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Collective Power to Create Political Change: Increasing the Political Efficacy and Engagement of Social Workers

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Abstract

Because social workers are called to challenge social injustices and create systemic change to support the well-being of individuals and communities, it is essential that social workers develop political efficacy: belief that the political system can work and they can influence the system. This study explored the impact of an intensive political social work curriculum on political efficacy and planned political engagement among social work students and practitioners. The findings suggest this model of delivering a political social work curriculum effectively increases internal, external, and overall political efficacy, and that increasing political efficacy has promise for increasing future political engagement.

Collective power to create political change:

Increasing the political efficacy and engagement of social workers

The social work profession has always been in the trenches with our nation's most vulnerable members of society. We have been on the front lines of every major social problem of the last century, fighting for social justice and social change. These efforts date back to Jane Addams—"the founding mother of social work"—and the settlement houses of the early 20th century (Addams, 1914). Political engagement and social action continue to be an imperative of the social work profession, and this is a commitment embedded in the profession's Code of Ethics (NASW, 2009) and educational requirements for program accreditation (CSWE, 2015). This is an invaluable strength and distinctive marker of the profession that differentiates social work from the other helping professions: social workers are called to be actively engaged in the political process and to take social action as part of their work with, and for, clients. However, despite a commitment for social work voices to take a political stance to end human suffering, some scholars argue that the social work profession has paid no deference to its mandate (Harding, 2004; Haynes & Mickelson, 1997; Reeser & Epstein, 1987, 1990; Specht & Courtney, 1992).

The social work profession continues to evolve and grapple with this mandate for social and political action. Social work is a diverse profession with differing interpretations of social and political action, how to achieve it, and what it means for individual social workers to actively engage in political process as part of social work practice (Weismiller & Rome, 1995). Some even purport that the profession has altogether abandoned its calling to address oppressive systems as the socio-political and economic conditions shifted. Once, social work used

government interventions as a tool to improve social well-being, and now the profession largely

embraces a treatment model focused on individual pathology, micro level practice, and person-

level change (Specht & Courtney, 1992). Scholars have called for greater attention to this shift

in common practice behaviors, and assert a recommitment to an explicitly radical mission of

political advocacy within the profession and make it once again part of its core identity (Harding,

2004; Haynes & Mickelson, 1997; Reeser & Epstein, 1987, 1990; Reisch & Jani, 2012; Specht &

Courtney, 1992). Nevertheless, for many social workers, political engagement is not part of their

personal philosophy or identity, let alone their social work practice (Rome & Hoechstetter,

2010).

Political Efficacy

For social workers to engage effectively with political processes, research shows they

must be informed, responsible, thoughtful, and engaged citizens with *political efficacy*: faith in

the ability to make a meaningful impact and changes through political engagement, particularly

voting and elections (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Citizens with political efficacy believe

in the political process and their own participation in it (Beaumont, 2011; Easton, 1965; Easton

& Dennis, 1967; Morrell, 2005; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al, 1995). Because, as a profession,

social workers are called upon to challenge social injustices and create systemic change to

support the well-being of individuals and communities, it is essential that social workers believe

the political system can work and that they and the profession can influence the system.

The expectation based on large-scale studies of the general public and smaller

examinations of social workers will lead to changes in their political efficacy – specifically the

likelihood of sustained political engagement. The theoretical basis for this work has its roots in

Albert Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy which suggests that one must believe in their capacity and sense of self as an agent-of-change to take action or change course. Those who believe they have the capability to complete a task are more likely to engage than those who do not.

