanent feature of the United States (Fukuyama 1992), now appears much more precarious. In this environment of democratic disenchantment, the ways that we socialize and empower young people to engage in political leadership are of dire national importance.

Educators need to both convey disciplinary knowledge and provide opportunities for developing skills for participatory citizenship and political leadership. Political science educators have developed a number of

pedagogical strategies for meeting these goals including simulations (Bernstein 2008; Mariani and Glenn 2014), placement learning/internships (Curtis and Blair 2010), and community-based projects (DaLaet 2016; Ferman 2012). Tapping into experiential learning opens up pedagogical possibilities, moving students beyond the classroom, while pushing past simple yet ineffective engagement. This so called drive-by participation, including acts such as posting or signing petitions online, may bring attention to political issues, but fails to engage participants in reflection or hold

representatives accountable for political action (McCartney 2017). By contrast, direct engagement with the state policy process offers great potential for concrete and meaningful impacts, potentially enriching students' understanding of the policy process and contributing to their own sense of political agency and efficacy. Here, we present an alternative model for the development of political leadership through engagement in the state political process, the Educational Network for Active Civic Transformation (ENACT). We suggest that state politics presents a neglected policy domain where students can learn and have an impact and that doing so can foster appreciation for political leadership and engagement with the democratic process.

THE ENACT MODEL

The national network of ENACT originated in 2010 with a course at Brandeis University entitled "Advocacy for Policy Change," taught by Professor of the Legal Practice Melissa Stimmel. Brandeis is a fitting site, given its namesake's belief that the American states

operate as “laboratories of democracy” (*New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann* 285 U.S. 262 (1932)). This innovative course engages teams of undergraduate students in the Massachusetts state legislative process. Students choose pieces of legislation, research the topics addressed within the bills, then craft and execute models of legislative engagement and advocacy to influence the path of legislation. This includes researching and collaborating on legislative research reports, crafting an advocacy campaign, writing op-eds, producing fact sheets, and meeting face to face with legislators to influence public policy. Students in the course collaborate with Professor Stimmel and a mentor from the Massachusetts State Legislature, as well as civic organizations and policy advocates, in their attempts to craft effective, evidence-based messaging on these issues. Wherever possible, students meet directly with state legislators and engage in civic advocacy on their chosen policy area. Since its inception in 2010, the Advocacy for Social Change course has embedded dozens of students directly in the state legislative process, where their efforts have shaped the perspectives of lawmakers, while also providing an invaluable and transformative experience for the students.

In 2015, the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life at Brandeis University initiated a national expansion of the course. The initiative expanded the course to 15 additional colleges and universities in other states, creating ENACT. A competitive process produced a faculty cohort from the following states: Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, and Virginia. Beyond their commitment to teaching a course engaging students in the process of legislative advocacy and their proximity to a state capital, the first ENACT cohort represents a range of educational institutions, including public and private, religiously affiliated, and historically black colleges and universities. The faculty that constitute the cohort are equally diverse, at all stages of their academic careers, with variation in training, disciplinary affiliation, and areas of expertise. ENACT has just selected its second cohort, expanding the network to 31 states with the addition of Alabama, California, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, and Pennsylvania.

Members of the first cohort convened at the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life

at Brandeis in May of 2016 to learn about this pedagogical model and how they would implement it in their respective states. Over four days, the Faculty Fellows learned from state legislators, policy advocates, Brandeis faculty, student alumni, ENACT staff, and one another. Topical workshops included discussing the logistical challenges that might emerge in specific states, designing assignments and syllabi, navigating the demands of engaged pedagogy, effectively and strategically framing one’s policy message. Faculty also went to the Massachusetts State House to shadow Brandeis alumnus and State Representative Jay Kaufman. Fellows spent the day observing the business of the legislature and meeting with legislators one on one to learn more about their perspectives on the state legislative process and the ways that students can have an impact. Over the course of the sessions, participants strategized about forms of collaboration and resources that could prove useful as they pilot their own ENACT offerings.

