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Mark Ezell  
*University of Washington*

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# The Political Activity of Social Workers: A Post-Reagan Update

MARK EZELL

University of Washington

*This article reports the findings of a survey that examined the political activism of social workers and what changes may have occurred in their political participation during the Reagan years. Social workers are politically active largely by writing letters to public officials but also by discussing political issues with friends, by belonging to politically active organizations and by attending political meetings. In addition, a substantial proportion of social workers make campaign contributions and get involved in candidate elections. Among social workers, those with the highest educational degrees, those who are NASW members, those who are in macro type jobs, and black social workers tend to be more active than their colleagues. These data also suggest that one of the primary reasons social workers are politically active is to advocate for clients. There has been significant growth in the political involvement of social workers over the Reagan years in office, confirming Amidei's (1987) perception of greater political efforts on behalf of the vulnerable.*

Almost all social workers know of the political involvement of early social work leaders such as Jane Addams, Bertha Reynold, and Harry Hopkins. They also know that the Code of Ethics, the person-in-environment framework, and a variety of practice methods reflect the profession's heritage of political activity. A social reform effort occurring without involvement in the political arena, whether that means partisan, bipartisan, or nonpartisan politics is hard to imagine. This applies to all types of social workers, direct services to executives (Pawlak & Flynn, 1990) because the personal is political (Bricker-Jenkins, 1990).

However, "from the earliest days, social workers have been ambivalent about their role in the political process" (Mahaffey, 1987, p. 283), and most social workers think that social work "is and should be apolitical" (Haynes & Mickelson, 1986, p. 16). Social work scholars explain this in many ways, but a compelling

argument can be made that social workers avoid politics for two reasons. First, as Mahaffey (1987) suggests, politics has to do with the pursuit and use of power. Many social workers believe that the use of power will result in someone or some group having less power and status and becoming subordinated or dominated. This runs counter to social work's prevalent ideology of equality, broad participation and involvement, and the worth and dignity of all.<sup>1</sup> The second reason that politics may be avoided is that many social workers, as do many Americans, believe that politics is a dirty business and they want no part of the process or the people. Notwithstanding these rather prevalent beliefs, it seems that more social workers are accepting the fact that whether dirty or clean, dominating or not, the political process is the major way this society distributes resources and establishes rights and entitlements. Although they may not participate enthusiastically, they know that the costs of not being active are tremendous.

According to Wolk (1981) the political involvement of social workers is about equal to that of other professional groups. Within the profession of social work itself, he found that political involvement was greater for older social workers, for those who had been in practice the longest and for those of the higher income levels. In addition, social workers who held macro level positions were more politically active than those in direct service jobs. He also reported the following non-statistically significant trends: female social workers were more active than males; blacks more active than whites; and social workers with Ph.D.'s more political than other degree holders.

This article reports the findings of a 1989 survey that asked social workers about their political activities. This study sought to learn which social workers are most politically active and what changes may have occurred in social workers' political participation during the Reagan year. This new data can be used to make a rough pre- and post-Reagan comparison since Wolk collected his data shortly before Reagan became president. What effect did the Reagan presidency have on the nature of political involvement by social workers? With massive cuts in domestic programs, did social workers mobilize politically or did they become pessimistic and withdraw from the political arena?

Several social work commentators have already commented that the political activity of the members of the profession increased during the Reagan years. Amidei (1987) observes what she considers "growing evidence of a new spirit of activism and politically conscious effort on behalf of vulnerable people" (p. 21). She credits the "human services community" for greater activism, for casting off the sense of defeatism widely felt in the early years of the Reagan Administration and with increased effectiveness in the political arena. Moreover, NASW, the major professional organization for social workers, has increased its legislative efforts as well as their support to political candidates (Reeser & Epstein, 1987); there has been an increase in the number of social workers elected to public office (Mahaffey, 1987). Reeser and Epstein (1987) found that between 1968 and 1984 there was an increase of social workers' approval rating of campaigning and working through political pates to change the public welfare system.

