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Social Workers in Politics: A National Survey of Social Work Candidates and Elected Officials

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This research identified 416 social workers who have run for local, state, or federal elected office, the largest number of such social workers identified and surveyed. The Civic Voluntarism Model was used to describe the factors leading to their political engagement. This model examines the resources, recruitment, and expertise of individuals and how those factors play into their public involvement. This model begins to describe the path these social workers took to elected office, and can help determine the opportunities for social work education and professional social work organizations who would like to influence this process. These results can be used to increase the number of social workers who seek elected office.

KEYWORDS advocacy, campaigns, elected office, policy, political engagement, political social work, social work education

Elected officials in the United States are likely to come from professional backgrounds in law, business, higher education and politics (Lawless & Fox, 2005). The 111th Congress included 186 representatives and senators with law degrees (Manning, 2010), while eight had social work degrees (NASW, 2009).

Research suggests that changing the cast of characters in politics affects the policies that are implemented (Burrell, 1996; Dodson, 1998; Swers, 2002). For example, adding more women to office makes it more likely that policy makers will consider issues that significantly and disproportionately affect women, such as health research that prioritizes women's health issues,

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foreign policy that emphasizes women's rights, and domestic policies that affect child care (Dolan, 2001). Legislative bodies with higher percentages of women are also likely to support rehabilitative criminal justice policies over punitive criminal justice policies (Swers, 2001). Specific policies that have had heavy input by female officials include changes to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 that created opportunities for women in high school and college athletics (Palley, 2001) and policies related to domestic violence (Murphy, 1997).

Changing the face of elected politics to include non-Caucasians also affects the resulting policies. Adding more African Americans to office has been known to intensify the focus of a legislative body on civil rights (Bratton & Haynie, 1999). Literature about Asian Americans in office suggests that they "have assumed the role of advocates for all Asian Americans," including leadership on legislation relating to redress for World War II internment (Lai, Tam Cho, Kim, & Takeda, 2001, p. 613).

Political activity is specifically promoted among social workers in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* in section 6.04, where social workers are charged with "social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access" to resources (NASW, 1999, n.p.). Meetings of the NASW Delegate Assembly, NASW's national representative decision-making body, have encouraged social workers to get involved in politics. NASW's actions to increase social workers' political activity have included operation of political action committees, organization of political training programs, endorsement of specific candidates who advance the profession's agenda, encouragement of social workers seeking office, and promotion of voter registration (NASW, 2009–2012). Despite this, social workers have not traditionally been represented among legislators (NASW, 2008), legislative staff (personal communication, Dina Kastner, March 17, 2004), or those who influence the legislative process (Hoefer, 2000). By 2008, only 201 social work-trained elected officials had been identified nationwide (NASW, 2008).

The authors are part of a growing movement to define political social work as a practice specialization. Political social work includes social workers who have run for or hold office, as discussed in this article, work for elected office holders, are appointed by elected officials or must be confirmed by elected officials, and social workers who spend considerable time lobbying elected officials as a volunteer or paid advocates. One other type of political social worker is anticipated to emerge in the future. Some years ago Ruth Messinger argued that social service agencies should have a political social worker on staff who would be responsible for organizing client and staff voter registration activities, coordinating political empowerment and advocacy activities and lead the agency's legislative agenda, although agencies may prefer not to use a "political" name to avoid concerns about partisanship (personal communication, IAPSWP board meeting, 1999).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HISTORY

The first social worker to hold elected office in the United States was the late Jeanette Rankin, a suffrage activist who had studied at the New York School of Philanthropy (Davidson, 1994; Josephson, 1974). Rankin was the first woman to run for Congress, the first woman to be successfully elected to Congress, and the first woman to be elected to any national representative body in the world. In 1971, Ron Dellums became the second social worker elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Dellums was known for his peace activities, his radicalism, founding the Congressional Black Caucus, and serving on the Armed Services Committee (Dellums & Halterman, 2000).

