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Social Work and Civic Engagement: The Political Participation of Professional Social Workers

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This article examines the involvement of practicing social workers in one type of civic engagement: the use of political processes to promote the public good. Based on a survey of 1,274 randomly selected members of NASW, this is the largest study to date examining the involvement of social workers in political action and policy advocacy. Findings suggest that approximately half of social workers demonstrate high levels of participation in the policy process. The authors analyze the frequency with which respondents engage in specific political and policy-related activities, and compare these results to those of other studies. They also examine respondents' attitudes toward political participation and share recommendations for increasing this aspect of civic engagement within the profession.

Key words: *Policy, advocacy, civic engagement*

Despite its great promise, the new millennium has witnessed the continued erosion of benefits and services for populations at risk (Parrott, Cox, Tristi, & Rice, 2008). In addition we face war and alienation abroad, an economic crisis and new hazards for immigrants at home, and profound threats to our civil liberties. In the face of these challenges, scholars and

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activists have decried America's low levels of civic engagement. Distrust of government runs high, with turnout at the polls hovering around 45% for non-Presidential federal elections (Day & Holder, 2004) and topping off at 60-64% in Presidential races (Holder, 2006). The 9/11 tragedy boosted trust in government temporarily (Putnam, 2002), but the gains were short-lived. Even at their height, positive attitudes failed to generate concomitant changes in behavior. The tide may be turning, however. The Presidential elections of 2004 and 2008 generated larger voter turnouts than at any time in the previous forty years (Wolf, 2008), with voters in 2008 representing unprecedented racial and ethnic diversity (Lopez & Taylor, 2008).

As social workers who value social justice and human rights, we have an ethical responsibility to participate in civic life by advocating for compassionate leaders and constructive social policies. This obligation appears explicitly in the NASW Code of Ethics:

Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice. (1999, Sec. 6.04)

The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008) and the International Federation of Social Workers' mission statement (IFSW, 2005) similarly testify to the importance of political action. This emphasis is a natural outgrowth of social work's long history of involvement in championing important social causes.

Commitment to social and political action has taken many forms within the social work community. Some choose public service. There are currently ten social workers who are members of the U.S. Congress and sixty-eight who hold statewide office (NASW, 2008). Social workers also serve as staff in national,

state, and local legislative offices. Others work as advocates or lobbyists. Meanwhile, policy practice has gained some currency in social work education with faculty teaching courses, requiring assignments, and providing practicum experiences in political and policy settings (Anderson & Harris, 2005; Hoefler, 1999; Sundet & Kelly, 2002; Wolk, Pray, Weismiller & Dempsey, 1996).

Review of the Literature

Most research examining the political participation of social workers has sought to identify whether or not social workers are politically active, what characteristics distinguish those who are highly active from those who are not, and how social workers express their political involvement. Several studies have concluded that social workers, as a group, are more politically active than the general population (Parker & Sherraden, 1991; Ritter, 2007; Wolk, 1981). A number have categorized respondents into those who are inactive, active, and highly active. Replicating an earlier study by Wolk (1981), Ezell (1993) found that the proportion of politically active social workers had increased by nearly 20% over the course of a decade, from 66% to 85.7%. In a more recent study using a different measurement scale, Ritter (2007) found only 46% of her national sample of social workers to be active or very active in political affairs.

The relationship between various demographic characteristics and level of political participation has been examined in a number of studies. Those found to be more active include African Americans (Ezell, 1993; Reeser & Epstein, 1990; Wolk, 1981), NASW members (Ezell, 1993; Hamilton & Fauri, 2001), macro practitioners (Ezell, 1993; Reeser & Epstein, 1990; Wolk, 1981), those with higher levels of education (Ezell, 1993; Parker & Sherraden, 1991; Wolk, 1981), those who are older (Wolk, 1981), those with higher salaries (Wolk, 1981), those who own their own homes (Parker & Sherraden, 1991), and those with more years of professional experience (Ezell, 1993).

Finally, researchers have attempted to identify the specific activities in which social workers are most likely to engage. Because different researchers have employed different subjects, scales, definitions, and time frames, readers should

exercise caution in comparing results across studies. Instead, the findings are useful in painting a picture of what seem to be common trends. Studies that have asked about "voting" (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Parker & Sherraden, 1991; Ritter, 2007) found it to be the single most common activity, even compared to other forms of electoral participation. "Contacting legislators" and "belonging to organizations that take a stand on political issues" were also among the most common (Ezell, 1993; Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Ritter, 2007; Wolk, 1981). At the other end of the scale were "campaigning" and "testifying," which consistently ranked last (Ezell, 1993; Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Parker & Sherraden, 1991; Ritter, 2007; Wolk, 1981).