Since Wolk's research, few researchers attended to the nature of or changes in social workers' political involvements; Cohen (1987) replicated Wolk's study in Israel and Pawlak and Flynn (1990) studied the political activity of executive directors. Cohen (1987) found that Israeli social workers are less active than those in the States. Most recently, Pawlak and Flynn (1990) found that executive directors are very politically active both on and off the job and that, by and large, the consequences of these activities are positive.

Aside from the empirical work of Cohen (1987) and Pawlak and Flynn (1990), many articles include exhortations for social workers to increase their political activity, seemingly equating political apathy with unethical practice. Salcido (1984), for example, says "Not to participate in political activities is tantamount to acceding. . . that only restricted groups, such as the very poor receive assistance" (189). Actually, rather than encourage social workers to participate in campaigns to win elections, Salcido proposes that social work consider political campaigns as a new arena for practice, one in which human relations, team building, and networking skills would be very useful.

### Methodology

Approximately 500 randomly selected members of the Washington State Chapter of NASW received a mail survey; this sample represented approximately 25% of the membership. In addition, a random sample of 77 graduates of the University of Washington School of Social Work (BSW, MSW, and Ph.D.) who were not members of NASW received questionnaires. After several weeks, a reminder letter was sent to those who had not returned their questionnaire. A total of 353 respondents returned usable surveys (311 NASW members, 42 nonmembers); after adjustments were made for undelivered surveys, a respectable response rate of 63.8% was achieved.

The survey consisted of three sections. The first set of questions collected demographic information. The next section included a wide range of questions exploring the respondent's amount and type of participation in advocacy (Ezell, 1990). Last, were a set of questions relating to political participation that Wolk (1981) had used in previous research. For his research, Wolk used a modified version of Woodward and Roper's (1950) Political Activity Index. These questions collect information on social workers' voting behavior, membership in organizations that might have political agendas, communications with legislators, campaign contributions, election activities, and political discussions with friends. A person with a high Index score is more politically active than one who has a low score. For some of the following analyses, we categorized the Index scores as "inactive", "active," and "very active" in the same manner as Wolk. The wording of the questions in the 1989 survey was the same as that by Wolk except minor editing, and the calculation of the total score on the Index was the same (see Appendix for wording of items).

Of the 353 social work respondents, 339 answered every question in the Index and, therefore, had a Political Activity Index score. The findings reported below are based on these 339 social workers. The reliability of the Index was .64 (coefficient alpha).

The sample was predominantly female, MSWs, white, and very experienced (i.e., more than 13 years experience on the

average). Most of the respondents were employed as social workers (full-time or part-time) in a wide variety of job types from direct service workers and therapists to agency executives.

### Findings

Table 1 shows the distribution of Index scores subdivided into three categories: Inactive, Active, and Very Active. The average score in the post-Reagan sample was 4.5 which is toward the higher end of the active category. Every social worker who responded reported doing at least one political activity. More than half the respondents' scores put them in the active category and almost a third of the sample can be considered very active. Half the sample scored 5 or above, indicating much political activity.

An examination of the responses to the individual items in the Index shows that writing letters to Congress or other public officials is social workers' most frequent political activity. Social workers wrote or talked to public officials an average of

Table 1

*Percentage Distribution of Political Activity Scores in 1989 and 1981.\**

Category	Score	1989 Percent
Inactive	0	0.0%
	1	4.1%
	2	10.3%
Subtotal		14.5%
Active	3	14.2%
	4	20.4%
	5	20.9%
Subtotal		55.5%
Very Active	6	14.5%
	7	13.0%
	8	2.7%
Subtotal		30.2%
Total		100.0%
		(339)

\* A low score indicates little political activism.

2.3 times in the year before answering the survey. Male social workers, those with doctorates, and NASW members were significantly more likely than their counterparts to write or talk to a public official. Testifying before a legislative committee (either local, state, or federal) was the least frequent political activity. Twenty-nine social workers said they had testified before a legislative committee on issues unrelated to professional concerns (i.e., licensing and vendorship) for an average of 2.1 times in the last four years. Predictably, because of the nature of their jobs, macro practitioners testified before committees more frequently.