Political efficacy has been used to help explain political engagement for decades (Easton, 1965; Easton & Dennis, 1967; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al, 1995). Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954) define political efficacy as "a combination of one's sense of competence in the political sphere and one's assessment of the responsiveness of the system" (p. 187). Beginning with the work of Robert Lane (1959), studies have differentiated two types of political efficacy: internal efficacy and external efficacy. Internal political efficacy is one's belief in her or his ability to "achieve desired results in the political domain through personal engagement and an efficient use of one's own capacities and resources" (Caprara, Vecchione, Capanna, & Mebane, 2009, p. 1002). An individual with high internal political efficacy believes that he or she understands how to take part in the political process and is not intimidated by obstacles that may be encountered. External political efficacy "concerns people's belief that the political system is amenable to change through individual and collective influence" (Caprara et al., 2009, p. 1002). It is also referred to as perceived system responsiveness. A person with high external political efficacy views the political system and leaders as responsive and accessible to the general public's needs. Political efficacy has been examined as a factor in political engagement in many studies of social workers (i.e., Ritter, 2008; Swank, 2012). Hamilton and Fauri (2001) found that political efficacy is the strongest predictor of political activity.

A Model for Increasing Political Efficacy

For social work to meet its ethical obligations to social action, political action, and social justice (NASW, 2009), politically astute social workers must be empowered and equipped with the skills and competencies to negotiate and navigate complex bureaucratic processes and systems. For the past 20 years, a northeastern university has been developing an experiential, hands-on political social work curriculum to train social workers, social work students, and community members for leadership positions in political campaigns and their own runs for elected office, which include multiple aspects of this learning model. Improving the political efficacy of participants is an explicit goal of the training, based on the work of Beaumont (2011), Hamilton and Fauri (2001), Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) and others. Beaumont (2011) suggests that four factors are key to developing political efficacy in a way which benefits all, but decreases the gap between those who enter the process with varying status. These factors are experiences in groups which are consciously engaging in political action, opportunities to acquire and practice skills for political action, engaging in political discourse in open and respectful settings, and inclusion in collaborative pluralist contexts. As Beaumont states, "political efficacy and equality depend on developing relationships and capacities that help us navigate the genuine challenges and rewards of democratic politics" (2011, p. 229).

Given the importance of political efficacy in our field, it is critical that this training be appealing and engaging. Ritter (2013) has been urging social work programs to rethink and assess innovative approaches in teaching policy advocacy by revamping and updating their policy courses in the interest of building the skills necessary to engage the legislative process and political arena. Experiential learning and teaching strategies employed by the political social work training program "aligns well with the learning style preferences of Millennial students,

which include active learning methods, working in groups with their peers, a less formal learning environment, and learning about topics that feel relevant to their lives and society at large" (p. 14).

The current political social work curriculum is based on 20 years of evaluation work, research, and input from alumni and experts in the field. It consists of three modules, all led by experienced political social workers who have worked full-time or part-time in electoral campaigns, advocacy work, or for elected officials. The first module is a detailed course in the terminology and processes of electoral campaigns in the United States. This section includes workshops and interactive activities regarding developing a campaign plan, messaging, performing opposition research on oneself, asking for money, and developing materials and strategies for voter contact. The second module of the political social work curriculum allows participants to learn from the experiences of social workers who have run for political office and worked in political employment. Panels, workshops, and small-group interactions allow participants to get a realistic sense of the experience of running for office and learn from the successes and challenges of those who have come before them. The third module is an interactive experience for participants to plan their own political development. Participants use the information they have learned to develop their own political plans, set goals for their political work in the next five years, and commit to first steps toward their political futures. All three sections include activities that are designed to build both internal and external efficacy of participants.

Research Hypotheses

This study examines the effect of a political social work (PSW) training on internal and external political efficacy. This will be assessed via the following research questions and hypotheses:

Research question 1: Does the PSW training increase participants' political efficacy compared to baseline?

> **Hypothesis 1:** Internal political efficacy of the training participants will be higher at post-test than at baseline

> **Hypothesis 2:** External political efficacy of the training participants will be higher at post-test than at baseline

> **Hypothesis 3:** Overall political efficacy (the combination of internal and external political efficacy) of the training participants will be higher at post-test than at baseline.

Research question 2: Is there a relationship between participants' political efficacy and planned future political engagement?

> **Hypothesis 4:** Internal political efficacy will have a positive relationship with planned future political engagement

> **Hypothesis 5:** External political efficacy will have a positive relationship with planned future political engagement

> **Hypothesis 6:** Overall political efficacy will have a positive relationship with planned future political engagement.

