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According to the NASW Code of Ethics, social workers are called to engage in political activity at the micro, mezzo and macro levels for the advancement of social justice and human rights. NASW has mechanisms in place to aggregate the voices of individual social workers through political activity. Drawing on a model of civic voluntarism, the aim of this study was to examine the impact of political activity on decisions by Texas social workers to join or re-join NASW, as well as their opinions on the political engagement of NASW/Texas. This study employs a non-experimental, exploratory, cross-sectional survey design to assess political participation of social workers and their view of how politically active NASW as an organization should be. The survey was sent to all attendees of the 2013 NASW/Texas Conference, held in Austin, Texas. The conference attendees (n = 789) included NASW members (n = 643), and non-members (n = 146). A total of 148 responded to the survey, yielding a 19% response rate. The findings of the study suggest that political activity at the organizational level positively impacts social workers' decisions to join or maintain their NASW membership.

Keywords: National Association of Social Workers, political activism, social work political action

Do Social Workers Support NASW's
Political Activism? Evidence from Texas

Social work, as a profession, has ethical standards promoting action at the individual client level, such as self-determination, respect, and confidentiality. Other ethical standards are focused at the wider societal level (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). The actions called for at this level inherently include (but are not limited to) advocacy, not only for our clients, but also for social justice and human rights. Section 6.04a of the NASW (2017) Code of Ethics identifies the purpose underlying advocacy for social workers: "Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully" (para. 174).

The Code of Ethics urges social workers to be aware of the impact of politics and policy-making on practice and to advocate for policy changes to improve social conditions. It charges social workers to act for expanded choices and opportunities for all people, especially vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited individuals and groups. In addition, social workers are to promote policy and practice that is respectful of differences, supports the expansion of cultural knowledge, advocates for cultural competence across organizations and systems, and promotes policies designed to safeguard the rights of all people (NASW, 2017).

While the NASW Code of Ethics takes strong stands on the duties and obligations of individual members of NASW, the Code is silent on the role NASW itself is to play in assisting members to achieve these purposes. NASW, as a professional organization, is presumably supported by members to achieve goals that benefit the vulnerable populations cited in the Code. Social workers, both members and non-members, may also expect or desire efforts to support issues that also benefit them, and these efforts may make a difference in whether social workers become members of the organization.

Questions about the congruence between ethical standards in the Code of Ethics and beliefs of individual social workers have not been answered and remain open. For example, does

NASW have the support of its members to conduct political activity on behalf of vulnerable populations? Does the membership want to use dues funding for political activity? Do non-member social workers have different views regarding political activism than do members? In this study, we examine the impact of NASW organizational political activity on decisions to become/stay a member of NASW, as well as both NASW member and non-member Texas social workers' opinions on NASW/ Texas's political involvement. We begin with a discussion of a general overview of the reasons why individuals, including social workers, might be involved in politics in the United States.

Why and How to be Involved in Policy Advocacy

Democracy can be defined as a form of government where the ultimate decision-making power rests with the people and is exercised by them through a system of representation, generally involving free elections. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) assert that "Voice and equality are central to democratic participation" (p. 1). Political participation simply means that a person is (voluntarily) involved in an activity that is intended to influence government action. Many individuals will argue that it is a *civic duty* to be involved in politics. This usually refers to the act of voting in an election at the local, state or national level; however, political activity is much greater than voting alone. Regardless of whether or not political participation is a civic duty, it is a right bestowed to citizens of a democratic nation. Involvement of individual citizens is key to the development of the nation. Citizens vote representatives into office to support their ideas, interests, and needs. Without the vote, which is one type of input from individual citizens, government officials would not know where the public stands on issues, how policies impact individuals, changes that need to be made, etc.

Verba et al. (1995) found many reasons, in addition to civic duty, that people report as their reasons for political participation. These include the chance to advance their career, to obtain assistance from an elected official on a personal matter, a desire to someday run for office or get a government job, recreational activities offered by the organization with which they become

involved for the political activity, excitement, enjoyment of the company of the other involved individuals, opportunity to meet important or influential people, opportunity to earn recognition from respected individuals, maintenance of personal relationships, and because they see it as an opportunity to influence government policy. In other words, there are a variety of reasons that individuals become involved in political activities.