Approximately two-thirds of the respondents are both members of organizations that take stands on public issues and attend meetings at which political speeches had been made. Of the respondents who said they belonged to an organization that sometimes takes stands on public issues (other than NASW), they averaged 2.5 organizations. Almost all social workers (99.4%) discuss public issues with friends. A little less than half of the social workers responding to the survey made campaign contributions and even fewer worked in campaigns. Of those reporting political contributions, they averaged less than \$300 in the last four years. Nonmembers of NASW gave significantly more money to political campaigns than members.

Table 3 shows the average Index score for various types of social workers. Female social workers are more active than male social workers but not enough to reach statistical significance. There were significant differences, however, in political activity among different racial groups with black social workers being the most active; NASW members are more active than nonmembers, and macro practitioners more involved than micro social workers.<sup>2</sup> Type of educational degree is associated with social workers' level of political activity. Of those with social work degrees, Ph.D.s/D.S.W.s are more active than MSWs, who are more active than BSWs. BSWs, however, are less active than those with a B.A. or B.S. and MSWs are slightly less active than those with other types of masters degrees. Those with an MSW and another masters degree are the most active.

Table 4 shows the correlations between the Political Activity Index and other factors. The more experienced a social worker the more politically active they are notwithstanding whether the

Table 2

*Itemized Responses to Political Activity Index, 1989 and 1981.*

Item	Response	1989 Percentage
Organizational Membership	No	33.6%
	Yes	66.4%
Discussion of Issues	Never	0.6%
	Occasionally	45.4%
	Frequently	54.0%
Letters to Congress	No	16.1%
	Yes	83.9%
Campaigning	No	72.7%
	Yes	27.3%
Attend Political Meetings	No	38.4%
	Yes	65.2%
Contributions	No	54.9%
	Yes	45.1%
Testifying	No	90.8%
	Yes	9.2%

experience is administrative, direct services or both. Although statistically significant, these associations are weak. Curiously, those social workers who received their highest degree recently show no greater or lesser probability of being active as those who received their degrees earlier. Wolk (1981) found that as a social worker's age increased so did their political activity. Also, his finding of a positive correlation between a social worker's reported income and their political activity was not confirmed in this sample.

Why are social workers involved in politics? Is it because they believe that clients will eventually benefit as a result? Might there be other reasons that motivate them to be involved? Several questions in the survey can be analyzed in such a way as to get some clues to an answer. Since the primary purpose of the survey was to study social workers' advocacy practice, they were asked about their primary reasons for engaging in



Table 3

*Political Activity Index Score by Social Worker Characteristics*

Characteristic	Average Score**	Standard Deviation	Number
<i>Gender:</i> Female	4.56	1.75	254
Male	4.40	1.73	85
<i>*Ethnicity:</i> Black	5.43	2.22	7
White	4.56	1.72	319
Asian	3.29	1.25	7
Hispanic	2.00	1.41	4
Native Am.	4.50	2.12	2
<i>*Highest Degree:</i>			
BA/BS	4.50	1.43	10
BSW	3.62	1.63	16
MSW	4.50	1.72	284
Other Masters	4.57	2.07	7
Ph.D./DSW	5.75	1.39	8
MSW & Other M.S.	6.25	1.49	8
Other Ph.D.	5.33	1.53	3
<i>*NASW Member:</i>			
Yes	4.60	1.73	299
No	3.97	1.76	40
<i>Work Status</i>			
Full Time SW	4.51	1.70	184
Part Time SW	4.49	1.80	80
Non-SW'er	4.45	1.86	29
Student	4.20	1.93	10
Retired	5.18	1.59	22
Unemployed	4.21	1.85	14
<i>*Type of SW:</i>			
Macro	4.96	1.44	57
Micro	4.35	1.76	207

\* F statistic significant,  $p < .05$ .

\*\* The higher the score the greater the political activity.