Research question 3: What individual political activities have a significant relationship with internal, external, and overall political efficacy?

Methods

This study obtained data through a voluntary self-administered, self-report survey. Before the survey was administered, permission to study human subjects was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of all participating institutions.

Measures

Prior to the administration of the survey, both measures were pre-tested on eight former training participants to ensure the language and questions were clear and understandable, and the survey could be completed in under 15 minutes.

Political Efficacy. The first scale measured political efficacy. This scale is based on the work of the American National Election Survey (n.d) (ANES), later refined by Niemi, Craig, and Mattei (1991) to operationalize internal and external political efficacy using an eight-item scale. All of the items have five Likert responses that range from strongly disagree to strongly agree and a total score ranging from 0 to 32, with high scores indicating strong efficacy. The internal political efficacy scale was comprised of four questions ("How often do politics and government seem so complicated that you can't really understand what's going on?"; "How well do you understand the important political issues facing our country?"; "How much do public officials care what people like you think?"; and "How much can people like you affect what the government does?") and this subscale had a range from 0 to 16. The external political efficacy scale also had four questions ("There are many legal ways for citizens to successfully influence what the government does"; "Under our form of government, the people have the final say about how the country is run, no matter who is in office"; "If public officials are not interested in hearing what the people think, there is really no way to make them listen"; and "People like me don't have any say about what the government does.") and a subscale range from 0 to 16.

Political Engagement. The second scale was based on the work of Rome and Hoechstetter (2010) in their study of the political engagement of 1,274 social workers who were NASW members. Respondents indicated on a 5-point Likert scale (from "never" to "always") how often they engaged in a wide range of political knowledge and past political activities. Some activities involved relatively mild effort, knowledge, or commitment (e.g. "read, listen to, or watch the news," and "discuss current policy issues with others") while others involved a greater degree of expertise or commitment (e.g. "testify at federal, state, or local hearings," "voice my opinion on policy issues to media markets"). High scores are equivalent to more political engagement.

Future Political Engagement. The third and final scale was created by the authors and consists of seven individual items (e.g., "Do you plan to volunteer for a political campaign?" "Do you plan to contact your elected officials in the future?"). Respondents indicated using a yes/no response set if they planned to participate in future political engagement activities after completing the training. The constructed item had a range from 0 to 7, with higher scores indicating more planned future engagement, and had an internal consistency of α=.426.

Participants at each training were given the pre-test prior to the start of training and a post-test at the conclusion of the training. Informed consent was provided in writing and described verbally by a researcher. Completion of the survey was considered consent to participate in the study. Surveys were placed in manila envelopes to ensure anonymity. The same protocol was followed for completion of the post-test.

Sampling

The survey was distributed to all attendees of the 2015 political social work training at two schools of social work in the northeastern United States, which took place during April

2015. School A is a large public institution in an urban area with an MSW and PhD program.

School B is a private university in a suburban area with a MSW program, which is offered in

person or online. A total of 91 training participants, 66 participants from School A and 25

participants from School B, were invited to participate. In order to be included in the study

sample, participants had to attend both days of the training, which totaled 68 people.   The

response rate for the survey was 98.5% (n=67).

Univariate analysis was employed to describe the demographic characteristics of the

sample. The mean age of the sample was 34.9 years old, 78% of respondents identified as

female, and more than half of the participants were social work students. Roughly three-quarters

of the sample identified as White, 16% were Black or African-American, 8% identified with

more than one race, and 5% identified as other races. Those who identified as Latino/Hispanic

represented 17% of the sample. Eighty percent identified their sexual orientation as

heterosexual, more than three-fifths (64%) were unmarried, and nearly 40% were affiliated with

a religion.

The sample exhibited high levels of political engagement and knowledge prior to the

training. Almost all participants (94%) were registered to vote, and 89% voted in federal

elections and encouraged others to vote. Just over three-quarters identified as a Democrat; none

identified as Republican. Eighty-one percent stated they knew who represented them in

Congress, 88% knew who represented them in the state legislature, and three had run for elected

office before, while six had been appointed to a political office. Only 77% voted in state and

70% voted in local elections. At School A, 90% reported following the news, compared to 64%

at School B. There were no significant differences in findings based on age, gender, race, or

sexual orientation.