Despite its importance, there remains little scholarly literature on the topic of civic engagement among social work professionals. Increasing our understanding of whether, how, and why social workers use political processes to promote the public good is critical to identifying strategies for increasing social work's influence in important policy debates affecting vulnerable client groups. The descriptive study presented in this article adds to the growing body of literature on this topic in several ways. First, it is one of the few to use a national sample. Most have relied upon subgroups of social workers: members of a single NASW chapter, licensed social workers within a single state, NASW chapter directors, etc. Second, this study features the largest sample size to date. With the exception of Reeser (1986), sample sizes have fallen in the 200-400 range, averaging about 350 respondents. This study is based on 1,274 valid responses. Third, the activity scale used here is more detailed than those used in other studies, addressing a larger number of activities and permitting finer distinctions in terms of frequency. Finally, this study includes a set of questions about social workers' attitudes toward political participation that adds a new dimension to previous research findings.

Method

A self-administered, self-report questionnaire was developed by the authors in 2000, and pre-tested with social work colleagues and students. Final revisions were made, and the instrument—together with a cover letter and business-reply

envelope—was subsequently sent by first-class mail to a computer-generated list of 3,000 randomly-selected “regular” members of NASW. Four weeks later a follow-up mailing, including cover letter, duplicate survey instrument, and reply envelope, was sent to those who had failed to respond to the initial mailing. Surveys returned by the post office as “undeliverable” were excluded, as were surveys completed by respondents indicating they were not currently practicing social workers. A total of 1,274 valid responses were obtained, for a return rate of 43%.

The instrument is divided into three sections. The first contains a series of 20 statements representing various types of political activity. The activities were derived from two sources: some were based on those used in other studies; others were suggested by the direct experience of the researchers, both of whom are former registered lobbyists. Respondents were asked to signal how often they engage in each activity listed, using a Likert scale of “never,” “rarely,” “sometimes,” “often,” and “always.” The second section contains a list of 22 statements expressing attitudes or beliefs regarding political participation and social work. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement by marking “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “no opinion,” “agree,” or “strongly agree.” The final section asks for demographic information concerning educational background, practice background, age, sex, and political party affiliation. There is also an open-ended question soliciting additional thoughts regarding political participation and social work practice.

Frequencies and cross-tabulations were computed using SPSS, allowing for percentage comparisons. A content analysis was performed on the responses to the open-ended question using open-source coding and categorization to identify recurrent themes.

Characteristics of Respondents

The vast majority of respondents (93.8%) hold an MSW degree. The modal length of time in social work practice is 11-20 years. Approximately 78% identify as female and 22% as male. The largest age concentration (40.8%) is in the 46-55 year

old category. Slightly more than 70% of respondents identify themselves as Democrats. Independents (12.4%) outnumber Republicans (7.9%). Those reporting no political party affiliation represent 6.4%. In addition, several respondents identified themselves as having run for, having held, or currently holding elective office.

The largest cohort of respondents indicates working in nonprofit agencies (33.4%), followed in descending order by public agencies (25.9%), private clinical practice (23.8%), and for-profit settings (12.5%). Most (86.2%) work in urban or suburban areas. Nearly half (45.7%) are employed in health or mental health settings, including private/group practice, mental health facilities, and hospitals. Only 7% work for advocacy or membership organizations. Of the entire sample, 61.8% identify themselves as direct service providers. The clients served are largely lower and middle income (84.5%), with very few respondents primarily serving upper income clients.

Results

An overall rating of political participation was devised, based on the list of identified behaviors. Scores were divided into "high" and "low," reflecting the frequency with which respondents engaged in each political activity. Slightly fewer than half (46.6%) of respondents fell in the "high" range, while slightly more than half (53.4%) fell in the "low" range.

Comparing rates of overall participation to various respondent characteristics yielded few significant differences. There was no discernable difference in level of activity related to issues of personal interest versus issues of professional interest. Respondents with a BSW degree were equally divided between the high and low categories, as were respondents with an MSW degree. Only doctoral level preparation showed a difference, with 75% of those with doctoral degrees falling in the "high" category compared with 25% in the "low" category.

