

# Fostering Political Activism in Animal Agriculture Courses

**M.D. Amstutz and K. Bennett-Wimbush**  
**The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute**  
**Wooster, OH**



## Abstract

Younger voters consistently fail to engage in American politics and rarely view political issues as pertinent enough to warrant participation. An agricultural issue on the November, 2009, Ohio ballot presented a unique opportunity to encourage student participation in politics. The proposed constitutional amendment (Issue 2) would create an Ohio Livestock Care Standards Board responsible for establishing animal care guidelines. This proposal was in response to legislation passed in other states. Fifty-nine students enrolled in three undergraduate animal science courses were administered pre- and post-tests. These students designed and implemented projects to educate voters on Issue 2, which they evaluated upon completion. Student projects included passive education, social networking, website development, radio, email and active campaigning. On a 1-10 Likert scale, pre-assignment familiarity scores were  $2.47 \pm 2.01$ ,  $5.29 \pm 2.83$ , and  $2.95 \pm 2.61$  for Issues 1, 2, and 3 respectively. Post-assignment familiarity scores increased on Issue 2 to  $8.83 \pm 1.79$  ( $p < 0.001$ ) and Issue 3 to  $6.52 \pm 2.44$  ( $p < 0.05$ ). Similarly, students' overall knowledge of Issue 2 increased ( $p < 0.01$ ) between pre-test (42.1%) and post-test (70.7%) scores. This activity increased students' perception and knowledge of contemporary ballot issues while actively engaging them in the political system.

## Introduction

Voter participation is the key tenet of an effective democratic government. Yet, numerous studies have shown younger voters to be apathetic when it comes to civic engagement (Converse, 1971; Wattenberg, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Published studies have addressed student activism both domestically and abroad, (Bolten, 2009; Liu, 2004), yet most have focused on cultural issues such as sexuality and racism. Reportedly, student volunteerism and membership in volunteer organizations has increased, however, college students do not seem to be as concerned with politics, but rather appear to be more preoccupied with fame and wealth (Spanier, 2008). Research by Lipka, (2007) has shown that student involvement in politics is very low with roughly a third keeping up with political issues and events. Furthermore, few if any studies have addressed student political activism in the realm of U.S. agriculture. In the 2009 Ohio General election, we foresaw a unique opportunity which allowed us to

stimulate student involvement in the political process. This paper describes our efforts to affect student political participation in an area germane to their academic career choice.

Prior to 1998 animal rights' groups had focused their activities in large part to protesting animal hunting and trapping, utilization of animals for research, and highlighting animal exploitation. More recently, Animal Rights' activist groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) have sponsored and promoted the passage of controversial legislation in numerous states regarding acceptable practices for food animal production. These groups have become increasingly vocal with regard to how livestock are reared, housed, transported, and slaughtered. Not content with the pace of change exhibited by the American livestock producer, animal rights groups have pushed for legislative measures mandating changes in agricultural production. In 1998 voters in the state of California voted to prohibit the slaughter of horses and sale of horse meat for human consumption. In 2002, HSUS was successful in backing a constitutional amendment in the state of Florida which banned the use of swine gestation crates (Florida Department of State). Using this success as a call to arms, the group then successfully proposed more restrictive legislation in Arizona (Arizona Secretary of State's Office, 2006) and California (California Health & Safety Code § 25990., 2008). Voters in both states passed the legislation by a fairly wide margin.

In late 2008, following the passage of California Proposition 2, which placed severe restrictions on animal housing in the veal, swine, and poultry industries, Animal Rights' group representatives met with Ohio Agricultural industry representatives to work on outlining acceptable food animal production practices in that state. No formal agreements or arrangements arose from these meetings. In response, Ohio Agricultural industry leaders developed a proposal which would create an independent 13 member board to establish and enforce standards governing the care of livestock and poultry. Board members were to include producers, consumers, veterinarians, and animal rights representatives. This constitutional amendment (known as Issue 2) was placed on the 2009 Ohio ballot. Pro-active in nature, this initiative was the first of its kind in the U.S., and was supported by the Governor, and both major political parties. Recognizing this opportunity

might represent a historical juncture in American agriculture whereby the future oversight of livestock production practices might be established, we sought to involve our undergraduate animal science students in the political process working on an issue directly related to their education and their future careers.