By 1979, there were 51 identified social workers in elective legislative office in the United States (Mahaffey, 1987). By 1991, NASW had located 113 elected officials who had been trained as social workers, and by 1993, there were 165 (Weismiller & Rome, 1995). As reported by NASW, the 111th Congress contained nine social workers: Senators Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) and Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) and Representatives Susan Davis (D-CA), Luis Gutierrez (D-IL), Barbara Lee (D-CA), Ciro Rodriguez (D-TX), Allyson Schwartz (D-PA), Carol Shea-Porter (D-NH), and Edolphus Towns (D-NY) (NASW, 2009).[1] In addition to these, NASW was aware of 192 social workers in state and local offices in 2008.

Only two studies of these elected social workers are known: a 1994 study of 41 social workers elected to state legislatures by the University of Connecticut School of Social Work Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work (NAHIPSW) (Humphreys, 1994) and a 1998 study by Haynes and Mickelson (2006) that surveyed 84 social workers in federal, state, and local office. Respondents to both surveys offered insight on topics such as their backgrounds and education, the reasons they chose to run for office, the challenges they met, and their recommendations for others who might be interested in following their path.

THEORETICAL APPROACH AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) developed the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) to identify factors that contribute to individual political choices in ways as specific as voting or as complicated as running for office. These researchers hypothesized that interest in politics alone was not sufficient to predict whether an individual would become involved in politics. Instead, they focused on resources available to an individual interested in politics,

[1] Two of these, Ciro Rodriguez and Carol Shea-Porter, were not re-elected to the 112th Congress (NASW, 2010). Luis Gutierrez has worked as a social worker but did not graduate from a school of social work ("Biography," n.d.)

and considered whether the presence of those resources predicted an individual's political participation.

In this model, empirically tested nationally and longitudinally with several large samples of Americans through the Citizen Participation Study, three main groupings of factors predict political activity. The first is psychological engagement, which includes political interest, political efficacy, political information, family influences, and party identification. The second is resources, including time, money, and civic or political skills. The third is recruitment, defined as whether people are members of social networks or groups that encourage members to get involved politically. Finally, the research determined that a subset of political interest, interest in a specific issue, often led to an individual's decision to engage in a political activity (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Ritter (2008) used the CVM to compare social workers to the general public by examining predictors of political activity among licensed social workers in 11 states across the country. Social workers differed from the general public in four major ways. First, while the general public was less likely to become politically active if they had less time and money available to them, social workers in her sample participated in political activity regardless of their available resources. Second, while degree of partisanship predicted political activity in the general public, it did not predict political activity among social workers. Ritter speculated that the lack of predictive ability for partisanship may have reflected the relative homogeneity of social workers, who reported being primarily registered Democrats and fairly liberal. Third, in terms of recruitment, Ritter found that while a majority of the social workers she surveyed belonged to a church or another nonpolitical voluntary organization, very few reported that they had been recruited into political activity through that network.

Finally, within the context of civic/political skills, Ritter asked her sample of social workers an additional question: whether they felt that their social work education had provided them with the skills they would need to engage with the political system. Approximately half of the respondents felt that they had learned these skills in their social work education, while the other half disagreed or were unsure.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to expand the available knowledge about elected social workers, this research identified and contacted social workers who had run for elected office in the United States. These individuals were surveyed about their political beliefs, previous political participation, how they came to run for office, potential future offices, their social work education, and their

demographics via an online and hard copy survey in 2008. The following research questions were examined:

Research Question #1: Do Social Workers who run for office have Access to Resources in the Areas of Time, Money, and Civic Skills?

The Civic Voluntarism Model found a statistically significant correlation between civic engagement and income, with an increase in income correlating with an increase in civic participation. In addition, the examination of several measures of individuals' available time found that those who worked fewer hours were more likely to be engaged in civic participation. In particular, those who were retired reported high levels of civic participation. Finally, those who reported high levels of civic skills were also re likely to be involved (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Based on those findings, this research examined the income of this sample in contrast with other groups of the general population and other groups of social workers. In addition, the civic skills of the sample were examined through questions about their preparation through social work education and their political activity prior to runs for office.