Age and years of social work practice experience both were positively correlated with civic engagement. The older the respondent, the more likely to be highly involved in political activity; similarly, the more years of social work practice experience, the more likely to be highly involved. Respondents

employed in the public sector showed the highest percentages of political activity (equally divided between the "high" and "low" categories), followed in order by those in nonprofit agencies, those in private clinical practice, and those in for-profit agencies (one-third of whom were in the "high" category and two-thirds of whom were in the "low" category). In terms of employment setting, those with the strongest showing in the "high" category work in universities (86.3%) and advocacy/membership organizations (85.7%). Those with the lowest overall participation rates work in nursing homes (25% in the "high" category), correctional facilities (22.2%), and substance abuse programs (17.6%).

In addition to overall participation, frequencies were calculated for each individual behavior in order to get a clearer picture of how social workers participate in civic life (See Table 1). The most common activities, defined as those engaged in "often" or "always" by more than half the respondents, include: voting (95.0%), keeping up with the news (89.2%), knowing who represents them in state and national government (79.4% and 85.3% respectively), encouraging friends, neighbors, or colleagues to vote (67.0%), monitoring legislation of interest (58.0%), sharing political opinions with others (54.6%), and discussing current policy issues with others (53.6%). The least common activities include: participating in (7.8%), helping to organize (3.4%), or encouraging others to attend (9.5%) rallies, marches, or demonstrations; voicing opinions through the media (7.1%); attending or testifying at hearings (11.5% and 4.3% respectively); actively campaigning for a candidate (13.4%); contacting legislators (17.9%); participating in community groups that seek to influence policy (18.2%); and keeping track of how legislators vote (26.7%). Particularly noteworthy is that more than 40% of respondents report never having attended a rally, march, or demonstration; nearly half (48.2%) have never contacted the media; and more than two-thirds (68.3%) have never testified at a public hearing.

Respondents were also asked about their attitudes and opinions regarding participation in the political process. For ease of reporting, responses have been organized into three thematic categories: Professional Role, Perceived Influence, and Educational Preparation. In a few cases where statements

Table 1. Frequency of Participation in Specific Activities

	N (Valid Responses)	Never N (%)	Rarely N (%)	Sometimes N (%)	Often N (%)	Always N (%)
I vote on election day	1269	10 (0.8)	11 (0.9)	43 (3.4)	264 (21.0)	941 (74.0)
I encourage others to vote on election day	1268	45 (4.0)	100 (8.0)	267 (21.0)	385 (30.0)	471 (37.0)
I share my political opinions with others	1264	25 (2.0)	86 (7.0)	463 (36.6)	463 (36.6)	227 (18.0)
I actively campaign for candidates of my choice	1266	384 (30.3)	411 (32.5)	302 (23.9)	105 (8.3)	64 (5.1)
I read, listen to, or watch the news	1271	9 (0.7)	23 (1.8)	105 (8.3)	348 (27.4)	786 (61.8)
I know who represents me in the state capital	1266	14 (1.1)	50 (3.9)	197 (15.6)	364 (28.8)	641 (50.6)
I know who represents me in Congress	1265	10 (0.8)	42 (3.3)	134 (10.6)	318 (25.1)	761 (60.2)
I follow the progress of legislation that interests me	1265	31 (2.5)	120 (9.5)	381 (30.1)	460 (36.4)	273 (21.6)
I discuss current policy issues with others	1269	35 (2.8)	114 (9.0)	440 (34.7)	489 (38.5)	191 (15.1)
I attend public hearings on issues that interest me	1269	402 (31.7)	418 (32.9)	304 (24.0)	105 (8.3)	40 (3.2)
I contact my legislators to share my opinion on policy issues	1266	209 (16.5)	397 (31.4)	434 (34.3)	177 (14.0)	49 (3.9)
I keep track of how my legislators vote on issues that interest me	1269	170 (13.4)	327 (25.8)	434 (34.2)	256 (20.2)	82 (6.5)
I participate in political rallies, marches, etc.	1264	513 (40.6)	396 (31.3)	257 (20.3)	64 (5.1)	34 (2.7)
I encourage others to participate in political rallies, marches, etc.	1265	513 (40.6)	379 (30.0)	254 (20.1)	78 (6.2)	41 (3.2)
I help organize political rallies, marches, etc.	1266	906 (71.6)	235 (18.6)	83 (6.6)	21 (1.7)	21 (1.7)
I testify at federal, state, or local hearings	1263	863 (68.3)	220 (17.4)	125 (9.9)	42 (3.3)	13 (1.0)
I participate in community groups that seek to influence policy	1265	355 (28.1)	342 (27.0)	338 (26.7)	166 (13.1)	64 (5.1)
I voice my opinions on policy issues to media outlets	1261	608 (48.2)	331 (26.2)	233 (18.5)	69 (5.5)	20 (1.6)
I take an active role in relation to issues that affect my clients	1242	137 (11.0)	314 (25.3)	455 (36.6)	267 (21.5)	69 (5.6)
I take an active role in relation to issues that affect me personally	1261	129 (10.2)	291 (23.1)	506 (40.1)	255 (20.2)	80 (6.3)

