



## The Need for Political Social Work

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A social worker's primary **mission** is to help people meet their basic human needs, particularly those who are oppressed, vulnerable, and/or living in poverty. This is typically achieved through **practice activities** that occur at the micro level with individuals and at the macro level with communities, organizations, and policymakers. **Social workers are also ethically obligated to engage in political action** to advance **social justice**, regardless of their concentration or practice setting. As the infrastructure of social justice is under attack, it's time for social workers to mobilize.

A social worker's participation in politics is critical, as the systems that dictate the ability for many Americans to meet their basic needs are largely outdated, inequitable, and/or fail to deliver. For example, **numerous poor and discriminatory outcomes exist** related to healthcare, education, criminal justice, foster care, housing, poverty, etc., while marginalized populations such as individuals with disabilities, immigrants, women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and/or people of color are disproportionately affected.

Social workers could confront ineffective policies and address inequitable outcomes through their participation in politics, yet the majority of the profession does not actively participate. For example, in one national sample, **only 47%** of social workers reported high levels of political participation, and roughly 20% of social workers saw no relevance of politics to their work. In another national sample, **only 14%** of social workers reported being politically active "often" or "very often."

While political participation in social work is low, barriers such as restrictions in federal policy, personal perceptions of inadequacy, and a deemphasis on macro and political settings in social work education exist. For example, the **Hatch Act** limits certain political action of government employees, but in fact, **individuals and organizations** are permitted to engage in a considerable amount of non-neutral political activity. Further, social worker perceptions of **ineffectiveness** and **inadequate preparation**, as well as their misguided need for **professional impartiality**, reduce political participation. Finally, social work education and the profession itself emphasize clinical practice at the micro level, as the **vast majority of MSW programs do not have macro concentrations**, and consequently, **almost all MSW graduates work in direct practice, micro level positions post-graduation**. Because **macro students and practitioners** tend to be more politically active than clinical social workers, the above statistics are critical.

### Political Social Work

**Political social work practice** provides a potential path forward for increased participation and explicitly focuses on: (1) expanding the political power of traditionally marginalized groups, (2) influencing decision-making and policy agendas of candidates and legislators, (3) holding government positions, (4) engaging with electoral, voting, and legislative interventions, and (5) holding elected office. Currently, there are **existing**

**political social work efforts** across the country, including professional organizations such as Influencing Social Policy, educational initiatives such as the Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work at UCONN, and campaigns to elect social workers into elected office, a number that already includes five in Congress and 212 in state and local levels of government. However, despite the persistent efforts of these entities, political participation within the social work profession remains low.

## Recommendations

To revitalize political participation in social work, the profession should:

1. *Increase political social work education.* Political social work should be a part of all curricula for all students in social work departments. Programs should create assignments, content, field placements, and entire courses that explicitly integrate political social work skills into the classroom across concentrations. Further, programs should work to counter the neutrality myth through issue-driven efforts surrounding voting, elections, and influencing policy, possibly through webinars, workshops, or events with community political social workers, professors, policy makers, and fellow students.

2. *Increase political social work practice in three arenas: elections, voting, and policy advocacy.*

- Elections: Social workers should work on campaigns and run for office themselves. By getting involved with **federal** and **state** level NASW Political Action for Candidate Election (PACE) committees, social workers can learn more about social work approved candidates and campaign volunteer opportunities. They can also attend events such as UCONN's **Campaign School for Social Workers** to learn how to run for office.
- Voting: Social workers should **check their own voter registrations** as well as learn how to **register others** in their community, either individually or through voter registration drives. Given the **voter turnout** of the presidential election, social workers must do more; by actively engaging in voter registration, social workers can help increase political participation among underserved communities, leading to stronger representation and more equitable policy outcomes.
- Advocacy: Social workers should determine the social problems most important to them and their clients and join existing advocacy efforts. Social workers should begin by attending organizational advocacy coalition meetings and subscribing to the mailing lists of **state and federal organizations**, including (1) advocacy news sources (e.g., **Common Cause** and **Common Cause North Carolina**), (2) NASW chapters (e.g., **NASW** and **NASW-NC**), and (3) relevant nonprofits (e.g., **NAMI** and **NAMI-NC**). They will provide **examples of how to advocate**, including tracking relevant bills, picking targets in the media or in the legislature, crafting a message that includes both statistics and personal stories, and how to formulate and execute a plan.

Social work's primary mission is to help people meet their basic needs through practice activities at the micro and macro levels as well as through ethically obligated political participation. However, despite the need for social change as evidenced by inequitable outcomes in most social work-related systems, social work education does not emphasize political action, and most practicing social workers are not politically active, instead attempting to increase client well-being under discriminatory systems, rather than changing the systems themselves. Political social work provides a blueprint for social workers to engage in political arenas, with goals of creating meaningful and lasting social change. Based on current socially unjust political climates and discriminatory policy movements, it is crucial that social workers take political action and return the profession back to its advocacy-oriented **roots**.

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