11-7-2018

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Civic Citizenship 2.0: Connecting Political Science Lessons to Real-World Politics

From working on campaigns to voter exit polls, poly-sci students use mid-term election as hands-on learning opportunity

November 7, 2018 | By Jill Rodrigues ’05

WARREN, R.I. – While they’ve been studying how voters tick and political campaigns are run, students in the Campaigns and Elections course used the 2018 mid-term election to experience firsthand what it’s like to understand and work in politics and engage fully in civic citizenship.

For the past few months, the students have trained a social science lens on the American civic duties of voting and running for public office through their own hands-on political fieldwork. They’ve spent this semester working on campaigns, stumping for a candidate of their choice – going door-to-door and calling voters to talk about the issues and candidates. It all led to Tuesday’s General Election when students conducted voter exit polls at polling locations from Providence to Little Compton, in between stints of holding signs to support their candidates.

Fieldwork enables students to gain critical insights into the topics they’re covering in class – why people run for office and campaign strategy, determinants of voter choice, factors that influence voter behavior, the role that public opinion and voting play in a democracy – according to Professor June Speakman, who teaches the Campaigns and Elections course.

“The work in the field lets students practice what they’re studying. The campaign work gives them insight into the working of an actual campaign and the opportunity to compare those experiences with what they read and what we discuss in class. And the exit polls give them the opportunity to get familiar with an essential social science methodology, to interact with actual voters, and to analyze the results of their work,” Speakman said.

Standing outside St. Mary’s of the Bay Church, a polling site in Warren, Cheyenne Quintal, a senior political science and legal studies double major, and Keryn Presutti, a sophomore anthropology + sociology major and political science minor, greet voters in cheerful salutes, recruiting them to participate in the exit poll survey as they’re leaving.
the polls on Election Day. The survey – conducted in partnership with the University of Rhode Island’s Department of Political Science – asked who voters chose in the governor’s race, preference on the ballot questions, voter affiliation, and basic demographics, to obtain a snapshot of voter behavior from among 10 districts across the state.

“Professor Speakman has really pushed for us to get out in the field and work with candidates,” said Quintal (student in foreground in image above), who interned with Massachusetts State Rep. Carole Fiola and worked on R.I. Sen. Cindy Coyne’s re-election campaign. “Having that time in the field allows for more of an engaged learning experience. We’re actually doing the work we’re learning about and seeing what it’s like on the ground during Election Day. That’s an experience you can’t beat when you talk to employers or grad schools – this is an experience that other students don’t often get.”

“This experience is making me a more well-rounded student. Working in the field allows me to find out how politics work in real life,” said Presutti (second from left in image above). “And coming from my anthropology and sociology major, I look at people and how they act. So I’m observing how they’re voting, coming to polls in groups and with family members. It’s been interesting to look at the human side of this.”

On the RWU campus, Aidan Keane and Rachael Rooklin administered the exit poll outside the polling site at North Campus Residence Hall. They explained to voters that they’re students collecting information that will help inform political science research.

“We’re learning about how big the stakes are in elections. These exit polls will show what you can glean from voter behavior versus what actually happens in elections. Like how people predicted a very different story for the 2016 election,” said Keane (pictured on right in image above), a junior political science major who worked on R.I. Rep. Jason Knight’s campaign and Matt Brown’s bid for the R.I governor’s race. “We’re trying to figure out why voting patterns are the way they are and why people vote.”

Many of the students will use the polling analysis in their own research. Rooklin, a sophomore political science major, plans to explore voter behavior, comparing this year’s mid-terms to previous elections, and analyze why voting matters.
“This has helped me figure out what I want to do with my political science career,” said Rooklin (pictured at left in image above), who worked on multiple political campaigns, including Rep. Knight, Rep. Donovan and Sen. Coyne. “I learned that I want to be behind the scenes of politics, rather than work in front by running for office.”

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