Given the traditionally low rate of student involvement in politics in general and agricultural politics specifically, and the unique opportunity presented by Issue 2, we endeavored to study students' awareness, ability, and willingness to become involved in agricultural politics. The objectives of this study were to: 1) measure undergraduate animal science students' familiarity with political issues; 2) educate them regarding a particular issue directly impacting their chosen field of study; 3) enable them to educate others about contemporary political issues and; 4) actively engage them in the political process.

## Methods

Fifty- nine students enrolled in three courses at the Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute (Ohio State ATI) participated in the study. Two of the courses were undergraduate level animal science courses and one was an undergraduate level equine course. In early October 2009, students completed a multiple choice pre-test to assess their knowledge, perceptions, and comprehension of statewide ballot initiatives. As part of this assessment, students were asked to indicate their level of familiarity with three statewide issues utilizing a Likert scale (1-10), with one being unfamiliar and ten being very familiar. Additionally, the pre-test specifically assessed student knowledge of factual information regarding Issue 2. Test questions were knowledge questions as defined by Anderson et al., (2001) and further categorized as either tier one, basic recall of elementary details, or tier two which tested more in depth knowledge of the issue.

Following the pre-test students were presented with factual information regarding Issue 2 including pro and con arguments. In order to maintain consistency across all three courses one faculty member presented the material. Students then conducted surveys of random members of the public to determine awareness of and support for Issue 2.

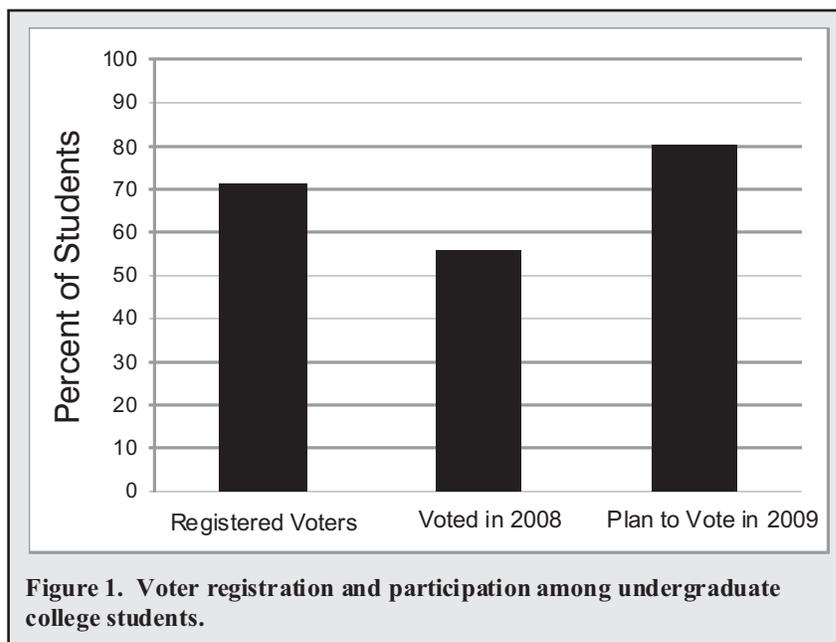
Political action projects were assigned where students were instructed to adopt a stance on Issue 2 either pro or con, formulate an approach to educate voting members of the public, and then implement and document the execution of their political action project. Students were permitted to work individually or in

small groups (< 4). Creativity in developing educational approaches was strongly encouraged and no other limitations were placed upon student projects. In developing their educational approaches, students were encouraged to consider both the number of voters they were likely to interact with as well as the degree or quality of the interaction. Upon completion of the project students prepared a self-evaluation assessing the perceived effectiveness of their educational strategy, their evaluation of the learning process, and a summation on how they believe the result of the vote will impact the future of animal agriculture here in Ohio. Following completion of the political action project, students were administered a post-test, identical to the pre-test, to measure the effectiveness of student-centered experiential learning in a political environment.

Simple means were calculated for self-reported voter registration data. Differences in pre and post-test data were analyzed using Paired T-test, SPSS 2008. Means and standard deviations were reported. This study was deemed exempt by the Ohio State University Institutional Review Board.

## Results and Discussion

Historically, 49.3% of 18-20 year olds nationwide report that they are registered to vote in Presidential election years whereas 37% reported registering in Congressional election years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Information obtained from our pre-test indicated that 71% of Ohio State ATI students enrolled in the participating animal science courses were registered voters (Figure 1). This is much higher than the national average for 18-20 year olds, particularly since this was neither a Presidential or Congressional election year. In part, this may be due to the State of Ohio's efforts to improve voter registration rates by increasing registration opportuni-



## Fostering Political

ties. Additionally, citizens with some college are more likely to be registered and more likely to vote according to U.S. Census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). However, only 56% of eligible student voters in our study reported voting in the prior election. Again, this was much higher than the national average reported for 18-20 year old voters in Presidential and Congressional elections years at 41 and 17 %, respectively. A full 80% of Ohio State ATI students indicated on the pre-test that they would vote in the upcoming 2009 election (Figure 1). Students may have perceived this to be the desired response on the pre-test and answered accordingly or prior knowledge of ballot issues, particularly Issue 2, may have influenced their decision to vote.