were phrased in the negative (to avoid acquiescent response set), they are re-phrased in the positive to allow for comparative analysis. The items comprising Professional Role are displayed in Table 2. A full 87.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the contention that it is unethical for social workers to be involved in politics, demonstrating that the vast majority find it ethically acceptable. Of the seven remaining statements, more than half the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the first five, affirming the relevance of political action to their jobs and recognizing their professional obligation to stay informed, educate others, and advocate for constructive policies. The remaining two statements apparently were more problematic.

Table 2. Professional Role and Political Participation

	N (Valid Responses)	SD	D	N	A	SA
It is unethical for social workers to be involved in politics	1238	651 (52.6)	432 (34.9)	115 (9.3)	29 (2.3)	11 (0.9)
I consider it my professional obligation to stay informed about changes in social policy	1264	11 (0.9)	35 (2.8)	106 (8.4)	692 (54.8)	420 (33.2)
Every social worker has an obligation to promote policies that benefit their clients	1240	36 (2.9)	140 (11.3)	255 (20.6)	564 (45.5)	245 (19.8)
I wish I had enough time to advocate for policy changes affecting my practice or my clients	1232	47 (3.8)	144 (11.7)	267 (21.7)	564 (45.8)	210 (17.0)
Increasing the general public's understanding of social policy is an integral part of the social work role	1232	45 (3.7)	177 (14.4)	328 (26.6)	532 (43.2)	150 (12.2)
I consider political action relevant to my job	1228	62 (5.0)	161 (13.1)	179 (14.6)	498 (40.6)	328 (26.7)
It is part of my mission to empower my clients politically as well as personally	1228	92 (7.5)	290 (23.6)	330 (26.9)	375 (30.5)	141 (11.5)
I wish my agency would let me be more involved in politics	1121	145 (12.9)	276 (24.6)	512 (45.7)	131 (11.7)	57 (5.1)

SD= Strongly Disagree; D= Disagree; N= No Opinion; A= Agree; SA= Strongly Agree

The statement on politically empowering clients generated the most ambivalence, with approximately 42% agreeing that it is part of their mission, 31% disagreeing, and 27% expressing no opinion. Finally, the statement "I wish my agency would let me be more involved in politics" elicited stronger levels of disagreement (27.5%) than agreement (26.8%), with 45.7% expressing no opinion.

The second theme represented by the attitude/opinion questions concerns Perceived Influence. Responses are summarized in Table 3. These statements were designed to measure the degree to which social workers believe they have the power to influence policy outcomes. The vast majority of respondents (93.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that voting is important. Nearly 85% disagreed or strongly disagreed that influencing policy should be left to professional lobbyists, suggesting that they potentially see a role for social work practitioners in shaping policy outcomes. More than 65% indicated that they believe they could influence social policy if they tried.

Table 3. Perceived Influence on Public Policy

	N (Valid Responses)	SD	D	N	A	SA
Voting is an important tool for influencing social policy	1243	16 (1.3)	23 (1.9)	42 (3.5)	490 (39.4)	671 (54)
Influencing policy should be left to professional lobbyists	1249	422 (33.8)	637 (51.0)	126 (10.1)	52 (4.2)	12 (1.0)
It is unlikely that I would have much influence, even if I tried to affect social policy	1245	254 (20.4)	579 (46.5)	215 (17.3)	165 (13.3)	32 (2.6)

SD= Strongly Disagree; D= Disagree; N= No Opinion; A= Agree; SA= Strongly Agree

Finally, several statements sought respondents' opinions about the adequacy of their Educational Preparation for civic engagement. These appear in Table 4. The strongest level of agreement (78.1%) concerned the link between social work practice and social action. This compares favorably to the 36.2% who felt they'd had adequate guidance on integrating political action into their professional roles. A total of 41.7% said they wished they were more knowledgeable about how to impact the political process, and 47.5% expressed being satisfied with their level of political involvement.