Table 4

*Correlations Between Political Activity Index and Other Factors*

Item	Coefficient	Probability
Years since graduation	.076	.086
Total years of experience	.146	.004
Years of direct service experience	.119	.015
Years of administrative experience	.101	.055
Number of employees in agency	.040	.055
Gross Annual Income	.040	.264

advocacy, how much advocacy they do both as part of their job and as a volunteer, and the effect of the Reagan Administration on their advocacy efforts.<sup>3</sup> They were provided with the following list of reasons for doing advocacy and asked to identify their top three in order: because it's my professional responsibility; because I've experienced oppression; because of previous work experience; because it's my job to do it; because I'd feel guilty if I didn't; because of previous volunteer experience; because of my personal values; because I enjoy advocacy; because I think it's the best approach for certain problems; because of peer pressure; and because I'd like to see things change. The major reasons social workers are involved in advocacy are because of personal values, professional responsibility and they like to see things change. Except for one them, none of these reasons correlated with a social workers' degree of involvement in politics. The one item that significantly associated with political activity was "because of previous volunteer experience"; those involved in advocacy because of some prior volunteering were more politically active than those who had other reasons for doing advocacy.

A list of 17 specific advocacy activities was included in the survey and respondents were asked how frequently they engage in each activity when advocating for clients. The frequency of participating in the following nine activities was significantly associated with the Political Activity Index score ( $p < .05$ ) indicating that the social workers who frequently engage in these

activities are also very active politically: influencing media coverage of an issue; lobbying individual policy-makers; mobilizing constituent support; political campaigning; organizing or maintaining coalitions; conducting issue research; influencing administrative rule-making in other agencies; pushing for increased clients' rights; and arguing for increased or improved services within their agency. Two of these activities reflect the items in the Political Activity Index (i.e., political campaigning and lobbying) so the positive relationships should be of no surprise, but the seven others included content not reflected in the Index. Five other activities were very close to being significantly associated with the Index score ( $p < .07$ ): giving testimony to decision makers; negotiating with administrative agencies; educating the public on an issue; teaching advocacy skills to clients; and representing a client in an administrative hearing. It is reasonable to conclude based on these associations that at least one of the reasons that social workers become politically active is to advocate for their clients by providing a voice in the political arena.

Respondents were also asked (in an open-ended question) what effect the Reagan presidency had on both their work related and volunteer advocacy efforts. Those responding indicated that they had increased their advocacy efforts (26.7%), that advocacy was harder (23.9%), or that it was more crucial (15.3%). A small number (5.7%) felt that the Reagan Administration had had the effect of decreasing their job related advocacy, but the largest number of those answering the question felt there had been little or no change (27.8%). Many social workers (31.1%) reported an increase in their volunteer advocacy as a result of the Reagan years and 16.8% said advocacy was harder. (see Table 5).

#### *Comparing Pre-Reagan Activity to Post-Reagan Activity.*

The 1989 study cannot be considered an exact replication of Wolk's (1981) work, but to the degree that the samples are comparable, it is possible to get an idea of the changes in social workers' political activity that occurred during the Reagan years. For the purposes of the following comparisons, the 1989 sample was split into NASW and non-NASW subgroups. The

Table 5

*The Effect of Reagan Administration on Job Related and Volunteer Advocacy*

Effect of Reagan Administration on	Percent
<b>Job Related Advocacy</b>	
Increased Time	26.7
Made It Harder	23.9
Mde It Crucial	15.3
Made It Useless	0.6
No or Little Change	27.8
Decreased Time	5.7
Total	100.0 (176)
<b>Effect of Reagan Administration on</b>	
<b>Volunteer Advocacy</b>	
Increased Time	34.1
Made It Harder	16.8
Mde It Crucial	11.2
Made It Useless	1.7
No or Little Change	33.0
Decreased Time	3.4
Total	100.2 (179)

1989 NASW subsample is most comparable to Wolk's since his sample consisted of NASW members only.

First, how comparable are the samples? The two samples had comparable proportions of females (Wolk's 73%; this one 73.6%), direct service workers (Wolk's 78% vs. 75.1%), BSWs (Wolk's 4% vs. 2.6%), MSWs (84% vs. 88.0%), Ph.Ds (3% vs 1.9%), and nonblack minorities (3% vs 3.5%). There are differences in the proportion of blacks (Wolk's 8% vs. 2.3%) and whites (Wolk's 89% vs. 94.2%) represented in the sample; these differences reflect the different demographics of the two states (i.e., Michigan and Washington).

