

A Social Worker, Working Where?
By: Renee Courville and Rachel Howds
University of Connecticut

This paper explores the general public's view of politics, and how they view a social workers role in politics, if at all. We interviewed ten randomly selected people from our communities using a questionnaire. The paper consists of our findings and a discussion of how the findings apply to social work within in the political arena.

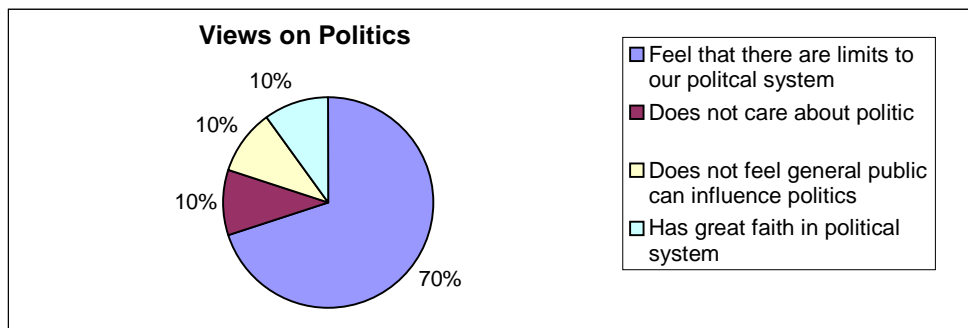
Introduction:

Our paper explores the general public’s view of politics and how they see social workers playing a role in politics if at all. We approached 17 accidentally selected customers from a local bank. Ten of the 17 customers agreed to participate in our survey and were surveyed by using a questionnaire (Appendix A). This paper consists of our findings and how these finding can be applied to the social work profession within in the political arena. We suspect that the general population will have a very narrow view of social work, which consists of social workers in direct practice work. We are making no predictions on how the general public will respond about social worker involvement in politics. The results, however, will have implications for political social work, which we will explore.

Data:

The data gathered reflects some themes in political views among participants.

Views regarding the limits of our political system are reflected in the responses of the



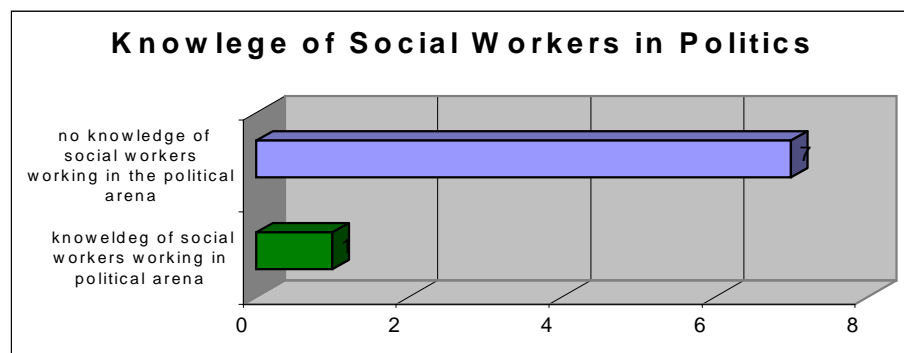
participants.
Their
responses
were that
special

interest groups override the needs of the general public; it takes big money to be in politics; there is a limiting nature to democracy; there are faults in the system; and there is lack of trust for politicians. Others in this sample viewed politics differently. One participant reported that he/she does not care about politics, while another said he/she

was interested in politics but does not feel the general public can change political decisions. Still two others have faith in the system. One participant reported great faith in the country and satisfaction with a Republican president. Another participant reported that a small government with a liberal background would be important to attain. Results reflect more views on the limitations in our current system however; a small percentage of participants have faith that change can occur in our political system.

Data shows the public’s understanding of the social work profession is generally narrow, focusing on direct care services. Every person in the sample understands that social workers help people; however, the generalities in this understanding are obvious. Most of the sample specified that social workers work for agencies that provide help to people through direct practice. Most sample participants have an understanding of the populations social workers serve. Participants reported that social workers serve all people, especially low-income populations. The differences in report data are reflected in participants’ specification of the populations they reported are served by social workers. One participant reported social workers help adults going through divorce, children and battered women. Others specified that social workers serve the elderly, low-income people, people with addictions and sick children. Overall findings reported that through direct practice social workers serve disadvantaged portions of the population.