Research Question #2: How were these Elected Social Workers Recruited into Candidacy?

The original Civic Voluntarism Model shows a relationship between an individual's civic engagement and his or her affiliation with nonpolitical associations and church attendance (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). As Ritter's study of social workers did not find churches or nonpolitical voluntary associations to be significant political recruitment grounds for social workers, this study examined recruitment through professional networks for this sample.

Research Question #3: What Policy Issues were Emphasized by Social Workers Running for or Elected to Office?

The Civic Voluntarism Model suggests that individuals tend to engage politically with issues that are either related to the individual's experience or are controversial (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Many other characteristics also play into issue consideration. For example, Segal and Brzuzy (1995) found statistically significant differences in voting among men and women of the same party on four domestic issues: family leave, gun control, the 1993 savings and loan bailout, and gays in the military. This study asked elected social workers to describe both the issues most important to them and the issues about which they felt most knowledgeable.

METHOD

Participants

The objective of this research was to identify social workers who had run for elected office at the federal, state, and local levels in the United States. The criteria for inclusion included any run for an elective public office, whether or not that candidacy had been successful. Eligible participants held a BSW or MSW degree from a school of social work accredited by the Council on Social Work Education. Since there is no definitive list of elected social workers, the initial sampling frame was the list of social workers known to NASW's national government relations staff, gathered by them through contacts with NASW chapters throughout the country. This list was expanded through purposive sampling. Internet searches combining social work terms such as MSW, Master of Social Work, BSW, Bachelor of Social Work, social work, and social worker with terms such as candidate and names of specific offices (town council, mayor, city council, state legislator, etc.) were conducted. In addition, follow-up contacts were made with NASW chapters and local social workers throughout the country, particularly in areas where few elected social workers had been identified. Finally, snowball sampling was used as identified elected social workers were asked to provide names of any other potential survey participants in their networks. Individuals who were identified in any of these methods were reviewed to ensure they met study criteria before inclusion. Potential participants were contacted up to five times after the initial contact over a period of eleven weeks via a mixed-mode survey (both e-mail and regular mail).

A total of 467 individuals who met the study criteria were identified. Accurate contact information could be established for 416 persons, and 270 of those contacted responded to the survey, providing a 66% response rate. While opinions vary on the acceptable response rate for a survey, particularly given a population with an unknown overall size, a response rate of more than 60% is considered a good response rate by Rubin and Babbie (2008).

Design

The questionnaire used for this research was a modified version of the survey developed by Lawless and Fox (2005) to validate their theory of gender and political ambition through the Citizen Political Ambition Study (CPAS). Items about political attitudes and participation, attitudes about running for office, demographics, family life, and upbringing were used from the CPAS survey. Additional questions related to type of office, use of power, social work education, and professional support were incorporated after pilot testing by a group of elected officials and politically active social

workers. The final survey consisted of 32 questions, both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The survey was available in hard copy and online through SurveyMonkey.com.

Limitations

This response rate of 66% for this research allows for some confidence in generalizing the results to all elected social workers. The number of social workers who have run for elected office is not known. While there is no way to know the total size of this population, the number identified here is a significant increase over the 190 known before. In addition, conclusions cannot be drawn about those who did not respond to the survey or those who were identified but could not be contacted.

An additional limitation is the time frame between some of the events respondents described and subjects' completing the survey was significant. The social workers who responded to this study were most likely to have received their social work degree before 1979 and the longest-serving officeholder had been in office for 32 years. The time lag between the events discussed in the survey and its completion could result in inaccuracy of retrospective recollections. These limitations suggest that while the strong response rate provides a measure of confidence, care is needed in generalization to all elected social workers based on this survey.