Table 4. Educational Preparation for Political Participation

	N (Valid Responses)	SD	D	N	A	SA
My social work education emphasized the link between social work practice and social action	1251	25 (2.0)	121 (9.7)	129 (10.3)	665 (53.2)	311 (24.9)
I wish I were more knowledgeable about how to effectively impact the political process	1243	75 (6.0)	332 (26.7)	318 (25.6)	437 (35.2)	81 (6.5)
I believe I've had adequate guidance on how to integrate political action into my professional role	1243	102 (8.2)	431 (34.7)	259 (20.9)	346 (27.9)	103 (8.3)
I am satisfied with my level of political involvement	1251	52 (4.2)	419 (33.5)	186 (14.9)	505 (40.4)	89 (7.1)

SD= Strongly Disagree; D= Disagree; N= No Opinion; A= Agree; SA= Strongly Agree

Discussion

The nearly equal division of respondents between high and low overall levels of political participation is not surprising, given the breadth and diversity within the profession. It echoes the profession's historical dual emphasis on casework and social action. The fact that nearly half of NASW members, nationally, are highly politically active is a positive sign, especially since some view NASW as a mainstream organization in which social work activists may be underrepresented. The levels of participation here are lower than those found (using a different index) by Wolk (1981) and Ezell (1993), but very similar to those found by Ritter (2007).

The effects of educational preparation (PhD), age, and number of years in social work practice are consistent with other findings. The fact that those with BSW and MSW degrees are equally active might be considered at odds with previous findings in which higher levels of education correlated with higher levels of civic engagement. The finding here may be a positive one, reflecting the attention paid to policy practice in BSW curricula, as required by the CSWE curriculum policy statement. Alternatively, it could be interpreted as negative, reflecting the sometimes narrower "clinical" focus of many

MSW social workers. It is not surprising that public sector and nonprofit agency employees show higher levels of involvement than those in private clinical practice or for-profit agencies. Nor is it surprising that those employed by universities and advocacy/membership organizations show the highest levels of participation. Of some concern, however, are the overall low levels of participation by social workers in nursing homes, correctional facilities, and substance abuse programs—settings beset by systemic problems and often in need of policy interventions.

Looking at the various ways in which social workers manifest their involvement in the political process, a clear pattern emerges. With the exception of voting, the activities engaged in most often are those that require the least amount of effort; they could be described as passive rather than active. These include: keeping up with the news, identifying one's legislative representatives, following the progress of legislation, sharing political opinions with others, and discussing policy issues with friends and colleagues. At least half of the respondents indicated engaging in these activities "often" or "always." By contrast, those activities requiring greater commitment scored lower. These include contacting legislators, actively campaigning for candidates, testifying at hearings, attending marches or rallies, contacting the media, and joining community groups that advocate for policy change. A similar preference for activities requiring lower, rather than higher, levels of commitment was identified by Parker and Sherraden (1991) in their study of electoral politics and social work participation.

Of the behaviors identified in the survey, perhaps the most widely studied is voting. The fact that 95% of respondents indicated they vote often or always is impressive. Even accounting for possible social desirability bias, this far outstrips the voting rate in the general population. It is, in fact, consistent with other studies all of which show more than 90% of social work respondents indicating they vote.

Findings on several other items were more surprising. Only 18.2% indicated that they "participate in community groups that seek to influence local, state, or federal policy." First, this is at odds with the findings of previous studies that identify organizational membership as one of the more common

ways of expressing political involvement. Second, everyone in the sample is a member of NASW, an organization that has an active lobbying presence at both the national and chapter levels. The outcome here may be a function of how the item is worded: Perhaps most NASW members don't view their membership as "participation"—or perhaps they don't consider NASW to be a "community group." Another possibility is that members are unaware of NASW's role in political advocacy. This suggests that more aggressive outreach to NASW members around the Association's policy efforts could be an important strategy for increasing overall levels of political participation within the profession.

The other finding that seems inconsistent with previous research is the small proportion of respondents who report contacting their legislators. The difference might be due to the ways in which the variable is measured across studies. For example, 60% of social workers may have contacted a legislator at least once during the past year (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001), but they might not characterize this in the present study as doing so "often" or "always." This interpretation of the data is supported by the fact that 34.3% say they contact their legislators "sometimes" and an additional 31.4% do so "rarely." Perhaps the findings are less inconsistent than they first appear.