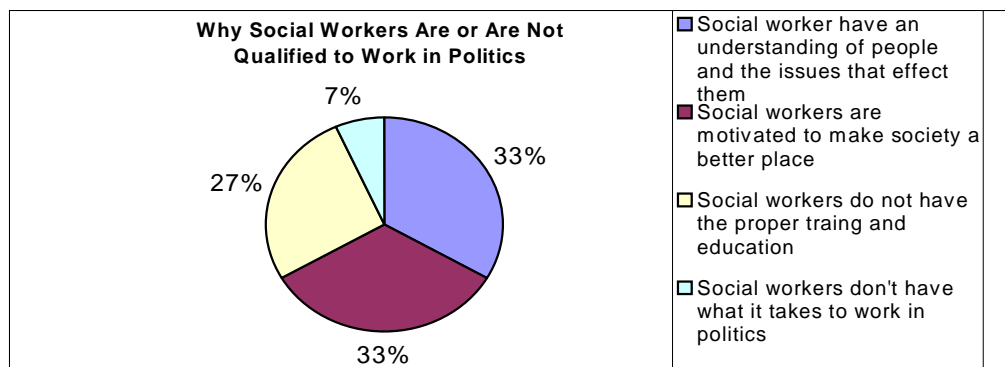
The data collected in regards the public’s knowledge of social workers working in the political arena revealed that only one



out of the 10 surveyed individuals knows a social worker working within politics.

Half of our sample population reported that social workers would be qualified to work in politics. This portion of the sample said that anyone could be qualified for politics if they had knowledge and understanding; however, they reported that there are two specific things that make a social worker qualified to work in politics. The first is that social workers have an understanding of people and the issues that effect them. They

also reported that social workers were

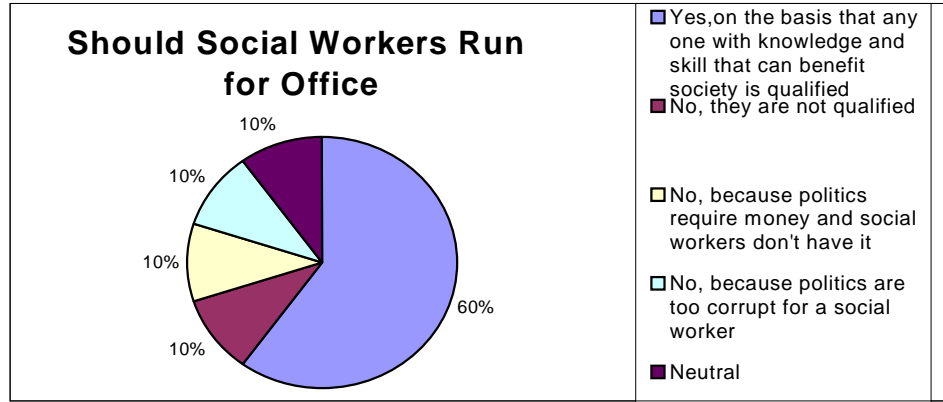


motivated to make society a better place, which they felt should be a qualification of someone in politics.

The other half of our sample reported that social workers are not qualified to work in politics. The basis for their response was education and training. This portion of the sample reported that social workers are not educated and trained in politics. They reported that those people educated in law and political science would be qualified to be in politics. In addition, one participant reported that social workers are too nice to work within politics. He/she reported that politics are corrupt, and that a social workers belief system does not parallel the views of people in politics.

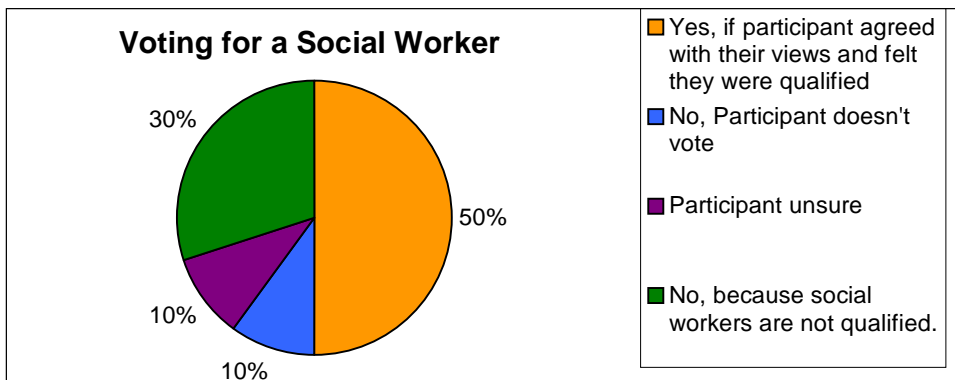
Generally, the data gathered reflects that more than half of the participants think social workers should run for office on the basis that anyone who has the knowledge and skills, and who can benefit society is qualified. Three participants reported that social workers should not run for office. The reasons reported are as follows: politics require a