Students (n = 55) approached 781 random community members during the survey portion of this exercise. Of the 781 interviewed, 70.4% were registered to vote. Student surveys, indicated the percentage of registered voters was very close to that predicted (71.9 %) for Ohio voters based on national statistics, (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Of the registered voters surveyed (n=550), 40.2% indicated they were familiar with Issue 2. Thus, the majority of voters were unfamiliar with the issue approximately one month prior to the election.

Student political action projects ranged widely in scope and approach. Some of the more common approaches included: direct and indirect voter contact (e-mail, text messages); social media, including Facebook; and flyer distribution. Alternative approaches included community presentations, participation in organized rallies, website development, radio announcements, marquee displays, and T-shirt sales. Although students were free to select their own stance on the issue, all political action projects were pro Issue 2. This was not surprising given the makeup of the student body. In hindsight, it would have been interesting to engage students in other majors to determine if their attitudes and perceptions were the same. Some students were initially reluctant to become politically active and expressed some apprehension about the assignment.

When asked to rate the effectiveness of their educational approaches, most students estimated their projects educated a minimum of 50 prospective voters. Assessing the quality of their interaction was more difficult. Those utilizing direct contact had a good feel for the level of voter comprehension, whereas those utilizing indirect contact had little or no basis for evaluating voter understanding of the issue. However, all students indicated that they perceived they were effective in successfully educating the voting public on Issue 2. We felt most students were cognizant of the compromise made between broad-based approaches, such as social media, designed to reach large numbers of voters and the quality of one-on-one or small group interactions. One student commented that *“working with small groups of people allows the voter to understand the*

*issue more thoroughly because it opens up more of an opportunity to ask questions that pertain to the issue.”*

In their final evaluation of the political action project, most students reported having a positive learning experience despite some initial reluctance. Typical student comments included:

*“The assignment was good and not only educated us but gave us the chance to give back information to others.”*

*“This was a different way of teaching us about how we need to be aware of everything that is going on in our world and how it affects us directly and indirectly.”*

*“... was a good way for me to learn about contemporary political issues...made me want to research groups such as PETA and HSUS.”*

A few students expressed a sincere desire to continue their political activities. Conversely, other students recognized the extensive time commitment the legislative process requires and the importance of differentiating voter education from propaganda.

Comparison of students' self-reported familiarity with statewide political issues before and after the project yielded some interesting results. Students initially expressed more familiarity with Issue 2, the proposed development of an animal care and use standards board than Issue 1, the sale of state bonds and Issue 3, approval to construct several casinos. On a 1-10 Likert scale, pre-assignment familiarity scores were  $2.47 \pm 2.01$ ,  $5.29 \pm 2.83$ , and  $2.95 \pm 2.61$  for Issues 1, 2, and 3 respectively (Figure 2). Not surprisingly, students were more familiar with Issue 2, likely due to their involvement within the agricultural industry. Students may feel the other issues are not pertinent to their daily lives and therefore dismiss any information they may have been presented with regarding these topics. Alternatively, differences in the level of media exposure could be a factor however; none of the issues seemed to garner much media attention. Student self-reported familiarity with Issues 2 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and 3 ( $p < 0.05$ ) increased significantly following the assignment (Figure 2). Numerically, student self-reported familiarity with Issue 1 more than doubled, yet due to a large standard deviation the difference was not statistically significant. These results indicate students perceived their understanding of the Issues was much greater than prior to the assignment.

Similarly, students' overall knowledge of Issue 2 significantly increased ( $p < 0.01$ ) between pre- and post-test scores (Table 1). Knowledge of more in depth questions (tier 2) also increased ( $p < 0.05$ ), while tier 1 scores increased, but not significantly. Students enrolled in animal science courses scored numerically higher on both pre- and post-tests compared to students enrolled in equine courses. All students scored better on tier one questions both pre- and post-test than tier two questions (Table 1). Thus, this experiential learning activity improved both students' perception and factual knowledge on a

current political issue. It was exciting to see students become actively engaged in citizenship despite their apperception and the stigma often associated with American politics.