Also rated surprisingly low was "participating in marches, rallies, or demonstrations." Reeser and Epstein (1990) characterize this as one of a set of "non-institutionalized" social action behaviors. One of their key findings is that, between the 1960s and the 1980s, social workers increased their use of "institutionalized" methods of political participation and decreased their engagement in "non-institutionalized" behaviors. This finding is consistent with that pattern, yet it remains counter-intuitive. With so many causes sponsoring walks and runs and rallies (AIDS, breast cancer, genocide, suicide prevention, gun control, gay rights, etc.), one would expect more social workers to participate. Perhaps respondents weren't thinking of the political agendas underlying these events, but only of their social or fundraising goals.

Consistent with other research findings, involvement in electoral campaigns ("I actively campaign for the candidates of my choice") scored low. This may reflect the profession's

lagging attention to the importance of electoral politics. Unlike policy advocacy, electoral politics does not appear in the NASW Code of Ethics, nor is it mentioned in the CSWE curriculum policy statement. Some social workers remain uncomfortable with partisan politics, believing it is unethical or “dirty”—or mistakenly viewing it as an incursion into others’ self-determination. (Haynes & Mickelson, 2010) Others may be wary of publicly affiliating themselves with a specific party or candidate, lest they jeopardize government or foundation support for their agencies. Social workers and social work students should clarify their legal rights to engage in partisan politics. Where appropriate, they can then begin with small expressions of their own electoral convictions: by putting up a yard sign, making a monetary contribution, sporting a bumper sticker, etc. Though looked on as relatively minor, these behaviors are a vital part of campaigning and may lead to more ambitious activities.

Also consistent with previous research is the low ranking attributed to attending or testifying at public hearings. What is curious about this finding is that testifying is among the policy practice exercises most often incorporated into policy courses in schools of social work. The low numbers are likely due to lack of opportunity to attend hearings or to testify in the context of one’s job. The work force might benefit from training that focuses on increasing social workers’ comfort level with the art of testifying. Issues of great importance to human service agencies often are considered by state and local governing bodies. Increasing the visibility and input of professional social workers would be an invaluable asset in influencing budget and policy outcomes that can determine the survival of key programs and services.

Using the media is another low-scoring activity, and one that has rarely been studied. Its importance, however, is undeniable. Political scientists have long observed that public call-in shows on radio and television skew conservative; social work voices are rarely heard. Fortunately, several policy textbooks now incorporate material on working with the media; hopefully the next generation of practitioners will be more comfortable with that role and will voice their opinions on important policy issues through strategic use of broadcast, print,

and electronic media.

Finally, although more than half of respondents indicated they often or always discuss current policy issues with friends, neighbors, or colleagues, this is a number that can and should be increased. This kind of discussion is critical to shaping public opinion, and public opinion is an important determinant of policy change. Amidei (2002) extols the virtues of talking about the issues in public: on the subway, in the elevator, etc. Social workers often are reticent about expressing their views. This will require a cultural shift that should begin with social work education. We have an obligation to be knowledgeable and to share that knowledge (and resulting convictions) with policy-makers and with the public.

Many social workers continue to harbor ambivalent feelings toward participation in the political process. Haynes and Mickelson attribute this reluctance to a "perceived conflict between political ideology and professional impartiality" (2010, p. 23). Students often express the mistaken belief that it is unethical for social workers to be involved in politics. The survey findings suggest, however, that among a strong majority of NASW members (87.5%), political participation is not viewed as ethically suspect. This comfort with political action on ethical grounds is essential; until we reach 100% agreement, we must continue to stress the integral relationship between political action, social work practice, and the quest for social and economic justice.

Respondents were asked to express their views regarding what functions are relevant to their jobs, what obligations they hold as social work professionals, and how they perceive the parameters of the social work role. The responses were impressive: 88% said they consider it their professional obligation to stay informed about changes in social policy, approximately 67% said they consider political action relevant to their job, and approximately 65% agreed that every social worker has an obligation to promote policies that benefit his or her clients. In regard to relevance, however, many of the clinical practitioners expressed a different opinion in response to the open-ended question. A typical comment was: "In my opinion, community action is far removed from clinical practice." Another mental health professional wrote, "Politics is not much relevant to the

day-to-day issues in my practice.”

