

# Political Social Work: History, Forms, and Opportunities for Innovation

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Over the past 50 years, national organizations have sought to engage social workers in political activity. The [National Association of Social Workers \(NASW\) \(2015\) Code of Ethics](#) has specified social workers' responsibility to the community and broader society since its adoption in 1960, and in 1996, strengthened its call to require *all* social workers to "engage in social and political action" to "expand choice and opportunity" and "equity and social justice for all people" (p. 27). To fulfill these obligations, social workers must have both the capacity and the drive to engage in the political processes that create policies. Political social work practice, focused on navigating and influencing power and political dynamics associated with social change, is therefore an essential component of our profession.

## POLITICAL SOCIAL WORK: HISTORY AND FORMS

Early social work education viewed policy as distinct from practice. However, in the mid-1990s, political social work emerged to focus on political mechanisms for eliciting social change. Political social work directly alters the power dynamics in policymaking through strategies such as staffing campaigns, registering and empowering voters, serving as political appointees, and running for and holding elected office. The two central models have long been the [Humphreys macro-oriented model](#), focused on working full-time in political arenas ([Lane & Humphreys, 2011](#)), and the [Fisher \(1995\) model](#), which emphasizes power, politics, and a change orientation across methods.

Questions surrounding social workers' political roles have persisted throughout the profession's history, including concerns about partiality, professionalism, status, potential harm to clients, and perceptions of legal restrictions ([Fisher, 1995](#)). Many

argue, however, that these concerns leave social work "on the margins of political discourse" ([Reisch, 2000](#), p. 293). Although the profession struggles with its political role, individual U.S. social workers have influenced the power dynamics involved in political decision making. From social work's earliest years, Jane Addams influenced candidate selection and candidates' policy agendas. Alice Paul, Lucy Burns, and Mary Church Terrell, among others, advocated for suffrage in the women's movement. Decades later, Richard Cloward continued the emphasis on suffrage, cofounding a national coalition dedicated to voter registration and the federal National Voter Registration Act. The first female cabinet member, Frances Perkins, played a pivotal role in the Social Security Act, after her appointment in 1933. The first woman elected to the U.S. Congress, social worker Jeanette Rankin, was elected in 1916. A century later, former congressional staffer turned congresswoman Barbara Lee chairs the Congressional Social Work Caucus. As of 2011, at least 467 U.S. social workers had sought local, state, or federal office ([Lane & Humphreys, 2011](#)).

Although professional social workers are more politically active than the general U.S. public, [Ritter \(2007\)](#) and [Rome and Hoehstetter \(2010\)](#) identified just 46 percent to 47 percent of social workers as active or very active politically. In fact, one-third of social work educators and field instructors see no role for social work in political contexts ([Mary, 2001](#)). Social workers rarely engage in political participation that requires taking initiative, wielding power, or engaging with conflict ([Rome & Hoehstetter, 2010](#)). Aside from voting, professional social workers and students engage in activities requiring limited effort ([Pritzker & Burwell, 2016; Ritter, 2007](#)).

African Americans, macro practitioners, NASW members, and more educated social workers participate more actively than other social workers

(Rome & Hoehstetter, 2010). These findings are consistent with political science's civic voluntarism model, which has guided substantial research on social work political activity (see, for example, Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Lane & Humphreys, 2011; Ritter, 2007). The model suggests three key factors that influence political participation: resources to engage in political activity (that is, time, money, and skills), psychological engagement with politics, and recruitment. *Political efficacy*, the belief that one has the capacity to affect political processes and that political processes will be responsive to one's efforts, plays a critical role in this model and in social work research. Furthermore, interpersonal recruitment has been found to strongly predict students' political participation—when their networks foster participation, participation happens (Swank, 2012). Hoefler (2016) and Gal and Weiss-Gal (2015) have suggested modified versions of this model specific to social work advocacy and political participation, with added emphasis on the organizations within which social workers advocate.

