The Political Participation of First Year Social Work Students: Does Practice Specialization Matter?

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This study identifies the types of political participation engaged in by MSW students (n=214). A self-report survey administered to MSW students at a Northeastern university indicates limited political involvement. MSW students participate in political activities not requiring significant time, energy, or resources. Furthermore, on the scale and its two subscales, micro-oriented students had less political participation than macro-oriented students. This study suggests first-year social work students may lack the tools to engage in the political

process effectively. Schools of social work should include political participation education in both micro and macro foundation courses and field placements.

Key words: social work education, political participation, policy, graduate social work students

Introduction

Masters-level social work students enter graduate education with a broad range of personal and professional motivations. Many graduate programs offer specializations in practice areas, and these reflect the breadth of the profession and address the wide range of interests and motivations of students. Yet all students—regardless of specialization—must demonstrate competence in foundational knowledge, values and skills established by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Education and Policy Accreditation Standards (EPAS). The foundational skills required for students as outlined in the Core Competencies by CSWE include the capacity to "understand their role in policy development and implementation within their practice settings at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels and they actively engage in policy practice to effect change within those settings" (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 8). This accreditation mandate suggests social work students should acquire, at a minimum, a basic understanding of the political process. Furthermore, this knowledge is best developed and demonstrated through actual engagement in political activities (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

An important area of inquiry is the determination of the forces that enhance or inhibit social workers' fulfillment of these fundamental ethical obligations. The majority of social work students enrolled in graduate programs pursue direct service or micro-oriented fields of practice. Often these practitioners do not see the connection between their practice and participating in political activities as social reform (Ostrander, 2016). A better understanding of students' political participation would be beneficial for social work education. An increased understanding of this phenomenon could help inform efforts to maximize students'

political knowledge, skills, participation, and cultivate a strong and ethically-grounded sense of the profession in schools of social work. Further, these skills translate into an enhanced ability to partner with client systems to impact the social environment in which those systems operate.

Social work has a rich—if lesser known—history of helping marginalized and oppressed populations through social reform. The first social worker to be elected to congress was Jeannette Rankin in 1916. Another social worker was not elected to public office until 1971 when Ron Dellums became the representative for California's 9th Congressional District (Lane & Humphreys, 2011). The important impact of social workers in the public sphere can be seen in the accomplishments of social work reformers, such as: Mary Church Terrell, George Edmund Haynes, and Dorothy Height, who founded and led national civil rights organizations; Harry Hopkins and Frances Perkins, who were instrumental in the development and implementation of the New Deal; and Bertha Reynolds, who was a radical figure in the labor and anti-poverty movements (Haynes & Mickelson, 2009; Reisch & Andrews, 2002).

A primary characteristic of the profession is its dual emphasis on the individual and the environment. The latter includes social, political and economic structures and actors that impact clients daily. The NASW's Code of Ethics (2008) affirms that social justice and political engagement are hallmarks of the social work profession and should be embedded in every form of professional practice. The CSWE (2015) asserts that social work students should learn how to engage in collaborative action within the profession and in tandem with clients to create effective policies that promote human rights and social justice. Although social workers have been found to have higher levels of voter engagement than average citizens, most engage in other less public displays of political involvement (e.g., encouraging others to vote) rather than direct engagement in electoral activities (such as working on a political campaign or running for office) (Dickinson, 2005; Domanski, 1998; Ezell, 1993; Felderhoff, Hoefer, & Watson, 2015; Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Parker & Sherraden, 1992; Reeser, 1988; Reeser & Epstein, 1987, 1990; Ritter, 2007, 2008, 2013; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010; Wolk, 1981, 1992, 1996).

Background

There is a lack of consensus on the role of political activity in the social work profession that is directly attributable to the historic divide between the profession's macro (Settlement House movement) and micro (Charity Organization Society movement) roots. Hull House, established in Chicago in 1889 by Jane Addams, was the best known of the first settlement houses in the United States. This arm of social work recognized the imperative to influence government to create new policies and private services to meet individual and group needs. Many of the settlement house workers had progressive ideals and helped form unions, created work projects for recently unemployed men and women, led strikes over work hours and poor working conditions, spearheaded child labor legislation, and initiated housing reform (Addams, 1910). Addams is credited with saying, "When the ideas and measures we have long been advocating become part of a political campaign, would we not be the victims of a curious self-consciousness if we failed to follow them there?" (as cited in Lasch, 1965, p. 348). This involvement in the political sphere resulted in an awareness of the importance of using power to influence governmental processes (Gitterman & Germain, 2008).