Comparing beliefs to action reveals some disparities; despite positive attitudes, fewer than half of the respondents demonstrated high overall levels of political participation. It is likely that lack of time is one explanation: 62.8% said they wished they had enough time to advocate for policy changes affecting their practice or their clients. Lack of time also emerged as a theme in the analysis of the responses to the open-ended question. The responsibilities of parenthood emerged as another. As one respondent wrote, “Since the birth of my baby, my time and energy are devoted to the politics at home! It feels impossible to march in D.C. like I did when I was in grad school. I suppose this is an area I will return to when my life changes again.” The effect of agency rules and expectations is less clear. While only 6.8% indicated that they wish their agency would let them be more involved in politics, this could reflect one of two things: either their agencies already do permit their political involvement, or they lack interest in becoming more politically involved. Greater levels of concern about agency constraints surfaced in response to the open-ended question, largely among public employees. In some cases the agency’s position seems to depend on the particular issues involved. For example:

I believe my state agency (public health) is quite paranoid about lawsuits and doesn’t encourage political action. An exception was when there was a threat to privatize all home health in the state. With agency leadership, we individual workers contacted fellows in other agencies *and* clients to write, call and testify at the state Congressional level.

Perhaps the most interesting responses were to the statement: “It is part of my mission to empower my clients politically as well as personally.” While 42% agreed, more than 30% disagreed and more than one-fourth expressed no opinion. The role of social workers in encouraging clients to be politically active—as distinct from advocating on their behalf—is an area that deserves further investigation. Although our profession subscribes to client empowerment as a fundamental practice goal, how we operationalize it remains unclear. This is an area

of enormous promise that could help give our clients a voice while promoting the public good and facilitating broad-based civic engagement (Rome, Hoechstetter, & Wolf-Branigin, *In press*).

Scholars have long taken an interest in identifying what factors might predict greater engagement in the political process. Political scientists, in particular, have defined a series of variables that comprise a measure of what they call “psychological engagement” (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). Among them is something similar to what social workers call “agency”—that is, the belief that one has the ability to affect outcomes. Hamilton and Fauri (2001) and Ritter (2007) have tested this notion with a social work audience. They found that those who believe they have the power to influence outcomes are indeed more likely to engage in the political process. Against this backdrop, the findings in the current study are encouraging: a strong majority of respondents believe that voting matters and disagree that influencing policy should be left to professional lobbyists. More than two-thirds believe that, if they tried, they would be likely to have some influence over social policy. One respondent wrote: “It continually amazes me how one or two or three people—plain citizens—can get legislation passed or killed, if they have a good case that doesn’t gore anyone’s ox, and they are persistent in their efforts.” On the other hand, a few responses suggest skepticism about the political process: “As someone who was very politically active in the 60s and 70s, I have become totally disillusioned with the political system and increasingly cynical about the political change process.”

Finally, respondents were asked about the adequacy of their preparation for policy practice. It appears that most respondents got the message about the interdependence of policy and practice, but many are having difficulty applying this conviction on the job. This suggests a need for continuing education that helps administrators, supervisors, and workers identify opportunities to incorporate political action into the work place as seamlessly as possible. Consider this comment: “Political involvement is an ‘extra’ when you have too few resources, too little time, and are generally doing more with less.” The goal is for policy and practice to exist as an

integrated whole, rather than as two separate pursuits. According to a few respondents, political participation can actually help relieve some of the stresses of the workplace: "I feel very strongly that it is our duty to become active in the political arena. Public policy impacts on our families in dramatic ways. I also feel it will help us to fight burn-out. I first became active as an advocate for child welfare when I was a CPS worker. When things felt hopeless I'd get involved in shaping policy."

The study further suggests that another topic for continuing education should be skill development in policy practice. Over 40% of respondents said "I wish I were more knowledgeable about how to effectively impact the political process." While not a majority, this constitutes a sizeable number of social workers who might well become more active with the confidence and comfort that stem from proper training.

Limitations

As mentioned previously, this study adds to a limited body of research on the topic of social workers' political participation. Yet caution should be exercised in drawing direct comparisons across studies. Each has asked somewhat different questions, employed somewhat different samples, used somewhat different instruments, and applied somewhat different interpretations to the results. Taken together, however, they begin to create a picture of the status of the profession in relation to the political process.