lot of money, and social workers do not have this kind



of money; politics are too corrupt for a social worker to participate in; and that a social worker is not qualified to run for office. One participant reported being neutral because he/she feels the whole system needs an overhaul, and a political position should be a politician's life work. The general findings show that all participants feel that the most qualified candidate should run for office; however, the data reflects that participants feel this qualified candidate is not always a social worker.

Half of the participants reported that they would vote for a social worker if they agreed with his/her political views, and felt that they were qualified and would do a good

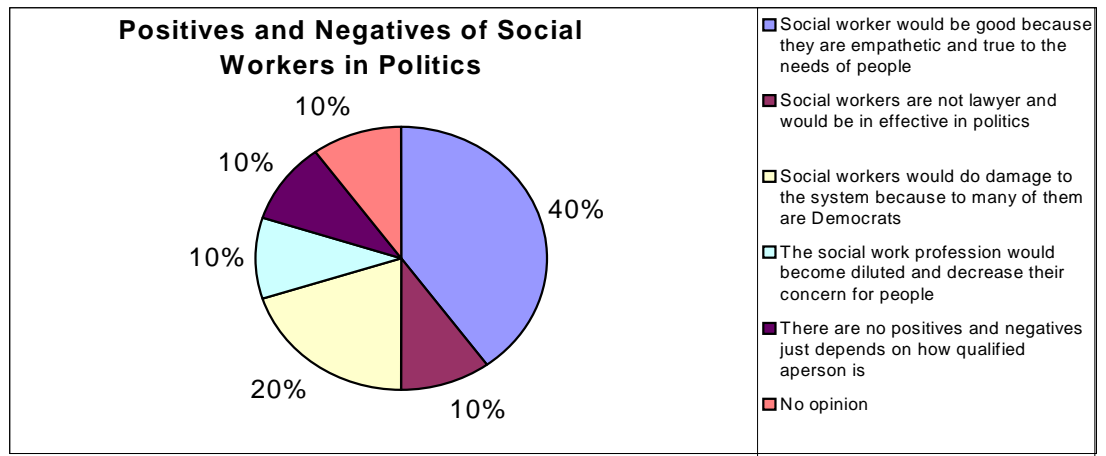


job in the position. The remaining

half of the participants varied in their responses. Two participants said no, they would not vote for a social worker in politics. One participant reported that he/she did not vote, and another participant was unsure as to whether or not they would vote for a social worker.

Reported data reflects both positive and negative views about social workers' involvement in politics. A positive theme emerged in 40 percent of the participants' responses. This group felt social workers would be good for our political system because social workers can bring change for the people by being empathetic with the true needs of the people in mind. Negative aspects were reported also. One participant felt that since a social worker is

not a lawyer, they would be ineffective in politics. Two participants felt that social



workers would do damage to the system of politics because there are too many Democratic social workers. One participant reported that the social work profession would become diluted with involvement in politics and could reduce a social worker's concern for the people. One person reported that the important issue was not the positive and negatives of social workers in politics, but rather the knowledge and expertise of each individual candidate that's important. One participant had no opinion on the question.

Discussion:

Our sample reported a narrow understanding of the social work profession. Every participant reported that social workers are direct practice workers who work within the confines of agencies. The view that people have of social workers is greatly influenced by the media. From television news to movies, social workers are portrayed as caseworkers that are over worked, under paid and who remove children from homes. This view of a social worker has carried over to the public, and as reported by our sample, it has given people a limited perception of the profession. Social workers are never portrayed as politicians. Only one of our participants had any knowledge of social workers being involved in politics. Some of our participants did see social workers as people who advocate for people and work to change society, but they did not connect them with politics. More social workers need to become involved in politics and advocacy; this would help widen the public's perspective of social work.