The two samples have many similarities and a few differences, but to what degree does each approximate the national demographic profile of the social work profession? Hopps and Pinderhughes (1987) reported that 91% of the NASW membership were MSWs, 73% female, 11.4% minority, and 63.7% involved in direct service. Their data were based on a 1982

survey, much closer to the time when Wolk did his research. Again, neither sample's demographic profile is the same as the national figures, but both are reasonably similar on demographic variables they all had in common.

The average Index score for NASW members in 1989 was 4.6 whereas in 1981 the average was 3.7 — a statistically significant difference — which means that political activity has increased. Fewer of the 1989 social workers had low scores compared to Wolk's sample (see Table 6) and more had high scores except for 8, the maximum score. From 1981 to 1989 there was little difference in social workers' likelihood of being a member of an organization that might exert some political pressure, of discussing political issues with friends, of working in campaigns, and of testifying before a legislative committee (see Table 7). There was a modest increase from 1981 to 1989 in the number of social workers reporting that they made campaign contributions. The big differences in the political behavior of social workers over the Reagan years was their greater tendency to write or talk to public officials and attend meetings at which political speeches were made.

### Conclusion

Based on 1989 data, social workers are politically active largely by writing letters to public officials but also by discussing political issues with friends, by belonging to politically active organizations and by attending political meetings. In addition, a substantial proportion of social workers make campaign contributions and get involved in candidate elections. Among social workers, those with the highest educational degrees, those who are NASW members, those who are in macro type jobs, and black social workers tend to be more active than their colleagues. These data also suggest that one of the primary reasons social workers are politically active is to advocate for clients.

The findings of this study also show significant growth in the political involvement of social workers over the Reagan years in office, confirming Amidei's (1987) perception of greater political efforts on behalf of the vulnerable. Though Haynes and

Table 6

*Comparison of Political Activity Index Scores for Social Workers Before Reagan and After Reagan*

Category	Score	1989 Non-NASW Subsample	1989 NASW Subsample	1981 Sample
Inactive	0	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%
	1	10.0%	3.3%	12.4%
	2	15.0%	9.7%	20.8%
Subtotal		25.0%	13.0%	33.9%
Active	3	12.5%	14.4%	19.7%
	4	20.0%	20.4%	11.8%
	5	22.5%	20.7%	11.4%
Subtotal		55.0%	55.5%	42.9%
Very Active	6	12.5%	14.7%	11.4%
	7	7.5%	13.7%	8.7%
	8	0.0%	3.0%	3.1%
Subtotal		20.0%	31.4%	23.2%
Total		100.0%	99.9%	100.0%
		(40)	(311)	(289)

Mickelson (1986) felt that "the 1980s have caught our profession short of social workers trained or even interested in political activity" (p. xi), political activism has increased.

It is interesting to note, and a little worrisome, that although the number of non-NASW members in this sample is small, they contributed significantly more to political campaigns than members. It is possible that NASW members donated funds to national or state PACE organizations (Political Action for Candidate Elections) and interpreted the survey question to be asking about direct contributions to candidates. Further research might pursue this issue further.

Obviously, there are many other factors which could explain the observed differences in the Political Activity Index score of the two samples. While it is true that the Washington State sample was similar to Wolk's earlier sample, and is largely consistent with the best estimates of the demographic characteristics of the profession as a whole, state or regional

Table 7

*Percentage of Social Workers Engaged in Political Activities Before and After Reagan\**