Although this study draws on a large, national, random sample of social workers, all are members of NASW. Although NASW is the largest association of professional social workers in the world, NASW represents only a fraction of those practicing social work. Since the responses were self-reported, there is also a risk of social desirability bias. Answers may be inflated in an effort to "look good" to the researchers. This study measured engagement in specific activities using a Likert scale of "never," "rarely," "sometimes," "often," and "always." These categories are imprecise, calling on respondents to interpret the labels and make judgments about the frequency of their various behaviors. Readers should consider this a relative, rather than an absolute, measure of participation. Finally, the

response rate of 43%, though respectable for a mailed questionnaire, suggests that findings should be generalized with caution. There is no way of knowing how those who didn't respond might have answered the questions. It is possible that non-respondents, as a group, have less interest in political action than those who took the time to complete and return the survey instrument.

Conclusion

This study surveyed a randomly-selected national sample of 1,274 practicing social workers, seeking to describe their attitudes toward, and engagement in, political action. The results show that slightly fewer than half of the respondents are "highly" politically active, with doctorally-prepared social workers, older social workers, and social workers with more years of practice experience demonstrating greater involvement.

With the exception of voting, behaviors requiring lower levels of commitment were far more common than those requiring higher levels of commitment. Consistent with previous findings, testifying at hearings and campaigning for candidates were among those activities engaged in least frequently. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the social workers surveyed express little ethical ambivalence about engaging in political action. Most expressed the belief that political action is relevant to their jobs, and that they have an obligation to stay informed about policy changes and to promote policies that benefit their clients. Lack of time may inhibit some social workers from acting on these beliefs. Their comfort with encouraging political activity on the part of their clients is less clear. Respondents were divided about whether they have a role in empowering their clients politically. This is an issue deserving of further discussion and investigation. On the other hand, strong majorities expressed confidence in social workers' ability to influence policy outcomes. Other studies have found this "psychological engagement" to be a predictor of political involvement.

Most respondents indicated that their social work education stressed the relationship between policy and practice.

Many, however, expressed a desire to learn more about how to impact the political process and felt they needed guidance on integrating political action into their professional roles. Overall, the findings paint a positive picture of the status of social workers in relation to political action. There is certainly room, nonetheless, to strengthen the profession's hand. It is critical that we persevere in delivering the message that political behavior matters, and that our engagement in the process benefits our clients. Social work education must continue increasing its emphasis on policy practice, incorporating it into courses, assignments, exercises, and field practica. This content should be required of all students, not just those in macro concentrations. Given that social workers in private clinical practice were found to have comparatively low levels of political participation, this exposure may be especially critical for students in clinical concentrations. For all students, early training in policy practice skills could help lay the foundation for greater comfort in integrating political action into the professional role. Meanwhile, the definition of policy practice should be broadened beyond policy advocacy to include electoral politics. CSWE and NASW, respectively, should entertain including references to electoral politics in the Education Policy Statement and the Code of Ethics.

With practicing social workers, we can start by encouraging those who are inactive to take small steps: share their ideas and opinions with friends and neighbors; become active in NASW's efforts or affiliate with other community groups that engage in advocacy; attend a march or rally; donate to a political action committee, a political campaign, or a cause of their choice; or sport a bumper sticker, button, or yard sign at election time. For many social workers (as for the general public), writing to a legislator, making a lobbying visit, contacting the media, or testifying at a hearing can be very intimidating. As in all social work practice, we should start where the client is. Meanwhile there are plenty of social workers, as evidenced by this study, who do want to know more and do more. Some just need occasional reminders, as demonstrated by the following comment: "This survey makes me feel guilty as hell. I'll be writing Congress tonight!" Others could benefit from continuing education that provides opportunities for social

work practitioners (including those in private practice and for-profit agencies) to become more knowledgeable about how to influence policy outcomes, how to present testimony at a hearing, how to work with the media, and how to integrate political action into their professional role. In order ensure that the workplace provides the necessary climate to support political activity, administrators and supervisors should be targeted as well, and helped to identify strategies for promoting political engagement without jeopardizing ongoing organizational activities.

Research should continue to examine social workers' political participation and its impact, identifying how we can maximize the effectiveness of that participation in positively influencing policy outcomes. Social workers should become leaders in the current national movement for increased civic engagement. After all, our Code of Ethics exhorts us not only to engage in social and political action ourselves, but to facilitate the political action of the broader society. This article addresses one type of civic engagement: the use of political processes to promote the public good. We must continue to expand our role as visible, credible, and effective agents of social change.

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