These activities can be classified into two main categories: direct and indirect political participation. Both direct and indirect political participation can be organized at the local, state and national levels. Direct participation includes such actions as communicating with public officials through personal meetings, working on electoral campaigns, attending protests, marches or demonstrations, writing emails, placing phone calls, or writing letters to representatives (Verba et al., 1995). Indirect political participation can be described as attempting to influence electoral results through the giving of time, effort or funds. Indirect participation can be accomplished as an individual or in collaboration with others.

Verba et al. (1995) focus on the ability and efforts of individuals in politics. People also work to affect policy by joining and thus supporting organizations that work to advocate particular political views. Individuals who are not active in other ways can, in effect, delegate this activity to an organization to be active on their behalf. Organizations can use their advocacy efforts to attract support (financial and volunteer) to increase their numbers of members if they can find a particular niche within the policy space. An example of a highly focused group within a crowded space is Greenpeace, an environmental activist group. Greenpeace defines itself as "the world's largest direct action environmental organization" (Greenpeace, n.d.). By finding the niche of "direct action," Greenpeace differentiates itself from other organizations active in the environmental field. Thus, carefully targeted membership (and other) organizations can serve to aggregate opinions of individuals and seek to magnify their political impact. People join only because the organization expresses views that are supported by potential members. If people stop believing in those views, they do not renew their memberships.

The situation of other membership organizations that seek to represent a profession and its members, as well as a particular Code of Ethics, is different and more difficult. Professionals

do not always join an organization simply to express their political views but also to gain the "selective benefits" (Olson, 1971) that are offered only to members. These benefits can include discounts on education or training, specialized insurance products, invitations to social and networking events, and so on. At times, potential members who desire to express a professional identity or to access selective benefits may be hesitant to join a professional organization if the political views that it supports are counter to their personal views.

NASW finds itself in this position. It is mandated by its Code of Ethics to be politically active to support the positions its members vote for, but these very positions may be perceived as reasons to avoid joining NASW by non-members. People who support banning or limiting abortions, for example, may not desire to join NASW because of its support for reproductive rights. NASW leadership may walk a fine line of encouraging membership with selective benefits that apply only to members, while promoting advocacy of positions that are not universally shared by the population of the profession.

Social Workers' and NASW's Involvement in Political Activities

Very little research has been conducted in recent years on whether social workers are meeting the charges in the NASW Code of Ethics related to political activity and how effective they are in doing so. There are studies that examine factors from the Chapter or Political Action for Candidate Election (PACE) Committee's standpoint, as well as those that examine participation from a student perspective, asking what might predict political participation (Colby & Buffum, 1998; Dickson, 2004; McNutt, 2010; Ritter, 2008).

Colby and Buffum (1998) examined the 1992 general election cycle in terms of PACE Committee's political participation nation-wide. They surmise that NASW PACE Committees raise and contribute significantly less than other, similar, professional PACs. Colby and Buffum also conclude that NASW State Chapter PACE Committees vary in the activities and level of participation with which they politically engage. Dickson (2004) studied a group of MSW students, in an attempt to replicate a study completed in

1972, investigating MSW students' attitudes toward social action. Dickson found that only about 80% of those surveyed "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with statements in the NASW (2017) Code of Ethics regarding political participation of social workers. She also found that respondents who were more politically active before, during and after completion of their MSW, were more likely to agree with these statements. Dickson's findings support the need for greater emphasis on policy advocacy in MSW programs but do not speak to social workers' attitudes toward NASW and their own political participation.

In an economic analysis of social work policy practice, McNutt (2010) asserts that the social work profession's commitment to evidence-based practice is not evident in the political arena. McNutt (2010) goes on to assert that social work as a profession does a poor job utilizing its limited resources for policy advocacy to the fullest of their capacity. He argues that economics is the foremost social science discipline in the policy arena, and that if social work is to move forward in participating in evidence-based advocacy, we must draw on the work of economists and others to maximize our resources and efforts. McNutt's analysis speaks to the lack of knowledge in the area of social workers' perceptions and activities toward policy advocacy as individuals and for professional organizations, such as NASW.