However, not all social workers agreed with the idea of becoming political actors. Mary Richmond, a leader of the Charity Organization Society (COS) movement, was one such detractor. Richmond envisioned that "friendly visitors" would investigate families seeking assistance, thoroughly document their household visits, and distribute aid to those considered "worthy." Over time, the COS leaders developed "scientific" methods to separate the worthy and unworthy poor and to help discourage "dependence" on public and private aid. In general, Richmond and other COS leaders did not seek to make structural changes to address critical social problems (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). They also held that social workers should be nonpartisan and maintain objectivity in the political arena (Pritzker & Lane, 2017). Despite this dilemma, a broader commitment to helping clients achieve social justice remains, as does the need for social workers to develop the skills necessary to execute the tactics needed to accomplish it.

Literature Review

Political Participation and Social Work

Despite political participation having a rich history in the social work profession, there exists a paucity of research on the political participation of social workers. Important discoveries from this limited body of research include findings that social workers vote more frequently and are more politically active than the general population (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Mary, 2002; Ritter, 2007). Among the specific political activities in which social workers are willing to engage, are writing or telephoning elected officials, voting, or belonging to a professional organization (Rome & Hoeschstetter, 2010). Social workers have been found to be more reticent in engaging in activities such as volunteering in political campaigns, marching or protesting, or providing testimony at legislative hearings (Ritter, 2007; Rome & Hoeschstetter, 2010). Swank (2012) and Rome and Hoeschstetter (2010) summarized research findings of political participation rates among certain sub-groups of social workers. Specifically, they explained that social workers with higher levels of political participation include African-Americans, NASW members, macro practitioners, older individuals, those with higher levels of education, those with higher salaries, home-owners, and those with more years of professional experience.

Although social work has enshrined political participation into its important documents, multiple conceptualizations of this practice exist in the literature, and there is no consensus on a singular definition for all types of social work practice. Further, there are inconsistencies in the various terms used to identify the political participation of social workers. In the social work literature, scholars include the concepts of *activism* (Domanski, 1998; Ezell, 1993; Swank 2012; Wolk, 1981, 1996), *political action* (Rome & Hoeschstetter, 2010), and *advocacy* (Bernklau Halvor, 2016; Hardina, 1994; McLaughlin, 2009) in definitions of political participation. Some embrace Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) political science model; however, some social work and political science researchers have broadened this definition to include civic participation. Ritter (2006) argues that the traditional definitions of political participation do not include "civic participation" because it is viewed as an apolitical activity.

Although not all forms of civic engagement have a political purpose, in the political science literature, Jenkins, Andolina, Keeter, and Zukin (2003) define civic activity as "organized voluntary activity focused on problem-solving and helping others, a definition that obviously encompasses a vast range of settings, goals, and behaviors" (p. 1) and argue that civic engagement can be used for purely political reasons.

The gap in knowledge of social work students regarding political participation is greater than that of social workers. Swank's (2012) study of undergraduate social work students found they became politically active while participating in coursework relating to oppression. Further, Swank found that asking students to participate in political activities increased their willingness to engage in the political process. Pritzker & Lane (2014) sought to identify barriers to political participation within social work students' field placements. They found social work students and field educators report a lack of student interest, physical distance from school, and having to sacrifice micro-level experiences for policy or political social work-related assignments. Hylton (2015) surveyed 100 students (mostly BSW students) and found they were more likely to engage in civic-oriented activities and less likely to participate in political activities. Pritzker and Burwell (2016) found BSW students voted at higher rates than the general public and at similar levels to practicing social workers. However, BSW students register to vote and actually vote less frequently than MSW or PhD students.

Civic Voluntarism Model

The most widely used and conceptualized model of political participation—the Civic Voluntarism Model—originates in Verba et al.'s (1995) landmark political science study. This model provides a possible framework for understanding this phenomenon among MSW students. Verba and colleagues characterized political participation as an "activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action-- either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies" (p. 38). This includes activities Rome and Hoeschstetter (2010) deemed "active" such as: voting; protesting a policy issue or government decision; volunteering with political campaigns; running for

elected office; and "passive" such as: gaining and using political knowledge; being aware of political issues; and contributing money to political campaigns. Verba et al. (1995) narrowed their definition of political participation to exclude political awareness activities (e.g., reading the newspaper or watching the news) and civic engagement activities (e.g., volunteering for a community agency or being engaged in organized religion) that do not explicitly target elected officials. They found that, while civic engagement significantly impacted interviewees' political participation as defined above, they do not consider civic engagement to be political participation because time, energy and/or resources were being directed toward the various activities rather than toward appointed or elected officials.