Although all participants had the same concept of social workers when asked, 66 percent of participant reported that social workers would be qualified to work in politics. It is interesting that this 66 percent think social workers are qualified on the basis that social workers understand people and are motivated to make change. This is interesting because when asked for their perception of a social worker, they all reported social workers are direct practice workers. The first question we asked our participants was what does a social worker do, to which they replied direct practice. However, in question three, when asked about social workers in politics, some began to think about what a social work does, and 66 percent felt that social work qualities would make them

qualified to work in politics. It becomes clear here that the media really does play a huge part in how people form opinions. When asked the first question they put the first thing that came to their minds about social work. That quick reflection is a product of what they hear, see and have personally experienced in regard to social work.

Another interesting finding is that of those who thought social workers were not qualified to be in politics, 27 percent said that lack of training and education was the biggest reason. This view comes from not only a misperception of social work but also of law and politics and their relation to each other. The participants reported that experience in law and political science would better prepare someone for politics; therefore, they would not perceive a person trained in clinical work as a qualified candidate for politics. If these people were to understand that social work is both a micro and macro profession and that social workers can receive an education and training in a variety of areas other than direct clinical practice, they may think a social worker was qualified to work in politics.

The fact that some of the participants felt that lawyers were more qualified to be involved in politics is a misconception. Lawyers are trained no more or less in politics than social workers are, but people tend to assume that because lawyers study the law they are qualified to be in politics. This assumption comes from a general lack of understanding of politics. Politicians and people who work in politics primarily work to establish and change policies to better suit our country and its' people. Lawyers interpret laws in order to benefit people. These two professions have less in common than social

work and politics. Social workers are far better trained to work with people towards creating changes that benefit society.

Hypothesis:

We were correct in our prediction that the general public would have a narrow view of the social work profession. We made no prediction on how the general public would respond regarding social workers in politics. However, we were surprised by our findings. More people than we expected felt that social workers would be qualified to be in politics, provided that they agreed with their view. One speculation as to why our finding surprised us is that we had a higher sample of women than men. Although it was an accidental sample, the customers at the local bank, tended to be women more than men. We believe that females tend to have a more open opinion when it comes to politics. Women, more than men, are likely to vote their interests. Men tend to stick more to party lines and to issues such as taxes. Women, on the other hand, are interested in issues such as education, childcare and health care, and these are issues about which social workers are concerned. A larger portion of participants, as evident in the answers from question three, reported that social workers are empathetic people, dedicated to making changes that benefit society and, therefore, were qualified for politics. If our sample would have represented the sexes more equally, we believe that our data would have been different.

Implications:

Overall, participant data in this study generated two important conclusions: there is a lack of knowledge that exists in regard to what the field of social work encompasses, and social work is largely viewed as a profession of people who that directly serve

disadvantaged populations. There is a lack of understanding of social workers that work in policy and administrative areas, as reflected in the data. Most importantly, the data reflects a lack of understanding and knowledge of social workers practicing in politics. How these viewpoints affect the social work profession needs to be explored.

Voting power is with the people. A great many people vote what they believe. Candidates with good political backing and financial support have the potential to do well. They are able to access the media with their money. They send their voice and their image out to the general public to make sure the public knows who they are and what they stand for. However, as evidence shows in our collected data, people do not have access to information about social workers. Our sample viewed social workers as direct care workers. Though some of our sample said they would vote for a social worker in politics, many of these same people did not know everything in which a social worker is knowledgeable. These narrow views on social work can have some important implications for the social work profession.

If social workers want a person's vote, then they need to gain his/her support. Social workers work from where the client is. One important strength of a social worker is that his/her ethical responsibilities are to the clients. Whether social workers are direct care workers, policy workers or politicians, the training a social worker receives gives him/her immense power and knowledge to understand and advocate for clients' needs. Social workers have expertise in the social work profession, and they use these talents throughout the tasks they do at all levels of practice. The one level of practice that often goes unnoticed is the political level. Just as ethically important as all other levels, social

workers have the responsibility to address this level of practice in their work, whether it is full-time or part-time. Political involvement is the one of the best ways to advocate for clients. Advocacy at the political level has the greatest impact on society, and therefore, social workers have a responsibility to advocate for this level of change.