We feel this assignment afforded us an excellent opportunity to invoke the many different levels of learning as described in Webb's depth of knowledge model (Webb, 1999). The instructors designed multiple choice tests to measure student's ability to recall information regarding political issues. Political action projects allowed students to practice research skills and apply conceptual knowledge, while organization and evaluation of the projects required both strategic and extended thinking. Students felt invested in the project and could directly see how the outcome might directly affect their chosen career path. Additionally, other less measurable benefits of the assignment included; the development of communication skills both written and oral, fostered teamwork, provided leadership opportunities, and invoked a sense of community.

Ohio voters passed Issue 2 on November 3, 2009 with 64 % approving the establishment of an Ohio Livestock Care Standards Board (Ohio Constitution). From their interactions with the voting public on this issue, few if any students were surprised by these results.

In the summer of 2010, the Governor of Ohio along with the leaders of the Ohio Farm Bureau and other Ohio Livestock Commodity groups surprisingly announced that they had reached a compromise with HSUS regarding livestock housing (Coehrs, 2010). This agreement effectively eliminated construction of caged housing for layers and gestation stalls for swine along with many other restrictions for both livestock and non-livestock

species. We therefore thought it might be interesting to solicit a response to this agreement from those students in this study which had worked diligently to gain passage of this legislation as this agreement effectively negated much of their efforts. Overwhelmingly, the students that responded felt the Ohio livestock producers had been “sold out” by this agreement and thought: “Issue 2 was a big hassle ... because in the end HSUS got what they wanted.”

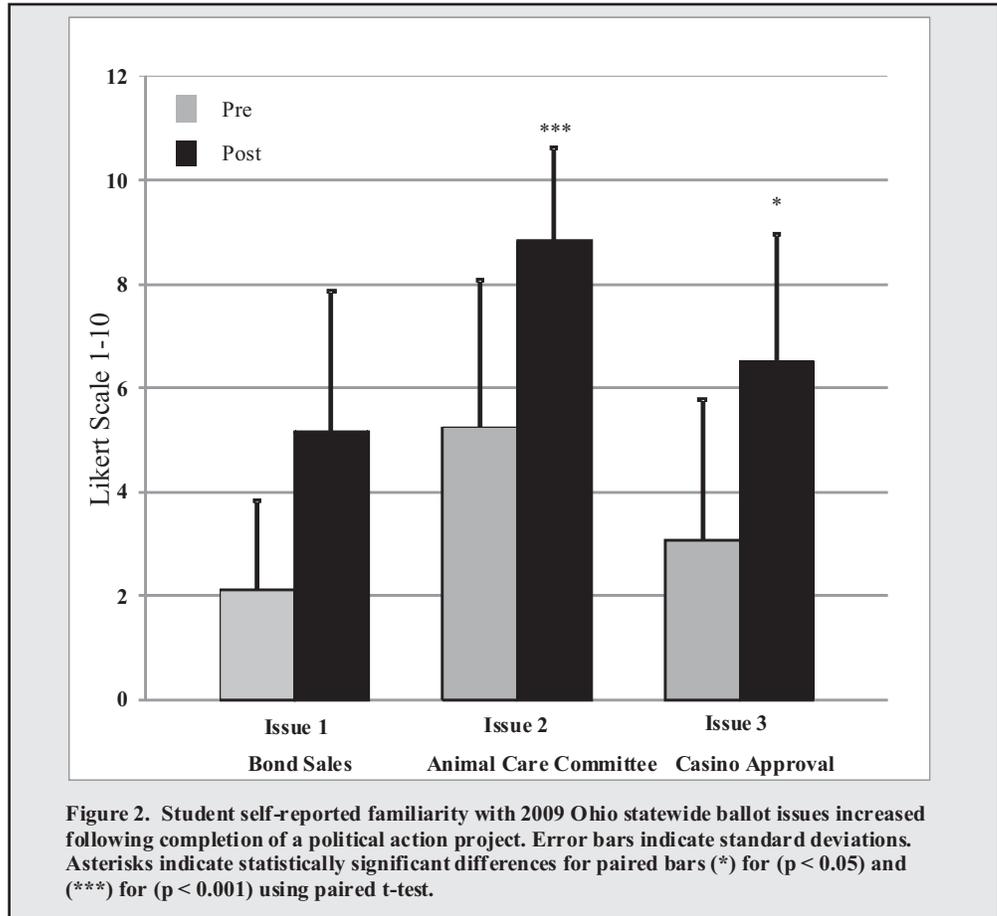


Figure 2. Student self-reported familiarity with 2009 Ohio statewide ballot issues increased following completion of a political action project. Error bars indicate standard deviations. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences for paired bars (\*) for (p < 0.05) and (\*\*\*) for (p < 0.001) using paired t-test.