The initial convening of the ENACT Faculty Fellows cohort produced numerous insights. First, variation in state legislative culture and institutions meant that the ENACT courses would vary widely from one locale to another. The ENACT network represents a group of scholars and educators united by a common goal, to engage students in political leadership directly via the state legislative process, but who may structure their pursuit of that goal according to the characteristics of their unique state political environment, institution, and personal teaching style. Second, the ENACT network opens great possibilities to build cross-institutional collaboration, both in terms of designing and executing courses, but also for research in teaching and learning, and research that delves into comparative analysis of state political and policy contexts. Third, there was broad recognition that state policy making often suffers from a lack of timely, evidence-based analysis of the legislative issues under consideration (particularly in states that have part-time citizen legislatures with limited staff capacity). As it grows, ENACT could serve as an information hub for policymakers, enhancing their knowledge about legislation under consideration, and their capacity to engage in data-driven, evidence-based policy. Fourth, fellows should be intentional about building shared resources and designing communication networks to facilitate exchange between ENACT Faculty Fellows, the staff at Brandeis, current students, and the existing and ever-growing network of ENACT alumni.

ENACT AND THE EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL OF STATE LEGISLATURES

The ENACT pedagogical model was developed with a belief in the centrality and importance of the legislative branch of government, despite the aforementioned threats of capture by powerful private interests and creeping forms of democratic erosion. As one recent commentator notes, “the legislature (and not the executive or the judiciary) is truly the engine of democracy. It tugs and pulls a heavy load, uphill much of the way. Like the little engine that could, the legislature usually delivers the goods—a mixed bag, depending largely on one’s tastes” (Rosenthal 2009: 1). In light of the unsettling themes introduced at the outset of this article, this description may seem an overly optimistic and quaint conception of American democracy.

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In theory, at least, the legislative branch is beholden to its constituents and organized interests with expectations of transparency and accountability. Legislators who fail to deliver tangible results for those whom they serve face rebuke from their peers and parties, public criticism, or even find themselves voted out of office. Furthermore, experimental research suggests that constituent expectations of the legislature are more or less consistent at both the state and national levels (Wolak 2017). Yet, the legislative branch operates with different expectations than the more insulated executive agencies or the often-private deliberations of the judicial branch. For this reason, the legislature operates as domain of government in which citizens can potentially have a greater impact. And, unsurprisingly, because the machinations of our legislative bodies are more visible with more points of access, popular opinion tends to be more critical of, and levels of distrust higher for, the legislative branch than for other branches of government (Newport 2012).

For a variety of reasons, students may have an interest in political topics at the national and international

level and less interest in state and local politics. Students have often been politically socialized in ways that overemphasize our national political institutions. For many students, their initial and formative civic education privileges the federal system. If asked to identify the institutional power centers of American democracy, they may suggest the US presidency, the US Senate and House of Representatives, the US Supreme Court, and only secondarily identify state and local settings. Their professional aspirations and goals can reflect this as well—evident in a preoccupation with living and working in Washington, DC, or gaining experience via involvement in national candidate races, issue campaigns, and organizations. This is even recognizable in popular culture, where it is far more likely to encounter plots centered upon Washington, DC, than a state capital or city hall.

This lack of attention is also a function of the media environment that we have created. As Lyons and coauthors note, “in the case of national politics, the opportunities to learn are plentiful—if interested in doing so, one can easily follow national events by watching the nightly news, a favored cable program, or listening to the news on the radio. But in the case of state politics, it can be much harder to stay informed” (Lyons, Jaeger, and Wolak 2013: 185). Structural challenges to the media landscape that make it harder for newsrooms to support a full-time state capitol press corps exacerbate the issue (Enda, Matsa, and Boyles 2014). This is not to suggest that citizens simply disregard state politics. Rather, research suggests this political environment creates a “monitorial citizen,” one who is “actively patrolling for political information but attentive to political circumstances that demand increased attention” (Lyons, Jaeger, and Wolak 2013: 186). Thus, citizens’ knowledge of state politics tends to be highest when there are unfolding, consequential (often negative) situations that require their careful attention: an unfolding natural disaster, a budget shortfall or threat of a government shutdown, or a political scandal.