Results

Political Efficacy: Internal and External

[Insert Table 1 here]

Table 1

Comparison of Political Efficacy Pre- and Post-Test Means: Internal and External

	Pre-Test		Post-Test				
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	t-value	df	Sig
External Political Efficacy	8.31	1.73	9.15	1.88	-3.899	58	.000*
Internal Political Efficacy	10.07	2.40	11.64	2.48	-4.414	58	.000*
Political Efficacy	18.37	3.53	20.80	3.98	-4.950	58	.000*

*p<.001

Mean scores for political efficacy were examined for the participants of the two-day political social work training. As described in Table 1, the mean score for internal political efficacy, on a scale of 0 to 16 at pre-test was 10.07 (SD=2.40). This rose to a mean of 11.64 (SD=2.48) at post-test, a statistically significant change (t(-4.14)=58, p=.000). Scores on external political efficacy also increased significantly from pre-test (M=8.31, SD=1.73) to post-test (M=9.15, SD=1.88); t(-3.90)=58, p=.000. The scale of overall political efficacy showed a statistically significant difference between scores from pre-test (M=18.37, SD=3.53) to post-test (M=20.80, SD= 3.98); t(-4.95)=58, p=.000.

Future Political Plans

[Insert Table 2 here]

Table 2

Summary of Intercorrelations for Scores on the Political Efficacy Scale, External Efficacy Scale, Internal Efficacy Scale, and Future Planned Activities Scale				
Post-Test Measures	1	2	3	4
External Efficacy	--	.654**	.881**	-.430**
Internal Efficacy	.654**	--	.934**	.293*
Political Efficacy	.881**	.934**	--	.387**
Future Planned Activities	.430**	.293*	.387**	--
*p<.05, **p<.01*				

Intercorrelations among the overall political efficacy scale, external efficacy sub-scale, internal efficacy sub-scale, and future planned activities scale are presented in Table 2. The future planned activities scale had a minimum score of 0, a maximum score of 7 and an average score of 6.40. Simple correlations indicated that external political efficacy ($r(55)=.43$, $p<.01$), internal political efficacy ($r(55)=.29$, $p<.05$), and political efficacy ($r(55)=.39$, $p<.01$), were significantly related to future planned activities.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Table 3

Summary of Correlations for Planned Future Political Engagement

Post-Test Measures	External Political Efficacy	Internal Political Efficacy	Political Efficacy
Plan to …participate in politics	.387**	.313*	.379**
…run for local office	.474**	.497**	.540**
…run for state office	.476**	.469**	.523**
…run for federal office	.256	.244	.274
…volunteer for a political campaign	.188	.179	.200
…donate to a political campaign or party	.257	.208	.252
…contact a local political official	.326*	.364**	.382**
…contact a state political official	.306*	.396**	.393**
…contact a federal political official	.325*	.422**	.416**

… use social media to engage around issues they care about	.009	.041	.030
… follow legislation they care about	.292*	.088	.193
… write and/or deliver testimony they care about	.286*	.228	.278*
… join interest groups, civic org., or a political party they care about	.308*	.155	.242
… participate in political rallies, marches, and/or protests they care about	.268*	.134	.210
*p<.05, **p<.01			

As described in Table 3, external efficacy was found to be significantly related to ten out of 14 of the participants' plans for future political engagement. Significant relationships were identified between external efficacy and participants' plans to participate in politics (r(57)=.39, p<.01); run for local office (r(37)=.47, p<.01); run for state office (r(37)=.48, p<.01); contact a local political official (r(56)=.33, p<.05); contact a state political official (r(56)=.31, p<.05); contact a federal political official (r(55)=.33, p<.05); follow legislation they care about (r(57)=.29, p<.05); write and/or deliver testimony (r(57)=.29, p<.05); join an interest group (r(57)=.31, p<.05); and participate in political rallies, marches, and/or protests (r(57)=.27, p<.05).