Within this model, political participation is viewed as requiring three key components: resources; engagement; and recruitment. Resources such as time, money, and civic skills are considered essential to a person or group's capacity to engage in political activities. The concept of engagement in this model involves several key psychological conditions. To be involved, people must want to participate, have a strong sense of self-efficacy, and feel personally fulfilled and connected to others. Additional indicators of engagement within this model include: identification with a political party and family background of political activity; having politically active parents is considered a predictor for greater engagement than having politically inactive parents. Finally, recruitment entails asking and encouraging people to participate in political activity. Typically, recruitment occurs within the context of faith-based communities, workplaces, or voluntary associations. Verba et al. (1995) contend that although an important component of political participation, recruitment can indeed occur without specifically asking a person to engage in political activity.

It has been suggested that political participation is related to membership in a subgroup that has greater power. Social workers with higher professional, educational, or income status are more likely to be politically active than their younger, less-educated, less-experienced and less-wealthy peers, which include MSW students. These outcomes are also seen in the findings of studies investigating political participation in the general population (e.g., Verba et al., 1995) and provide support for the Civic Voluntarism Model. The resource component of this model predicts the

association between higher socioeconomic status and higher levels of political activity. Swank (2012) highlighted that lower rates of participation among poorer socioeconomic groups in general populations may be explained by "a person's class location grant[ing] or imped[ing] access to opportunities and financial resources that make political activism easier" (p. 247). A contradictory finding to this aspect of the model is that African-American social workers, a group with less economic resources and thus historically an oppressed group, have higher rates of political participation than their white colleagues (Ezell, 1993; Reeser & Epstein, 1990). This may be a result of African-Americans' history of marginalization and leadership in the American civil rights movement.

Given the limited amount of current research on political participation amongst MSW students, this study contributes to understanding how MSW students are influenced to participate in the political process. Social work students are held to the standards of the NASW Code of Ethics and the CSWE EPAS. Understanding how MSW students participate politically could inform the way in which MSW programs should implement policy and political social work education.

Research Questions

This study investigated the political participation of Master's level social work students. The authors explored several factors that may enhance or limit the nature and frequency of involvement in a wide range of political activities. Based on the theoretical and empirical literature related to the constructs of social work and political participation, the investigation explored two questions:

1. How frequently do MSW students engage in forms of political participation?
2. What difference exists between MSW students' chosen specialization and their levels of political participation on the full political participation scale, and active and passive subscales?

Methodology

Sample

Data for this cross-sectional study were obtained through a voluntary self-administered, self-report survey. The survey was distributed to first year MSW students enrolled at a school of social work within a large university in the Northeastern United States during November and December of 2013. Before administering the survey, permission was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board to study human subjects. A full-board review was required given that the study's population was students. No incentives were offered. All students (regardless of concentration) enrolled in required first-semester foundation year courses were eligible and invited to participate in the study, for a total of 211 unique participants. 189 surveys were completed (response rate of 89.6%).

The average age of the sample was 28.83 (SD = 8.13) and 80% of respondents identified as female. Three-quarters of the sample identified as White, 17% were Black or African-American, 5% were multiracial, 3% were Asian, and 2% were American Indian or Alaska Native. Those who identified as Latino/Hispanic represented 11% of the sample. The university requires students to identify a practice area of casework (48.1%), group work (20.6%), community organizing (11.7%), policy practice (11.2%), or administration (5.6%). The sample included a small number of non-matriculated students (2.8%). As is characteristic of most graduate programs, a majority (69%) of the sample were enrolled in a micro concentration (casework and group work).

Other items were included to gather descriptive information from the sample. Nearly half (46%) of the sample described their current community as suburban, three-quarters (74%) were unmarried, nearly two-thirds (58.3%) were affiliated with a religion, almost all students (92%) were registered to vote, 22% were NASW members, and only 8.4% of participants had a bachelor's degree in social work. Identifying as Latino/Hispanic (t(191) = -2.07, p = .039), affiliation with a religion (t(191) = 3.24, p = .001), and being a member of NASW (t(192) = -2.34, p = .020) were significantly associated with political participation.