Consideration of Multi-Modal Differences

In order to assess any differences between those who responded in hard copy and those who responded online, descriptive statistics of information collected via the two methods were analyzed. In most respects, including racial/ethnic background, likelihood of having children, age of children at the time of first running, social work education, geographic area of the country, size of town in which they current live, family encouragement, recruitment, and previous political activity, the two sets of responses were alike. There were statistically significant differences in only four areas. T-tests revealed that those who completed the survey online were younger (the mean age of online participants was 55; of hard copy participants, 62) ($t = 5.180$, $p < .001$); more likely to be male (53% compared to 68%) ($t = 2.759$, $p < .01$); and had higher personal income (average \$75,001–\$100,000 compared to \$50,001–\$75,000) ($t = -2.849$, $p < .01$). Finally, they differed in marital status: both groups were equally likely to be married, but those who completed the survey online were more likely to identify themselves as partnered but not married (8% compared to 4% of hard copy respondents), more likely to identify as separated (3%, while none of the hard copy respondents were separated), and less likely to be widowed (3%

compared to 13%) ($\chi^2 = 11.617$, $p < .05$). Their overall similarities suggest a lack of substantive differences between the two sets of results, and they were therefore considered as one group for the remaining analysis.

Demographics

The elected social workers surveyed were 61% female and 39% male, with one transgender participant. The most commonly reported racial/ethnic background was Caucasian (74%), followed by Black, African American, or African origin (13%) and Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino/a (6%). Respondents' ages ranged from 25 to 87, with a mean of 58. Twenty-five percent were under the age of 53 and 25% were older than 65. Only one respondent was under the age of 30, with 13 (5%) between 30 and 39. Eighty-four percent had children. Of those respondents with children, 49% had children over the age of 18 when they first ran for office, while only 5% had children under the age of one. Fifty-seven percent reported a personal income of $75,000 or less, and the majority (77%) lived in a household with an income of $75,001 or more.

The sample was similar in many ways to social workers in general. They were less likely to be female than other social workers (83% of NASW members are female and 81% of licensed social workers are female) and slightly more likely to identify as non-white (14% of NASW members and licensed social workers identify themselves as non-white). Members of this sample of elected officials were older than the population of social workers in general, as can be seen by comparing this sample's average age of 58 with that of NASW members (mean age of 45) and licensed social workers (averaging 45–54) (Arrington & Whitaker, 2008; Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006).

Respondents to this study lived in 45 different states as well as the District of Columbia, as shown in Table 1, at the time they completed the survey. The regions with the largest numbers of respondents were New England, the South Atlantic, the Eastern Midwest, and the Pacific West. California, Connecticut, and New York had the largest numbers of respondents from individual states, while no elected social workers responded from South Dakota, Tennessee, Montana, Nevada, or Virginia.

The most common social work degree held by respondents was an MSW, held by 89% of those surveyed, followed by a BSW (29%). Twenty-three percent of the total held both a BSW and an MSW, while 7% of the total had an MSW and a PhD or DSW, and 2% held all three social work degrees.

Offices Held and Sought

Half of the social workers surveyed (51%) were holding office at the time of the survey, while 39% had held office in the past and 10% had been

TABLE 1 Geographic Distribution of Respondents

Census region	Included states	Respondents	
		n	%
New England	Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont	53	21
South—Atlantic	Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia	40	16
Midwest—Eastern	Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin	35	14
West—Pacific	Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington	35	14
Midwest—Western	Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota	29	11
Middle Atlantic	New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania	23	9
South—Western	Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas	18	7
West—Mountain	Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Montana, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming	14	6
South—Eastern	Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee	7	3

candidates for office but not (or not yet) elected. The largest group (69%) had been officeholders or candidates at the local level, 29% were candidates at the state level, and 2% had been candidates at the federal level. Unfortunately, no current federal officeholders participated. Both current and former officeholders represented a wide range of experience: current officeholders had been in their most recent office for an average of six years, ranging from less than one year to 32 years. Former officeholders had held their most recent office for an average of eight years, with a range between two and 24 years.