Similarly, internal efficacy was found to be related to six items that participants plan to engage in after completing the two-day training. Significant relationships were discovered between internal efficacy and participants' plans to participate in politics (r(57)=.31, p<.05); run for local office (r(37)=.50, p<.01); run for state office (r(37)=.40, p<.01); contact a local political official (r(56)=.36, p<.01); contact a state political official (r(56)=.40, p<.01); and contact a federal political official (r(55)=.42, p<.01).

Significant relationships were found between overall efficacy and participants' plans to engage in seven items. Those with high efficacy were more likely to participate in politics ($r(57)=.38$, $p<.01$); run for local office ($r(37)=.54$, $p<.01$); run for state office ($r(37)=.52$, $p<.01$); contact a local political official ($r(56)=.38$, $p<.01$); contact a state political official ($r(56)=.39$, $p<.01$); contact a federal political official ($r(55)=.42$, $p<.01$); and write and/or deliver testimony ($r(57)=.28$, $p<.05$).

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest this model of delivering a political social work curriculum effectively increases internal, external, and overall political efficacy, and that political efficacy has promise for increasing future political engagement. Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were confirmed, with participants' scores on internal and external political efficacy increasing, and their overall score rising following the training. Participants began with a slightly lower score on the external scale than the internal scale, and the increase in external was smaller (.84) than internal (1.16). This may suggest that the training is more effective at increasing their understanding of their own ability to change the system than at increasing their confidence in the system. Given that the training includes much frank discussion from those who work in and try to affect the political system about its strengths and weaknesses, but who discuss their own successes in making the system work, this may not be surprising.

An increase in efficacy is desired primarily as a method of increasing overall political engagement. Both internal and external scales correlated positively with high amounts of planned future political activities, and the overall efficacy scale had a positive correlation as well. The highest correlation (.430) was between external political efficacy and future planned

activity, while the lowest correlation was between internal political efficacy (.293) and planned

future activity. This result, combined with the previous discussion, suggests that one method of

increasing the impact of this training may be to revise the curriculum to emphasize the ways in

which the political system effectively creates change, as that seems to have a high impact on

planned behavior. However, this change should be thoughtfully considered, as it is key to

present an honest and accurate picture of the political system to participants. It would not be

ethical or productive to give them false hopes about the challenges ahead.

Internal, external, and overall political efficacy were compared with respondents' plans to

participate in a variety of activities. As might be expected, plans to participate in many activities

correlated positively with all three types, including overall plans to participate in politics, plans

to run for local or state office, and plans to contact local, state, and federal elected officials.

However, three activities were correlated only with external political efficacy and not with

internal or overall political efficacy. These activities were plans to follow legislation, plans to

join interest groups, and plans to participate in political rallies, marches, or other protests. These

activities may be seen by participants as those that require no particular political skill or

knowledge, and as relatively low-risk or passive. Therefore, they may believe they can

participate in these even if they are unsure of their own abilities.

Plans to write or deliver testimony were correlated with high external and overall political

efficacy but not with internal efficacy. This finding may require more investigation, as the act of

delivering testimony is generally seen as active and tends to create high anxiety in social workers

and social work students who have not done it before (and possibly in those who are

experienced). This may be a quirk of this data, or there may be more to learn about the perception of this activity.

There was no correlation found between any type of efficacy and plans to run for federal office, likely because very few participants planned to run for federal office. The opposite was true of plans to volunteer and donate to campaigns—as nearly all participants planned to participate in these activities, no relationships were found. Future research should examine these activities with a more diverse group of research participants, in the hopes of creating a situation where there is more variance in the dependent variable and more conclusions can be drawn about the relationships between efficacy and planned action. One would certainly hypothesize that running for federal office would require a significant amount of internal efficacy.