Recruitment

Participant recruitment occurred in sixteen sections of several foundation-level MSW classes. Researchers described the study protocols in each classroom and students were offered the opportunity to participate. Paper versions of the survey were distributed, and when the students completed the survey, they were instructed to put the survey in an envelope. Students choosing not to participate were instructed to place blank surveys in the envelope. The course instructors and investigators left the room during the completion period, to ensure anonymity. Additionally, an electronic survey was sent via email to all enrolled MSW students. Students were instructed not to complete both versions.

Measures

The survey used was developed for this study by the authors, based on an instrument previously used by Rome and Hoechstetter (2010). The reliability of the scale and subscales was unknown prior to conducting the current study, however the measure appeared to have face validity. Prior to survey administration, the measure was pre-tested on eight Ph.D. students to ensure questions were clear, the questions' language was understandable, and the survey instrument took less than 15 minutes to complete.

This modified 18-item scale (Table 1) operationalized political participation using a 5-point Likert scale (from "0 = never" to "4 = always") in which respondents indicated how often they engaged in a wide range of political activities. This was divided by activity into two subscales: a 7-item *passive* subscale, which featured activities involving relatively mild effort, knowledge, or commitment (e.g., "read, listen to, or watch the news," and "discuss current policy issues with others"); and an 11-item *active* subscale which 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"). The alpha for the full scale (PP) was $\alpha = .919$, with scores ranging from 0 to 72, and was calculated by adding the total score (0-4) on the 18 items.

On the active subscale ($\alpha = .869$), the average score was 13 and participants scored a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 38. The passive subscale ($\alpha = .835$) revealed average scores of 16.98

and a minimum score of 3 and a maximum score of 28. The survey also included several items assessing current and previous education (e.g., method specialization/concentration, previous degrees). A number of demographic questions were included to provide both a greater understanding of the sample and to investigate factors such as religious affiliation (Verba et al., 1995), race/ethnicity (Ezell, 1993), age (Wolk, 1981), and NASW membership (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001), which were found previously to impact political participation and voting behavior.

Results

Political Participation Frequency

The average score for the students was 39.98 with a minimum score of 6 and a maximum score of 66. The behaviors in which 50% or more students participated most frequently (always and often) were: voting; reading, listening to, or watching the news; and encouraging others to vote. Activities deemed "active" were participated in by less than 34% of participants. Of note, 9% or less engaged in the following activities: keeping track of how my legislator votes; actively campaign; encourage others to participate in rallies and marches; participate or contribute to groups that affect policy; participate in rallies and marches; voice their opinion to the media; attend public hearings; and testify at federal, state, or local hearings.

Differences Based on Practice Concentration

Investigating the differences between the five-practice concentrations and the level of student PP was measured using a two-way between-group analysis of variance (ANOVA). Participants were organized according to their area of concentration (Administration; Casework; Group Work; Community Organization; Policy Practice) for the following analyses.

Full Political Participation Scale. There was a statistically significant difference in PP scores for the five methods: $F (5,190) = 4.47$, p = .001. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was a medium effect at .103. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated mean scores for Casework (M = 35.01, SD = 12.19) were significantly different from Community Organizing

Table 1: Political Participation Activities

Political Activity (n = 212, *Italics* = Passive, **Bold** = Active)	Always/Often
Vote	162 (76%)
Read, listen, or watch the news	*146 (69%)*
Encourage others to vote	*118 (56%)*
Know who represents me in Congress	*100 (47%)*
Know who represents me in state government	*94 (44%)*
Discuss current policy issues with others	*91 (43%)*
Share my political opinions with others	*78 (37%)*
Follow progress of legislation that interests me	*77 (36%)*
Take an active role in issues that affect me	**72 (34%)**
Take an active role in issues that affect my clients	**60 (28%)**
Keep track of how my legislators votes	**19 (9%)**
Actively Campaign	**18 (8.4%)**
Encourage others to participate in rallies/marches	**18 (8.4%)**
Participate/contribute to groups that affect policy	**17 (8%)**
Participate in rallies/marches	**17 (8%)**
Voice my opinion in the media	**10 (5%)**
Attend public hearings	**10 (5%)**
Testify at federal, state, or local hearings	**3 (1.5%)**

(M = 44.88, SD = 14.85) and Policy Practice (M = 47.4, SD = 13.56). Administration and Group Work did not differ significantly from Casework, Community Organizing, or Policy Practice.