Ritter (2008) applies a model from Verba et al. (1995) termed the "civic voluntarism model," to determine whether or not civic voluntarism explains why some licensed social workers are more politically active than others. Ritter's (2008) findings support previous suggestions that social work students are not as adequately prepared for policy practice as they are for clinical and direct practice services, and thus social workers are less active than other similar professionals. She suggests that psychological engagement with politics is a crucial factor in explaining licensed social workers' political engagement. This is really the first study of its kind to test a model of political participation with a sample of social workers (both members and non-members) selected from each region of the United States.

What is missing from the literature is research aimed at understanding the impact of an organization's political activity on decisions by eligible professionals to join or not. The aim of this study is to partially fill this gap by examining the impact of

political activity on decisions by Texas social workers to join or re-join NASW, as well as their opinions on the political engagement of NASW/Texas.

Methods

This study reports on six items from a larger survey of social workers' opinions on and actions toward political engagement. This study employs a non-experimental, exploratory, cross-sectional design for an eighteen-item survey created by the authors to assess political participation of social workers, their view of how politically active NASW as an organization should be, how social workers maintain currency with political news, and in what ways social workers engage in political activity. Upon approval by the TPACE Board of Trustees and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Texas at Arlington, the survey was designed in the online survey platform, Survey-Monkey, for distribution.

The survey was sent to all attendees of the 2013 NASW/Texas Conference, held in Austin, Texas. The conference attendees (n = 789) included NASW members (n = 643), and non-members (n = 146). These potential respondents were selected as they would provide a robust sampling of both member and non-member social workers/social work students in the state of Texas.

Three recruitment emails were sent to registrants of the 2013 NASW Texas Annual Conference by the NASW Texas office, from February through March 2014, which included a link to the online survey. These emails were accompanied with the incentive of entering a drawing for one of three $25 Amazon gift cards, as well as one $100 Amazon gift card. In the end, a total of 148 surveys were completed (19% overall response rate). This turned out to be 106 members (16% member response rate) and 23 nonmembers (16% non-member response rate). (An additional 19 respondents did not answer the item about their membership at the time of the conference so we have excluded them from these results.) Members and non-members are thus proportionally represented among the respondents relative to their attendance at the NASW Annual conference. While these rates are not ideal, they do fall in line with average response rates for online surveys in recent years (Couper, 2000; Fricker & Schonlau, 2002; Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004).

In order to gain a broader understanding, six survey items were used to approach this topic (see Table 1). A principal component factor analysis was completed to determine whether a pattern of intercorrelations among variables existed. The principal component analysis yielded two subscales made up of the six survey items that explain 68% of the variance in this model. These two subscales were labeled: (1) general support for advocacy; and (2) narrow support for advocacy. The general support for advocacy subscale includes four items measured on a 5-point Likert scale: "I am much less likely," "I am less likely," "it has no impact," "I am more likely," and "I am much more likely." These items are: (1) "In what way does NASW/Texas' policy advocacy/political action affect your decision to be a member of NASW?"; (2) "To what extent does maintaining current NASW/Texas political activity affect your decision to join/re-join NASW?"; (3) "To what extent does advocating for current NASW/Texas political stands affect your decision to join/re-join NASW?"; and (4) "To what extent would ending all NASW/Texas political activities affect your decision to join/re-join NASW?" The general support for advocacy subscale was found to be reliable (4 items; α = .76).

The narrow support for advocacy subscale included two items ranked on the same 5-point Likert scale. The items are: (1) "To what extent does advocating only for better social worker pay, benefits and working conditions affect your decision to join/re-join NASW?"; and (2) "To what extent does advocating only for greater social justice affect your decision to join/re-join NASW?" The narrow support for advocacy subscale was also found to be reliable (2 items; α = .74).