Respondents were asked about all of their past runs for office, successful or unsuccessful, and their future offices they might consider. Social workers in this survey were most likely to run for office on the city, town, or county council. Over half (51%) had run for this office, 39% succeeding and 32% planning to run for this office in the future. They were also likely to seek the positions of state legislator (38%) and school board (36%). Social workers surveyed were most likely to be elected when running for school board (87% were successful) and judge (86% successful) and nearly as likely to be elected to state legislatures (79%) and city/town/county councils (77%).

Candidates in this sample were least successful in their runs for U.S. Senate, U.S. House of Representatives, and governor (of the 15 who had run for these offices, none had yet been successful). While social workers have certainly run for the federal legislature successfully, they were not among these respondents. Table 2 shows all of the offices respondents had sought, or had considered, and the offices to which they were successfully elected. These numbers include multiple runs by the same individual, both successful and unsuccessful for the same office. It should also be noted that

TABLE 2 Offices Past, Present, and Future

	Ran for office		Elected to office		Considering running for office	
Office	n	%	n	%	n	%
City/Town/County Council	121	51	93	39	69	32
State Legislator	84	38	66	29	91	41
School Board	79	36	69	31	32	15
Mayor	25	12	16	7	35	16
US House of Representatives	12	6	0	0	23	11
Judge	7	3	6	3	6	3
Statewide Office (Attorney General, Secretary of State, etc)	4	2	1	<1	15	7
Governor	2	1	0	0	13	6
US Senate	1	<1	0	0	10	5
Other	36	17	29	13	12	6

candidates who ran unsuccessfully were the hardest to locate and composed the smallest group of respondents.

Social workers in this study did not limit themselves to offices traditionally associated with social issues. The breadth of offices held by respondents required a wide range of substantive expertise. Offices included areas associated with social work and social policy, such as boards of education, mental health boards, or hospital boards and those that showed the range of abilities of social workers: the borough president of a large city, a coroner, a city controller, and a water district member.

Political Philosophies and Party Identification

Respondents described their political philosophies as mostly liberal (60%) and moderate (38%), with 2% identifying as conservative. They were most likely to identify as Democrats (84%), and were equally likely to identify as either Republicans (9%), or members of other parties (8%) such as the Caucus (Consensus) and Working Families parties.

Policy Issues

A list of 13 issues reflecting current policy topics including abortion, campaign finance reform, crime, economy, education, environment, foreign policy, gay rights, guns, health care, mental health, the war in Iraq, and work/family balance were provided to respondents. Elected social workers in this study were asked about the issues most important to them and about which they felt most knowledgeable. Respondents were

TABLE 3 Issues about which Respondents Felt Knowledgeable and Considered a Priority

	Considered self knowledgeable		Considered a priority	
Issue	n	%	n	%
Abortion	24	10	11	5
Campaign finance reform	12	5	11	5
Crime	57	23	58	25
Economy	90	37	127	54
Education	152	63	156	66
Environment	58	24	76	32
Foreign policy	8	3	5	<1
Gay rights	17	7	13	6
Guns	2	1	1	<1
Health care	108	44	118	50
Mental health	129	53	77	33
War in Iraq	6	2	6	3
Work/family balance	65	27	46	20

most concerned about education (36%), the economy (20%), and health care (16%). Respondents considered themselves most knowledgeable about education (30%) mental health (26%), health care (16%), and the economy (10%). It should be noted that the surveys were completed in early 2008—given the global economic crisis that gained attention in late 2008, economic issues might have changed in importance if asked at a later date. The complete list of issues is found in Table 3.

Recruitment and Encouragement

Respondents had been very active in politics before their first run for office. Every respondent had voted regularly in national elections, 98% had voted in local elections, and 97% had voted in primary elections. Participation rates in these and other political activities by this sample are found in Table 4.

In addition to questions about previous political activity, participants were asked to identify individuals who had recruited them in their run or runs for office. The results are shown in Table 5. The largest group, encompassing three-fourths (75%) of the sample, were recruited to political activity by a friend or acquaintance. Sixty-five percent were recruited by an elected official and 52% by a nonelected political activist.