In contrast to scholarship focusing on the participation of social workers, minimal research has examined their role in empowering clients' political engagement. Just 28 percent of Rome, Hoehstetter, and Wolf-Branigin's (2010) social work respondents agreed that "social workers should do more to involve clients in the political process" (p. 213), and some explicitly expressed discomfort with encouraging clients to be politically active.

Over the profession's history, social work education has been criticized for inadequately preparing social workers to engage with policy and politics. In fact, nearly half of Ritter's (2007) sample felt that they had not been prepared to participate in politics, and just 36 percent of social workers reported receiving sufficient education about political engagement (Rome & Hoehstetter, 2010). Given these concerns, it is imperative to consider the literature that has established that educators play a critical role in developing students' political participation (see, for example, Hamilton & Fauri, 2001).

Social work education has taken three main approaches to preparing students for political engagement. The cross-method model prepares students to integrate political skills and an understanding of power into arenas of practice as diverse as community organizing, organizational development, and clinical practice (Fisher, 1995). Illustrative of this model is the University of Houston's cross-method

Political Social Work specialization and its Austin Legislative Internship Program, which places micro and macro MSW students as full-time legislative staffers in Texas. The macro specialist model trains students to be full-time practitioners in political action. Often connected with community organizing or policy practice concentrations, this model is exemplified by the Campaign School for Social Workers at the University of Connecticut, which has trained social workers to lead campaigns and run for electoral office since 1996. The occasional model integrates content on political processes and potential political social work roles into single curriculum components. Students may gain efficacy and skills through voter registration drives, participatory learning strategies, elective coursework, or in field.

### **POLITICAL SOCIAL WORK: OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION**

To facilitate social change, the social work profession needs social workers who can lead political efforts and a social work population capable of engaging with politics and empowering clients to leverage their political voices. We propose an intentional model of political social work that incorporates the strengths of all three models described in the previous section to achieve both of these goals.

Social workers across methods need to feel empowered, efficacious, and obligated to contribute to positive social change. A concerted effort to engage students and professionals across methods and settings with the political context and associated power dynamics is essential to increase their preparation for political engagement. Educating students across methods to gain fundamental knowledge about political systems and to analyze and navigate power dynamics should be explicit in future education policy and accreditation standards (EPAS). Of note, the word "political" appears only three times within the 2015 EPAS and the word "power" just twice (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). The experiential teaching techniques and hands-on exposure to political action commonly used in the occasional model are critical for teaching political skills and efficacy in the classroom and can benefit NASW chapters and other organizations across the country interested in expanding practitioners' involvement. Exposure to electoral processes belongs in the implicit curriculum, and assessments of power and the relevance of political context to client experiences may fit well not only

in policy courses, but also within theory, diversity, and oppression coursework.

Renewed emphasis on educating, training, hiring, and supporting politically oriented macro specialists is key to ensuring that change efforts are collaborative, effective, and guided by social work values. Perceptions among social work students and faculty about barriers to macro careers such as licensure, competition with other disciplines, availability of jobs, and salaries must be addressed. Literature on macro graduates finds success in these areas (Pritzker & Applewhite, 2015); but more research is needed, particularly around the effects of licensure laws in various states, to understand how to best support students interested in pursuing policy careers. Students and practitioners need intensive, focused education and networking opportunities, including political field placements and continuing education, to increase their skills as they advance in the field. Leaders must identify core competencies and create resources for macro-level political social work practice. Identifying social workers who are currently in political specialist positions and ensuring that they are incorporated into programs' field networks, alumni outreach, and career development can help develop networks for more social work students to move into careers involving political social work leadership.

## CONCLUSION

The intentional model of political social work can ensure that social work's values and principles guide future societal change. All social workers, regardless of field or method, should possess core political knowledge and skills, while a subset of social workers lead in this area. All social workers must work together to ensure that the true experiences of those served by social work are represented within the political process. A renewed commitment by the profession to political social work practice is needed, preparing social workers for the challenges ahead. **SW**

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