Results

The major purpose of this study is to determine the desire among social workers to see NASW act in the political arena and to determine if there are differences between the two groups in their views

Information from all Respondents

The first item asked about advocating for current NASW/TX's political stands. The distribution of responses positively skewed,

with 40% of respondents indicating that this made them "much more likely" to join or re-join, with another 41% saying they were "more likely" to join. Only 3% were "much less likely" or "less likely" to join because of these efforts by NASW.

A second item asked how maintaining NASW/TX's current political activity affected membership decisions. The distribution of responses is similar to the first question but is slightly less positively skewed with more respondents saying it had no impact (26%). Still, 26% of respondents indicated that this made them "much more likely" to join or re-join, and another 44% said they were "more likely" to join. This contrasts with just 5% saying maintaining current activities made them less or much less likely to join.

We then asked, "In what way does NASW/Texas' policy advocacy/political action affect your decision to be a member of NASW, whether or not you are currently a member?" Respondents reacted strongly positively and in nearly the same way as the previous question. Nearly two-thirds of all respondents indicated that it made them "much more likely to join or rejoin" (26%) or "more likely to join or rejoin" (38%). While political advocacy did not affect membership decisions for one-third of respondents, there were only a handful of respondents who reacted negatively (3% were "less likely" to join or rejoin while just 1% were "much less likely" to join). These four questions comprise the "general advocacy support" subscale. All items on this subscale are ranked 1–5 (1 being "much less likely" and 5 being "much more likely"). The overall mean score of this subscale was 4.

The next two questions (the "narrow advocacy support" subscale) ask how changing what is advocated for might affect the likelihood of joining NASW. The first item relates to "advocacy only for better social worker pay, benefits and job conditions" while the second asks about "advocacy only for greater social justice." Responses for both items are very similar, with a majority of respondents seeing either of these options as making them "more likely" and "much more likely" to join. Still, respondents are much more positively inclined to join when NASW/TX maintains current political stands than limiting policy stands to only social worker benefits or social justice issues. This subscale also utilizes a 1-5 Likert scale ranking system (1

being "much less likely" and 5 being "much more likely"). An overall mean of 3.6 was found for this subscale.

The final item in Table 1 asks about the impact on joining if NASW/TX ended all political advocacy. This question had the most skewed distribution of the six items. Over half (54%) said that this would make them "much less likely" to join or re-join, while another 28% stated it would make them "less likely" to join. Thus, over four-fifths of respondents felt that ending all political advocacy would make them less likely to join or rejoin, compared to only 3% for whom this action would increase their likelihood of joining or rejoining.

Comparing Responses from
Members and Non-members

Because we have the possibility to compare responses from NASW members and non-members, we can address the question of whether it is likely that non-members do not join NASW due to its political activities. We look at the same six items to determine if there are differences and if there is a pattern within the distribution of responses (See Table 2). While we saw in Table 1 a very steady level of support for NASW political activities, the pattern here is not as uniform.

We analyzed responses from the first question regarding how NASW policy advocacy/political action affects membership decisions, breaking apart the answers by whether the respondent was a member of NASW at the time of the conference or not. We find a significant difference between the two groups, with non-members stating they were much less likely or less likely to join NASW because of its advocacy efforts. Even here, though, many social workers who were not NASW members saw NASW's political advocacy as something that inclined them to join. Similarly, in the second question, we see there is a significant difference in the effect on joining or re-joining NASW between members and non-members related to maintaining NASW/TX's current political activity. Non-members are significantly more likely to respond negatively to the survey items regarding keeping NASW's political activities going. Interestingly, none of the other four items show significant differences

Table 1: Percent Respondents' support for NASW Political Action

	Much less likely	Less likely	No impact	More likely	Much more likely	P <
How does advocating for current NASW/TX political stands affect your decision to be a member of NASW? (n=133)	1%	2%	16%	41%	40%	.001
How does maintaining NASW/TX' current political activity affect your decision to be a member of NASW? (n=133)	2%	3%	26%	44%	26%	.001
How does NASW/TX' policy \ advocacy/political action affect your decision to be a member of NASW? (n=141)	1%	3%	33%	38%	26%	.001
How does advocating only for better social worker pay, benefits and job conditions affect your decision to be a member of NASW? (n=135)	6%	18%	16%	31%	29%	.001
How does advocating only for greater social justice affect your decision to be a member of NASW? (n=131)	4%	21%	20%	30%	25%	.001
How does ending all political advocacy by NASW/TX affect your decision to be a member of NASW? (n=132)	54%	28%	15%	1%	2%	.001

between members and non-members. Additionally, there were no differences between members and non-members on the general and narrow advocacy support subscales.