Respondents were also asked to describe the person who had most strongly encouraged or supported them in their run for office. The encouragement for the respondents could be grouped into six categories: elected officials, members of the community, family members, other social workers, friends, and professional colleagues.

TABLE 4 Previous Political Activities

Activity	n	%
Regularly voted in national elections	259	100
Regularly voted in local elections	255	98
Regularly voted in primary elections	251	97
Contacted an elected official via phone, e-mail, letter, or in person	236	92
Volunteered on a community project	235	91
Attended a city council or school board meeting	232	90
Joined a group in the community to address a local issue	226	88
Served on the board of a non-profit organization	219	87
Volunteered for a political candidate	209	83
Contributed money to a political campaign	210	82
Wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper	192	76
Actively participated in a political interest group	189	75

TABLE 5 Recruitment into Political Office

Person who recruited the respondent	n	%
Friend or acquaintance	187	75
Elected official	157	65
Non-elected political activist	128	53
Co-worker or professional associate	124	51
A political party official	107	44
Spouse or partner	66	29
Member of family	60	26
Other source	15	8
NASW	13	8

EXAMINATION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research Question #1: Do Social Workers who Run for Office have Access to Resources in the Areas of Time, Money, and Civic Skills?

MONEY

Consistent with the findings of the Civic Voluntarism Model, the population of social workers responding to this study appears to have access to more financial resources than the population in general and social workers in general. Only 30% of the U.S. population has a household income above $75,000 (Census Bureau, 2005–2009), while 62% of this group had an income of $75,000 or more, much higher than the average income of the population. This group also had a higher average income than NASW members or licensed social workers. Fifty-six percent of this sample had an income over $100,000, while only 33% of NASW members and 3% of licensed social workers earned $100,000 or more (Arrington & Whitaker, 2008; Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006). This study is consistent with other studies that have shown that those who run for office have greater

access to personal resources such as money (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001). Personal resources may be instrumental not only in providing financing for campaigns, but in providing candidates with time away from paid employment to pursue elected office.

Time

While available time was not measured directly, the findings related to age may shed some light on this subject. A quarter of respondents to this study were over the age of 65, while only 5% of all licensed social workers are over 65 (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006). These findings are consistent with the CVM, which showed political activity highest in the age groups of 40–69 (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001). The average age of the current elected social workers is 58. Because the majority of the respondents are nearing or within retirement age, this may be consistent with a separate CVM finding that those who are retired are significantly more likely to take part in political work (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Civic skills

Social workers in this sample were asked about the preparation for running for office that they received from their social work education. In this measure of their training as a part of their civic skills, 63% agreed or strongly agreed that their social work education prepared them for running for office. Twenty-three percent were neutral, 8% disagreed, and 7% strongly disagreed. The social work education of the respondents was an area where they were able to increase their civic skills, which is consistent with the CVM finding that those with more civic skills are more likely to be involved in politics. (For more information about the social work education of this sample, see Lane, 2011 in the *Journal of Social Work Education*.)

Another measure of civic skills is the political activity of this sample. This group, even prior to their original runs for office, demonstrate much higher political activity than the general public (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001), consistent with previous research that suggests social workers are likely to be politically active (c.f. Domanski, 1998, Reeser & Epstein, 1989).

In 1989, of the members of the general public surveyed by Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001), only 8–9% had worked on a campaign, 20–27% had made a political contribution, 1–4% had served on a board, and 30–38% had contacted a local government official. By comparison, 83% of this sample had worked on a campaign, 82% had made a political contribution, 87% had served on the board of a non-profit organization, and 92% had contacted an elected official prior to their runs for office. These activities gave them an opportunity to practice and improve their civic skills in

ways that would both encourage them to run for office and help them in those runs.

Research Question #2: How Were These Elected Social Workers Recruited into Candidacy?