Considering the collected data, what is it that social workers need to be doing to alter the opinions and views of the public regarding not only the social work profession, but also social worker's involvement in politics? Not all people may believe social workers fit into politics, however we are already there, fitting quite nicely. Weismiller and Rome state, "the influence of social work on federal and state policy-making has grown steadily since 1984"(1995, p.2310). As social workers, we have an obligation to our clients. Social workers have an obligation to think of innovative ways to help clients and others learn about politics and the role a social worker can take. Social workers have to be willing to educate clients, family members and the general public on the importance of a workers role in electoral politics and representing constituents in an ethical and client centered manner.

Social workers have to find ways to gain more acceptance from society. Social workers need to be educators throughout their day-to-day activities about the professional elements of social work. Without the support of the public, we have no votes. Without the support of our peers, we have no funding. The responses generated from our accidental sample of participants provided us with some insight on issues that the profession needs to address. Some of the data showed that social workers weren't capable of being politicians. Other data showed that politics is meant for lawyers. Other data

revealed that social workers are largely democrats and reflected this as a negative quality. These responses need to be addressed. Whether it is through a television commercial, on the public broadcasting station, a large advertisement in the telephone book, or through the Internet, social workers need their voices to be heard. If the public does not understand who social workers are and what they do, then they will continue to hold a narrow view and differing ideas about the profession of social work. Without a full understanding of the social work profession, people will not vote in favor of a social worker in politics.

In an example according to our data, some people feel social workers work with families on visitation and custody issues. Many people are exposed to social workers coming into their homes and taking their children away. Some people have knowledge of this happening to their friends' families. Word of mouth is a powerful source of advertising. Many people look at this positive social work intervention as very assuming and very intimidating. Social workers do their jobs to the best of their abilities to make homes safe for children and families; however, there is no media coverage counteracting this negative stereotype. There are no television commercials talking about the good that social workers can do for people. Programs for which social workers work for are funded by grant monies, state monies, and federal monies to name a few. Struggling to keep afloat is a priority. Advertising brings about a whole new spectrum regarding the ethical use of the media and is not the first thing on every social worker's mind. However, the future implications of the use of media in social work are very important not only to educate clients but also to help them gain access to program knowledge more easily. If

people were educated on the services they qualified for and the help they could get, more people would pick up the phone to get help. This would not only help clients gain services, it will also educate those clients who vote about what social workers do for people.

The population that need to be most educated, so all the above mentioned strategies can start happening, are social workers who are not already politically involved. As Weismuller and Rome state,

“The different approaches to social work practice reflect what some see as a conflict of values...Despite the profession’s increased sophistication in political matters, many social workers continue to be reluctant to enter into the fray because they feel ill-prepared to succeed in the political arena, are concerned that political activity would divert attention from their direct practice with clients, or believe that political activism is incongruent with fundamental social work values...”(1995, p. 2311).

Social workers who are educated on social work involvement in politics have the ethical responsibility to educate other social workers that have a narrow understanding of political involvement. Some important elements to this education need to be addressed.

A social worker can be involved in politics. As reflected by the data from our sample, some people do feel that politics are corrupt. Others feel that attention to client issues would be sacrificed if social workers became involved in politics, and others think social workers may be giving up their core social work values by becoming involved in politics. These are some dangerous generalizations that need to be ameliorated in order for social workers to continue to make progress in the political arena. Internet

information sites about social workers in politics would be very helpful to social workers who have a limited understanding about the capabilities of the role of social work in politics. As stated in an article by Edward Allan Brawley, “With regard to practical issues, social services organizations are increasingly recognizing that media communications do not have to be sophisticated, elaborate, or expensive to achieve worthwhile results”(1995, p. 1676). Brawley takes it a step further by delving into the “psychological barriers”(1995, p.1676) that can be present in a social worker which limit his/her attempt to include the media in his/her work. Education is needed on the ethical dilemmas of the use of media. One educational activity that could provide social workers with some education and experience regarding the media would be for the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) to do workshops on the issue. If the positives of media use were highlighted and expectations were raised, it could promote more reflection on the important matter of using the media and also on the role of social workers play in the political arena.

References:

Brawley, E.A. (1995). Mass Media. The Encyclopedia of Social Work (19nd Edition. Volume 2). Washington D.C.: NASW Press

Weismiller, T. & Rome, S.H. (1995). Social Workers in Politics. The Encyclopedia of Social Work (19th Edition Volume 3) Washington D.C. NASW Press.