Discussion

Social work, as a profession, has ethical standards focused on macro-level practice, specifically political advocacy (NASW, 2017). This paper used a non-experimental, exploratory, cross-sectional design for an 18-item survey created by the authors to assess political participation of social workers. Six of these items,

specifically, were examined for purposes of answering the research question: What is the impact of political activity on social workers' decisions to become/stay a member of NASW, the professional organization of social work? The findings of the study suggest that political activity at the organizational level impacts social workers' decisions to join or maintain their NASW membership. However, as there were significantly more NASW members than non-members that completed the survey, and many of the non-members responded with less interest in the political activities of the organization, it is difficult to say for sure if this is a widely held view of social workers, or simply a view of current NASW members. Additional limitations of this study include a relatively small sample size (n = 141) with a small number (n = 23) of non-member respondents, which makes generalizing from these results difficult. Further investigation is needed to determine the intensity of the views represented in this study of social workers in Texas and elsewhere.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes new and important information to the existing literature on policy advocacy for social workers. These results highlight the importance of political participation for NASW/Texas, based on the views of social workers. Again, these findings are in contrast to reports from volunteer and paid leadership within the NASW/Texas and TPACE organizations, who had heard from social workers in this "red" state, that the candidates the organization endorsed and the policy positions endorsed were not those that social workers within the state felt as though should be supported by the organization. These findings, standing in contrast to the beliefs held by NASW/Texas and TPACE leadership, have the potential to impact future directions of NASW/Texas, TPACE and other state chapter/PACE program initiatives. It is important to note, however, the slight variation in two of the items, between NASW members and non-members, may suggest that those that are not currently NASW members are less likely to join because of the political activism of NASW/Texas. While these numbers were small due to the limited number of social workers surveyed, relative to the total number of social workers in Texas, it is not clear whether or not this is a widely held view.

Table 2: Percent Respondents' support for NASW Political Action (NASW member and non-member)

		Much less likely	Less likely	No impact	More likely	Much more likely	p =
How does NASW/TX' policy advocacy/political action affect your decision to be a member of NASW?	Member (n=105)	0%	0%	31%	38%	31%	.000 Chi-square = 21.944 df=4
	Non-member (n=23)	8%	8%	35%	39%	9%	
How does maintaining NASW/TX' current political activity affect your decision to be a member of NASW?	Member (n=104)	0%	4%	23%	43%	30%	.003 Chi-square = 16.135 df=4
	Non-member (n=21)	10%	0%	43%	38%	10%	
How does advocating for current NASW/TX political stands affect your decision to be a member of NASW?	Member (n=105)	0%	2%	16%	39%	43%	.158 Chi-square = 6.066, df=4
	Non-member (n=20)	5%	0%	20%	45%	30%	
How does advocating only for better social worker pay, benefits and job conditions affect your decision to be a member of NASW?	Member (n=105)	6%	21%	13%	30%	31%	.255 Chi-square = 5.3324, df=4
	Non-member (n=22)	5%	5%	27%	36%	27%	
How does advocating only for greater social justice affect your decision to be a member of NASW?	Member (n=103)	4%	20%	21%	29%	25%	.709 Chi-square = 2.146, df=4
	Non-member (n=20)	0%	15%	15%	40%	30%	
How does ending all political advocacy by NASW/TX affect your decision to be a member of NASW?	Member (n=104)	56%	25%	16%	1%	2%	.929 Chi-square = .869, df=4
	Non-member (n=20)	55%	25%	15%	0%	5%	

Further investigation is needed to assess whether or not the views of Texas social workers are similar to those of social workers in other states. However, this study provides a base for understanding how social workers view the duties of political activity of their professional organization.

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