Active Political Participation Subscale. The test of homogeneity of variance was less than .05, meaning assumptions were violated. When Welch and Brown-Forsythe tests were consulted, there was a statistically significant difference in active scores for the five methods: F (5,200) = 3.92, p = .002, and there was a medium effect size, using eta squared, at .089. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated mean scores for Casework (M = 11.09, SD = 6.23) were significantly different from Community Organizing (M = 16.08, SD = 9.03) and Policy Practice (M = 17.04, SD = 7.29). Administration and Group Work did not differ significantly from Casework, Community Organizing or Policy Practice.

Passive Political Participation Subscale. There was a statistically significant difference in passive scores for the five methods: $F_{(5,200)} = 3.44$, p =.005, and there was a medium effect size, using eta squared, at .079. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Casework (M = 15.65, SD = 5.22) was significantly different from Policy Practice (M = 20.35, SD = 5.24). Administration, Group Work, and Community Organizing did not differ significantly from Casework or Policy Practice.

Discussion

The primary purposes of this study were to investigate the types of political involvement in which first-year graduate social work students engaged and to identify differences according to practice concentrations. The political participation scale helped illuminate the types of activities MSW students had engaged in prior to starting graduate school, and, as such, these findings establish baselines for students entering graduate social work education. This is important given that Casework and Group Work students represent 69% of respondents in this study, and the two most common undergraduate degrees were psychology (33%) and sociology (14%). These degree programs predominantly focus on either individual or societal functioning. Subspecialties, such as social psychology, focus on understanding how people perceive themselves in relation to those around them and act based on those perceptions (American Psychological Association, 2017), while applied sociology empirically tests sociological theories to solve social problems (American Sociological Association, 2017). Neither simultaneously attends to an integrated person-in-environment perspective, with an emphasis on social justice at the micro, mezzo and macro levels of society. Also, unlike social work, these fields do not enshrine these concepts in professional and ethical mandates.

The Code of Ethics and the CSWE accreditation standards explicitly state that all social workers, including students, should personally engage in politics and professionally empower clients to create change. As previously discussed and cited, social workers generally vote in larger numbers than the general public. Thus, it was unsurprising that 92% of participants were registered to vote and that 56% encouraged others to vote. The results indicate a majority (50% or more) of students engage

in only three activities: voting (76%); reading, listening to, or watching the news (74%); and encouraging others to vote (56%). Roughly 34% of participants engaged in active forms of political participation, indicating that many first-year social work students may lack the necessary knowledge, skills or political efficacy to fully participate in politics. Of the top eight participatory activities, all but voting were passive forms of participation. The categories were: read, listened, or watched the news; encouraged others to vote; knew representatives in Congress; knew representatives in state government; discussed current policy issues with others; shared political opinions with others; and followed the progress of legislation of interest. Even within these seven categories, less than 50% of all students engaged in these passive forms of political participation, which indicates that a majority of students did not engage in activities requiring little time, resources, or energy.

Of particular interest, only 8.5% of students reported actively campaigning for candidates. The social work profession has an ambiguous relationship with electoral politics. To date, only three studies of social workers in elected office (Haynes & Mickelson, 2010; Lane, 2011; Salcido, 1984) have been conducted. Haynes and Mickelson (2010) found that social workers believe partisan politics are unethical and could potentially lead to power imbalances between practitioners and clients. A contributing factor to low electoral participation levels could be related to 78.5% of the sample identifying as women. Fox and Lawless (2011) argue women experience structural barriers and discrimination (such as gender socialization, gender roles, and historic exclusion) when exhibiting political ambition or interest, viewing politics as a career, and/or receiving encouragement to run for political office. Further, women demonstrating characteristics similar to those of men are often perceived as "inappropriate or undesirable to possess these characteristics" (p. 60).

Ostrander (2016) found similar results to Haynes and Mickelson's (2010) and Fox and Lawless's (2011) research when studying the political participation of clinical social workers in New England. New female social work students need to be empowered to bring about broader change and given the necessary tools to feel confident in engaging or running for elected political offices. The Code of Ethics does *not* state that electoral

politics are unethical; rather, NASW encourages social workers to engage in the political process at all levels.

Casework students reported significantly lower overall political participation scores than community organizing and policy practice students. As expected, similar results were found when the scale was subdivided into its subscales. On the active political participation scale, casework students had significantly lower forms of active political participation than Community Organizing and Policy Practice students. The results of the passive subscale also indicated that Casework students had a significantly lower mean score than Policy Practice students. The results for Casework students are of concern for two reasons. First, these activities require very few resources (time, energy, or money) and only a general awareness of the political process. Second, given that these students account for the largest area of practice focus, the lower scores are problematic. The disparity in participation by these new students, who have self-selected into their practice specializations, presents an opportunity for social work educators to practice one of the profession's primary tenets "of starting where the client is." It is clear from this baseline assessment that not all students enter their MSW education with the same knowledge or motivation to participate in the political process.