Table 1. Summary of student pre- and post-test scores following completion of an experiential learning political action project.

	Pre-test Equine	Post-test Equine	Pre-test Animal Science	Post-test Animal Science	Pre-test Combined	Post-test Combined
Overall score	30.7 %	58.3 %	42.1 %	70.7 %	37.7 %	66.7 %**
Tier 1 question score	52.3 %	78.4 %	61.5 %	87.8 %	58.1 %	93.1 %
Tier 2 question score	19.9 %	42.1 %	32.4 %	59.6 %	27.5 %	53.5 %*

<sup>1</sup> Asterisks in combined columns indicate statistically significant differences (\*\*) for (p < 0.01), and (\*) for (p < 0.05) between pre- and post-test scores using paired t-test.

### Summary

Initial student knowledge of political issues was very limited despite many of them being registered voters. This experiential learning activity engaged

## Fostering Political

students in the political process, increased their perception and knowledge of contemporary political issues, and stimulated citizenship. Additionally, students reported developing an interest in the political process, improved research and communication skills, and enhanced creativity. Students often thrive when given the opportunity to apply academic lessons in practical situations. As educators we should seek every opportunity to allow students to convert ideas into tangible action.

## Literature Cited

- Anderson, L.W., D.R. Krathwohl, P.W. Airasian, K.A. Cruikshank, R.E. Mayer, P.R. Pintrich, J. Raths, and M.C. Wittrock. (eds.). 2001. A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing - A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Arizona Secretary of State's Office. 2006. Proposing amendment to Title 13, Chapter 29, Arizona revised statutes by adding Section 13-2910.07; Relating to cruel and inhumane confinement of animals. <http://www.azsos.gov/results/2006/general/BallotMeasureText/PROP%20204%20%28I-07-2006%29.htm>. Accessed December 28, 2010.
- Bolten, C. 2009. Rethinking burgeoning political consciousness: Student activists, the Class of '99 and political intent in Sierra Leone. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47(3): 349-369.
- California Health & Safety Code § 25990.2008. <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycode?section=hsc&group=25001-26000&file=25990-25994>. Accessed December 28, 2010.
- Coehrs, D.J. 2010. Farm Bureau: State deal made with HSUS product of leverage. *Fulton County Expositor*. <http://www.expositornews.com/ful/ohio-hsus-agreement>. Accessed December 28, 2010.
- Converse, P. 1971. Non-voting among young adults in the United States. In: Crotty, W., Freeman, D.M., and Gatlin, D.S. (eds.). *Political Parties and Political Behavior*, 2nd ed. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Florida Department of State, Division of Elections, Animal Cruelty Amendment: Limiting Cruel and Inhumane Confinement of Pigs During Pregnancy. <http://elections.myflorida.com/initiatives/initdetail.asp?account=34174&seqnum=1>. Accessed December 28, 2010.
- Lipka, S. 2007. Poor participation in politics. *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54(13): 23.
- Liu, A. 2004. The perils of protest: State repression and student activism in China and Taiwan. *China Review International* 10(2): 473-476.
- Ohio Constitution. § 14.01. 2009. Ohio Livestock Care Standards Board. <http://www.legislature.state.oh.us/constitution.cfm?Part=14&Section=01>. Accessed December 28, 2010.
- Spanier, G. 2008. Is campus activism dead – or just misguided? *Chronicle of Higher Education* 55(8): 35-36.
- SPSS Inc. 2008. SPSS Statistics 17.0.1. Chicago IL: SPSS Inc.
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2010. The 2010 Statistical Abstract. (129th Edition) <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2010/tables/10s0406.pdf> and <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2010/tables/10s0407.pdf>. Accessed December 28, 2010.
- Wattenberg, M. 2007. *Is voting for young people?* New York, NY: Pearson Longman.
- Webb, N.L. 1999. Alignment of science and mathematics standards and assessments in four states.
- Washington, D.C.: Council of Chief State School Officers.



---

**THANK YOU**  
to the  
**College Of Agricultural  
Sciences & Natural Resources**  
at  
**Oklahoma State University**  
for Endowing the  
**NACTA Southern Region  
Outstanding Teacher Award**

---