The final item with no correlations, plans to use social media, is an interesting case. Not only was the correlation not significant, it was almost nonexistent (.009 for external, .041 for internal, and .030 overall), suggesting that posting on social media involves little need for belief in one's own skills or faith in the system. This could suggest that social media is a good entry point for those who are beginning the political process or have not had successful interactions with the political system in the past. Given the increase in political campaigning and influencing done via social media in the current electoral and advocacy process, this topic is worth more attention in future work.

Schools and organizations that wish to increase the political engagement of social workers, social work students, or members of the communities we serve can take advantage of these findings to strengthen the curricula and interventions they use to educate and encourage social workers to understand and engage with the political process, and to encourage their clients

and communities to do the same. Ultimately, the development team for the political social work curriculum hopes that increased political efficacy (and subsequent increased political engagement) will translate into more social workers seeking elected office. Indeed, high internal and external political efficacy were both correlated with intentions to run for local and state office. However, high efficacy scores also correlated with intentions to complete a variety of activities that schools and organizations may wish to encourage in their students, workers, clients, and communities. These include intention to contact local, state, and federal officials, a goal that is at the heart of advocacy trainings and initiatives at schools of social work and in the community. External efficacy was also correlated with intentions to testify about policy issues, join interest groups, civic organizations, or political parties, and participating in rallies, marches, or protests, methods that can help social workers meet their ethical obligations to social and political action that works to strengthen human rights and social justice.

All of these are activities encouraged by social work faculty and practitioners in the community. The connection of these activities to efficacy, particularly to external efficacy, suggests that strengthening efficacy is an important aspect of trainings and initiatives. While the political social work training was shown to increase efficacy, there are other methods that can and should be incorporated by schools and organizations. Our work suggests interventions should include one or more of the key aspects of the Beaumont model. First, educators and practitioners should promote experiences in groups which are consciously engaging in political action, often accomplished through experiential learning and problem-solving. Second, look for opportunities to acquire and practice skills for political action such as campaigning, testifying, and engaging with elected officials. Third, create spaces where students and communities can

engage in political discourse about current issues in open and respectful settings. Finally, look for ways to broaden contexts so students and community members are participating in these activities with diverse colleagues.

Internal and external political efficacy are not without implications for those who are marginalized by their race, gender, class, or other characteristics. Increasing political efficacy among marginalized groups can decrease the gap between the political "haves" and "have nots" (Beaumont, 2011). Descriptive representation, or the experience of having elected officials who share important identity characteristics with the individual, has been shown to increase internal political efficacy, a significant finding in a realm where the majority of elected officials are Caucasian and male, a stark difference from much of the electorate (Wallace, 2014). Efficacy in African-American voters has been found to be more heavily influenced by their perception of their group's ability to make a difference than their individual ability (Mangum, 2003). Women feel less empowered than men to participate in the political world (Lawless & Fox, 2011). Interestingly, some research suggests that marginalized groups may be mobilized through their contact with inequitable systems. For example, one study found that personal contact with the criminal justice system increased all types of political engagement other than voting, and proximal exposure (exposure by someone close to the respondent) increased all types of political engagement. While these results are true for respondents of all ethnicities, the effect is stronger for those who are persons of color (Walker, 2014).

Future research should examine whether the methods used to increase efficacy can be improved, and whether gains in political efficacy are sustained over time. Other potential areas for research include the effectiveness of the curriculum for specific marginalized groups;

tracking future behaviors of program participants to assess actual future political engagement (including runs for office); and conducting this training in other regions of the country to understand how local political ideology may influence the results. A priority for future studies is to explore a possible relationship between political ideology and political engagement, and also to examine perceived barriers of participants of the training. Addressing the first priority, a political scale will need to be employed in order to detect variation in the participants' political ideology, which tends to be nuanced even among those identifying with the same political affiliation (Rosenwald, 2006). In order to address barriers to political engagement, participants will be asked to identify how implicit and explicit social work curricula and professional contexts (i.e., non-profit, governmental, and for profit) may facilitate or serve as barriers for social work faculty, student, and practitioner engagement in the political process. Data on these concepts will help to refine and enhance the training for future participants with the ultimate outcome of reclaiming electoral engagement as a cornerstone of the social work profession.

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