The elected social workers described here reported that they were recruited into runs for political office by friends or acquaintances (75%), elected officials (65%), and nonelected political activists (53%). In general, the encouragement that the respondents deemed most important in their runs for office came from elected officials, members of the community, family members, fellow social workers, friends, and professional colleagues (other than fellow social workers). Fifty-one percent stated that they were recruited by a co-worker or professional associate and 8% made specific reference to the National Association of Social Workers, showing that professional networks were important in recruitment for many of the respondents. In one difference from the CVM, also reflected in Ritter's study (2008), there was little mention of recruitment or encouragement from religious networks in this sample, whereas this was an important network for the general population in the CVM.

Research Question #3: What Policy Issues were Emphasized by Social Workers Running for or Elected to Office?

Issues of most importance to respondents were education (36%), the economy (20%), and health care (16%). Respondents considered themselves most knowledgeable about education (30%) mental health (26%), health care (16%), and the economy (10%). Although previous studies have noted significant differences between gender in issue concerns (Segal & Brzuzy, 1995), statistically significant gender differences were found in the importance and knowledge about only one of the issues presented to these respondents. Abortion was selected as a high priority by 1% of male respondents and 6% of female respondents ($t = -2.425$, $p < .05$). No male respondents selected abortion as their highest priority, while three women chose it as their top priority. Women were also more likely to describe themselves as knowledgeable about this issue ($t = -2.419$, $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The discovery of 416 social workers across the country who have run for local, state, or federal office suggests that there are many social workers

who are using their social work skills and knowledge in the political arena: more than twice as many as were previously known. Information gathered from this group documents the experience of social workers in running for and serving in political office and provides directions for future research, education, and practice that can increase their numbers and may be a model for others interested in this path.

The respondents to this study were less likely to be female than social workers in general. These findings are consistent with related research suggesting that social workers in nondirect practice positions, particularly administrative positions, are more likely to be male than social workers in direct practice positions (Healy, Havens, & Pine, 1995). Conversely, respondents were *more* likely to be female than elected officials in general, likely due to the higher concentration of females in the social work profession. While 61% of these respondents were female, 17% of Congress, 23% of statewide elected executives, and 24% of state legislators are female (CAWP, 2009); the U.S. population overall is 51% female (Census Bureau, 2005–2009). This suggests that electing more social workers to office can change the overall demographics of elected officials.

Because large numbers of social workers come from groups that are underrepresented in political office, social work is a richly diverse recruitment pool for political candidacy. Social workers are more likely to be female and persons of color than other candidates (Arrington & Whitaker, 2008; Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006). In addition to their education and experience with social work values and practice and knowledge about domestic policy issues, they also bring these underrepresented identities to the political arena. More detailed analysis should be done of demographic characteristics of social workers who run for office. Discussion of characteristics such as gender, racial/ethnic background, age and level of office chosen (local, state, or federal) may provide examples of the issues, situations, and motivations that bring these individuals to elected office and find ways to increase the diversity of those who run for elected office.

These findings that those who run for office have greater access to personal resources such as money and time provide challenges, as this may be a barrier preventing many social workers from considering elected office. This information suggests that social workers who are interested in running for office are not currently able to run. Schools of social work and professional organizations should consider ways to assist these social workers in their interest in and campaigns for office.

This research finds elected social workers to be interested in and knowledgeable about a wide variety of offices and issues. The choice of education as both the issue about which they were most concerned and the issue about which they were most knowledgeable is consistent with the public offices respondents held. One-fifth (21%) held offices specifically related to

education, many sitting on city or town boards of education. The prevalence of health care and mental health likely reflects the overall focus of the social work profession on these issues, as well as the likelihood of social workers to be employed in health and mental health centers. These are two of the most common practice areas in which licensed social workers operate: 37% of licensed social workers are in mental health settings and 13% in health settings (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006).

The concentration of social workers in these areas suggests that social workers are using their training, expertise, and practice in areas such as education, health, and mental health to inform policy in these areas. One promising area for future research is an examination of the policies that are written, sponsored, and promoted by social workers who are in elected office, to see how their policies might be different from policies promoted by other elected officials. How do social workers bring their training, expertise, and/or knowledge gained from their clients' experiences into their political careers? Further research should also examine elected officials' fields of practice and positions, and the ways these relate to their candidacies and elected work.