All students should have a basic understanding of how government functions, the different levels of government, their representatives in local, state, and national bodies, and how they can have a voice in this process. Without this general awareness and education, social work students, and micro-oriented students in particular, cannot adequately advocate for themselves or assist their clients in addressing and maneuvering through governmental policies that impact them every day. In the social work literature, Ritter (2007) found that less than half of her sample reported receiving adequate training on the political process and how to engage with it in their social work program. Finally, only 8% of Rome and Hoechstetter's (2010) sample of NASW members believed their social work program adequately linked practice and social action. Lane's (2011) study of social workers elected to political office found that 48% reported being taught about the political process in their social work programs.

Verba et al.'s (1995) Civic Voluntarism Model's three components—resources, engagement, and recruitment—provide a basis

upon which schools of social work can embed political participation skills in first year coursework and field placements, with tailored emphasis for students intending to pursue micro practice specializations. In order to bring about social reform, it is critical that the academy better integrate the link between individual problems and socio-political structures into undergraduate and graduate-level social work curricula. Resources such as civic skills may be incorporated into formal course content which will serve to further increase the social work profession's awareness of the importance of political practice for social work students of all practice orientations, and will promote its relevance in practice and research-based literature and the academy.

Further, opportunities exist for micro and macro-oriented students to engage with each other. Such dialogue can serve to allow students to identify experiences and motivations for pursuit of their various fields of practice, and may ultimately set the stage for mutual development of strategies to integrate political engagement into clinical practice. In the process, micro students will also contribute by sharing their practice realities and limitations with macro students in order to enhance their understanding of structural barriers. Such collaboration would help to bridge the divide between the two areas of practice, thus helping to dismantle the long-standing feud between practitioners as to the nature of "true" social work. This conversation could occur as a weekly group discussion assignment as part of foundation courses, on topics appropriate to the respective class.

The concept of engagement, which can be understood in this context as having strong self-efficacy, can be developed by the synthesis of skills gained through coursework and field assignments in which recruitment activities may occur. For students entering an accredited MSW program with a non-social work undergraduate degree, each student should be required to complete one field experience or service learning placement in both a micro and macro setting. One such strategy that has been implemented is use of the Voter Engagement Model—created by the Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work—to embed voting activities into social work students' field placements. Students are required to attend a two-part voter engagement training in their Macro Practice foundation class, develop a voter engagement plan for their placement to help engage their clients in a basic civic act, and complete a

reflection assignment requiring them to think critically about their experiences. Similarly, requiring social work students to spend part of their field practicum working for political campaigns, advocacy organizations, or with local, state, or federally elected officials could further build their confidence and provide students with critical experiences, which may increase political efficacy (Ritter, 2008).

Study Limitations

This is the only social work study of first-year graduate social work students' political participation and thus contributes to furthering research on the topic. The sample was from only one graduate school of social work, and the findings cannot be generalized to every graduate school of social work. Further, this study was only administered to first-year graduate students and a small percentage had a bachelor's degree in social work. Although precautions were taken to maintain anonymity, students completed the surveys in a room of peers, and social desirability may have been present. Additionally, students were required to recollect their memories of participation in specific political activities, which may have been affected by recall bias.

Conclusion

Political participation is an historic and integral part of the social work profession. It is embedded into both the profession's Code of Ethics and CSWE accreditation standards. Social work students from this study did not have high levels of passive or active political participation. Of specific concern is that micro-focused social work students—69% of student population—were especially limited in political engagement. This is of particular importance because these practitioners comprise the bulk of the profession and have the potential to impact policies and regulations affecting their client populations. In addition to having an understanding of issues affecting clients, students should have the skills and tools required to effectively create social change. Field placements offer an excellent opportunity for this implementation. Additional opportunities would be to embed basic civic and political engagement skills into mandatory foundation-level classes in the social work curriculum.

Providing micro and macro social work students with the knowledge and skills to impact political processes could directly impact the way social workers participate in political activities, as well as the degree to which they engage. This would serve to effectively socialize and prepare social work students to execute the full scope of the profession's person-in-environment and social justice work, and enhance their ability to navigate the systems that create and shape the policies affecting their clients.

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