Item	Response	1989 Non- NASW Subsample	1989 NASW Subsample	1981 Sample
Inactive	No	41.5%	32.6%	34.0%
	Yes	58.5%	67.4%	66.0%
Discussion of Issues	Never	0.0%	.7%	1.0%
	Occasionally	55.0%	44.1%	52.0%
	Frequently	45.0%	55.2%	47.0%
Letters to Congress	No	25.0%	14.9%	51.0%
	Yes	75.0%	85.1%	49.0%
Campaigning	No	82.5%	71.4%	70.0%
	Yes	17.5%	28.6%	30.0%
Attend Political Meetings	No	37.5%	34.4%	60.0%
	Yes	62.5%	65.6%	40.0%
Contributions	No	70.0%	52.9%	65.0%
	Yes	30.0%	47.1%	35.0%
Testifying	No	92.5%	90.6%	94.0%
	Yes	7.5%	9.4%	6.0%

political traditions and events might predispose Washington social workers to be more active. Likewise, research design problems aside, the policies and practices of the Reagan Administration alone may not be the cause of the increases in political activism. As previously mentioned, NASW, nationally as well as many state chapters and local units have increased both their legislative and election activities during this period of time. These activities might have contributed to social workers' increased political activism. Whatever the causes, apparently social workers increasingly understand that they "no longer can leave critical issues and decisions on social policy to nameless others" (Haynes & Mickelson, 1986, p. 13).

Additional caution is advised when interpreting and generalizing these findings because of the nonresponse rate. One

might argue that the failure to fill out and return a questionnaire on advocacy and political activity indicates a person's inactivity and apathy. If so, 36.2% of those sampled would be considered politically inactive since this was the rate of nonresponse. In addition, 14.5% of those who responded — or approximately 9% of those sampled, fell into the "inactive" category. From this point of view, nearly half of the social workers sampled are politically inactive. Unfortunately, we were unable to do further comparisons of respondents to nonrespondents to verify or refute the argument above.

It is very doubtful that social workers' increased political activity can be attributed to any course content they experienced while getting their degrees. Haynes and Mickelson (1986) found very little content on politics in schools of social work curricula. If a school's curriculum does nothing else, it should underscore the importance of political activity and help resolve the value dilemmas which seem to restrain social worker participation in the political arena. Beyond that course content should allow social work students to acquire knowledge of political processes and the requisite skills to participate effectively. State chapters of NASW should continue and increase their political and legislative efforts because they appear to be effectively increasing the political activism of the profession.

### Notes

1. For an excellent discussion of the compatibility of social work values and political action see Haynes and Mickelson (1986, pp. 15-25).
2. Macro practitioners are agency executives, program managers, supervisors, and planners. Micro social workers are therapists, counselors, case managers and other direct service providers.
3. The definition of advocacy used for this survey was "those purposive efforts which attempt to impact a specific decision, law, policy or practice on behalf of a client or a group of clients." This additional, clarifying information was provided to respondents: "The important elements of this definition are: 1) that you are engaging in these advocacy activities *on behalf of a specific client or group of clients*; 2) the '*target of intervention*' is not the client but an agency or system; and 3) like other social work interventions, it is systematic (i.e., it involves problem assessment, planning, action, and evaluation)."



## APPENDIX: Political Activity Index Items

1. Do you belong to any organizations (other than NASW) that sometimes take a stand on public issues? (If yes, how many?)
2. When you get together with your friends, would you say that you discuss public issues frequently, occasionally, or never?
  - a. If you answered frequently or occasionally, which of the following statements best describes your part in these discussions?
    - 1) Even though I have my own opinion, I usually just listen.
    - 2) Mostly I listen, but once in a while I express my opinions.
    - 3) I take an equal share in the conversation.
    - 4) I do more than just hold up my end in the conversation; I usually try to convince others that I am right.
3. Have you ever written or talked to your member of Congress or Senator or other public officials to let them know what you would like them to do on a public issue? (If yes, how many times in the past year?)
4. In the last four years have you worked for the election of any political candidate by doing things like distributing pamphlets, making speeches, or calling on voters?
5. Have you attended any meetings in the last four years at which political speeches were made?
6. Have you contributed money to a political party or to a candidate in the last four years (with the exception of the federal income tax deduction of \$1)? (if yes, approximately how much?)
7. With the exception of professional concerns (e.g., third party payments or certification) during the last four years, have you testified before a legislative committee at the local, state, or national level for or against a bill under consideration? (If yes, approximately how many times?)

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