The evidence here does not provide a clear general path to elected office. Recruitment and encouragement for social workers into elected office does not yet appear to be systematic or common. Yet it is clear that the recruitment process and encouragement of others are key aspects in the path to elected office. More information about successful methods of recruitment and encouragement is necessary in order to pinpoint opportunities for identification, encouragement, and recruitment of social workers into this area of practice. It is clear that there are opportunities for professional organizations and schools of social work to take a more active role in this area.

This survey of elected social workers raises many questions. Much of the profession's interest in elected social workers presumes that the presence of social workers in elected office changes policy or the policy process. Research should examine whether social workers promote policies that are substantially different from existing policies or proposals by non-social workers. Also important to examine is whether social workers in elected office engage with constituents, advocates, or other policy makers in any manner that is different from other elected officials. Having identified this pool of social workers, the majority of whom are current officeholders, future research that compares the proposed legislation, sponsored legislation, voting records, and process of this population with those of non-social workers can determine whether these assumptions are accurate. In addition, the important role of social workers serving in staff positions for candidates and elected officials requires more attention.

The information provided by these elected social workers provides a variety of ideas for social workers active or interested in the political arena. One implication for social workers in practice is that possibilities for political involvement by social workers are vast. Social workers have been successful in their runs for local, state, and federal offices, and for runs in judicial, legislative, and executive branches of government. Social workers surveyed here were most successful in their runs for legislative offices such as city council, school board, and state legislature. These may be the races that social workers should most strongly consider for their initial forays into candidacy. Social workers also felt knowledgeable about political issues that included traditional social work area such as education, mental health and health care, as well as areas as diverse as crime, the economy, and the environment. This suggests that the respondents to this survey have explored a wide variety of areas of public office, and provides encouragement to other social workers to follow their examples.

The path to political office for these individuals included involvement in political and community activities before their first run for office, including voting in local elections, national elections, and primaries, contacting elected officials, working on community issues, service on non-profit boards, and work for political campaigns and candidates. Many of those in this sample came to the attention of political insiders as possible candidates because of their work in the community or on the campaigns of other candidates. This community involvement obviously has merit in its own right, but can also help potential candidates learn about the issues in their communities and become known to leaders and voters in their area. Many described here were already active members of their communities when an opportunity for a run for elected office arose. Social workers who are interested in future runs for political office may have a better rate of success if they are already actively engaged.

A final implication for social work practice is that the population of social workers in elected office is more diverse than the general population of elected officials in terms of gender and ethnicity. Social work is a rich recruitment pool for those who would like to increase the diversity of elected bodies. This is consistent with the efforts of the National Association of Social Workers and their political action committee (Political Action for Candidate Election) in supporting candidates who are significantly aligned with NASW's agenda and who are women and people of color (NASW, 2009–2012). Information about the demographics of social workers who are elected officials can help the social work profession create alliances with organization, groups, and movements with similar goals. Some of these alliances have begun, such as the collaboration in 2009 between NASW and the White House Project (NASW Advocacy Blog, 2009), but there is much room for expanding on these efforts.

CONCLUSION

Social workers have many opportunities to affect change in the policies that directly and significantly affect our clients (Rocha, 2007). The election of social workers to public office, providing them a seat at the table where decisions are made, can be the means for social workers to most directly influence these policies. The results of this research show that the presence of social workers in the political arena is much larger than was previously estimated. While encouraging, it should be noted there is much room for growth, given the large numbers of elected positions available in local, state, and federal government and the traditional dominance of other professions among their members.

Individual social workers across the country are participating in policy decisions in city councils, state legislatures, judiciaries, and other government bodies. Their experiences provide inspiration and models for beginning social workers who are interested in the political arena. Social workers who are interested in affecting policy and professionals who would like to increase the numbers of social workers in elected office have much to learn from these individuals. The experiences of elected social workers described here should be used to influence the political future of social work through professional development, curriculum adaptation, promotion of this subset of social work practice, and future research.

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