For a variety of reasons, then, our students (and the citizenry at large) may simply not be knowledgeable about state government or realize the power they have to influence policy and decision making on this level. This emphasis on the federal level can be disempowering, due to both the *distance* of this realm of policy making from its constituents and the *dysfunction* evident in national politics. With regard to distance, the decision makers in Washington, DC, are a political class that can be relatively insulated and hard to access (even when they

are physically present in their home districts). Trying to contact one's congressional representative or senator to offer input on an issue or seek constituent services often results in a relatively brief and impersonal interaction with a staffer or intern. This is understandable, as such policy-makers are dealing with expansive constituencies. Nevertheless, it can be difficult for ordinary citizens to have regularized contact with them or to forge meaningful relationships. While state political landscapes can vary widely in terms of district size and access to legislators, there is a far greater potential for such interaction and relationships.

Furthermore, our political dysfunction in Washington, DC, makes it exceedingly hard to pass any major piece of legislation at the federal level, even the reauthorization of legislation that in the past enjoyed broad, bipartisan support. Congressional leadership resorts to extraordinary procedural machinations to pass legislation at all, or passes a spate of largely symbolic or ceremonial bills to give the illusion of some action. Alternatively, we have seen the executive branch circumvent Congress altogether through executive orders and policy changes that do not require congressional approval. Again, political culture and ideological climate can vary immensely by state and this is not to say that there are not similar forms of dysfunction and gridlock evident at the state level (Fehrman 2016). However, the state-to-state landscape is diverse and many states can rightfully pride themselves on their sustained capacity for cooperation and compromise and relationships of trust across party lines, even as Washington, DC, becomes ever more stymied by partisanship and legislative gridlock. Furthermore, states face constraints on spending, with all but Vermont having some form of a balanced budget requirement, a factor that compels negotiation and compromise that is less essential in Congress (NCSL 2010). And by sheer volume of legislative output, there is no comparison. For every one piece of national legislation, state legislatures are passing 75 of their own (Fehrman 2016).

THE ENACT NETWORK THUS FAR

As is clear from what we've written so far, the state legislative context is too often underemphasized in both citizens' understandings of their own capacities and our models of civic education and political leadership. Yet, tapping into this context opens up pedagogical possibilities whereby students can not only move beyond the classroom walls, but also push

themselves beyond less-demanding forms of engaged learning centered upon limited forms of service and volunteerism. Direct engagement with the state policy process offers great potential for citizen and student access. Student involvement in the state legislative realm can yield concrete, meaningful impacts, potentially enriching students' understandings of the policy process and contributing their own sense of political agency and efficacy. Furthermore, given the physical proximity of many of our educational institutions to state capitals, logistically, the state legislative context is a setting highly conducive to forms of engaged, experiential learning where students actually physically inhabit the halls of political power and see the policy process in operation.

Since its inception in 2016, students across the ENACT network have been learning the skills of state policy advocacy in specialized course offerings across the 16 participant states, working intensively on dozens of pieces of important state legislation across a range of policy areas. Numerous bills on which the students have worked directly have been successfully passed into law, in part because of their efforts. Many ENACT Faculty Fellows have already offered their courses multiple times. Furthermore, with the expansion of the ENACT Faculty Fellows in 2018 to encompass 31 total states, the network will soon be working within a majority of the state capitals in the United States.

Engaged learning opportunities such as these are challenging. Rolling this model out to more states has meant that individual instructors have had to grapple with the particularities of varying state political cultures, the idiosyncrasies of each state's political system, and the inevitable variations in institutional capacity and the student body being engaged in the political process. Yet, demanding educational experiences such as this are the very settings in which the qualities of political leadership are forged. Furthermore, familiarity with the policy process and appreciation for the complex dance of legislation beats back debilitating and pervasive political attitudes of disenchantment and apathy. At a time in which democracy is increasingly under threat, educational opportunities for engagement at the state level foster the skills necessary for sober, serious, and effective political leadership. 

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Robert W. Glover is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and the Honors College at the University of Maine. He also serves as the codirector of the Maine chapter of the Scholars Strategy Network. His research and teaching focus on democratic engagement, state and local policy, and the politics of immigration.



Kathleen Cole is an assistant professor of political science in the Social Science Department at Metropolitan State University. Her research focuses on racial identity and political judgment. She teaches courses in American politics and political theory.



Katharine A. Owens is an associate professor in the Department of Politics, Economics, and International Studies and director of the University Interdisciplinary Studies program at the University of Hartford in Connecticut. She researches civic engagement and environmental policy and often incorporates real-world activities and experiential learning into her courses