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Cover Page Footnote

We thank the staff of the Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work and the faculty and staff of our institutional partners who make the Campaign School for Social Workers and Voter Engagement Project possible. We also thank the participants of the Campaign School and Voter Engagement Project for their commitment to political social work.

Political Efficacy in Social Workers Before and After 2016

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Since 2016, members of communities traditionally prevented or discouraged from electoral politics have challenged barriers to political power. Social work's current research base about political action reflects the pre-2016 political landscape. Survey data collected between 2015 and 2019 examines ways social workers' political engagement and efficacy reacted to this political environment. We examined political efficacy of social workers and students before and after 2016 to compare their internal efficacy (sense of one's own power in the political system) and external efficacy (sense of the system's responsiveness). Political engagement and individual measures of political efficacy increased among certain demographic groups; however, overall political efficacy was unchanged. Implications for social work education and research are discussed.

Keywords: political social work, elections, civic engagement, efficacy, political efficacy

The 2016 election of Donald Trump began a time period for many in the U.S. characterized by increased attention, anxiety, and participation in the political realm. From the Women's March immediately after Trump's inauguration in January 2017 to the protests and renewed attention to the Black Lives Matter movement following the murders of George Floyd and Breanna Taylor in the summer of 2020, people increasingly took action in the public sphere. High turnout from the 2018 mid-term elections also indicates that at least in some segments of the population, the increased interest in politics and the public sphere translated into electoral engagement. Organizations that support candidates' development and recruit people into political work and roles reported unprecedented growth (Kurtzleben, 2018; Litman, 2017). This increase in political engagement has been particularly pronounced among women, young people, and communities of color (Carter & Lautier, 2018). Characteristics such as race, gender, and political party seem to affect individuals' responses to the current political environment (Berry et al., 2019; Campi & Junn, 2019).

One potential explanation for this difference is that individuals or groups have increased their political efficacy since the 2016 election. In light of that possibility, this article examines political efficacy of social workers and social work students from before the 2016 election (2015 and 2016) to following the 2016 election (2017, 2018, and 2019). We aim to discover whether there were perceived differences between participants' reported sense of their own power in the political system or the system's responsiveness to them during the two time periods identified.

Literature Review

Existing literature suggests social workers' political action exceeds that of the general public in certain activities, primarily in activities such as voting and those that are classified as passive political action (Ritter, 2008; Rome & Hoehstetter, 2010). However, a minority of social workers engage in active political activities other than voting (Lane, 2011; Ritter, 2008; Rome & Hoehstetter, 2010) and social work students may be more likely to participate in other types of community engagement than political engagement (Hylton, 2015). Further, while social work educators and field

instructors are politically active, research in the early 2000s suggested one-third of social work faculty may not believe that social workers ought to be active within political contexts (Mary, 2001), although no systematic study of the engagement of social work academics in policy and political processes has been completed (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2017). Mosley (2013) suggests that social workers' policy advocacy activities must be understood within an organizational context; in other words, the funding, managerial, and structures of social workers' place of employment also shape social workers' level of political engagement in both positive and negative ways. Thus, while the field has a stated ethical commitment to policy advocacy (National Association of Social Workers, 2021), as well as historical and practice precedents for engagement, there is room for improvement at multiple levels.

Political Efficacy

Political efficacy is the perception that the political actions taken by an individual do, or can, impact the political process (Craig et al., 1990). Political efficacy can be divided into two sub-components. Internal political efficacy is the belief that one has the capacity and competence to understand and participate effectively in the political system. External political efficacy is the belief that the system has the capacity to respond to the actions of the individual and others in the society (Craig et al., 1990). The measurement of political efficacy generally includes survey items that measure both internal and external efficacy, and these can be examined together or separately (American National Election Studies [ANES], 2012; Niemi et al., 1991).

Beaumont (2011) suggests four factors that are key to developing political efficacy, all of which are very connected to a person's environment. Beaumont highlights group membership, if the group is consciously engaged in political action; opportunities to practice political skills; engagement in political discourse in settings that allow for open, respectful dialogue; and inclusion in "collaborative pluralist contexts" (p. 217). Beaumont notes that social status, resources (including civic resources), and socialization are often related to political efficacy.

Studies of political efficacy within social work are limited but generally find low efficacy among students (Bernklau Halvor, 2016) and have urged faculty members to address this through classroom and other experiential activities (Beimers, 2016; Bernklau Halvor, 2016; Ritter, 2013). Studies have suggested that higher efficacy within social work students and practitioners is correlated with increased political activity (Lane et al., 2018; Ostrander et al., 2017). Data collection for all of these studies pre-dates the 2016 election.

These results suggest that living up to the profession's commitment to policy advocacy requires political efficacy on the part of social workers. There is a gap in the literature about our understanding of political efficacy in the post-2016 political world. A previous pilot study by the authors examined political efficacy within two groups of students between September and December 2016 (Hill et al., 2019). The authors found that political efficacy of one set of students increased during that time period, while it decreased for another set of students. Qualitative comments from the students with increased efficacy noted the importance of voting and their sense of their own capability, while students with decreased efficacy noted a disillusionment with the political system and concern that their vote did not make a difference. The results of that pilot study, combined with observed changes in enrollment within political social work activities, qualitative responses to program evaluations, and ongoing discussions with social workers and students about the ways the changes in the U.S. political environment have affected them led to this study.

Research Questions

This research is a secondary analysis of existing data and addresses two research questions:

1. What was the impact of the 2016 election on the political engagement and efficacy of social workers and social work students?
2. How do characteristics such as previous level of political engagement, race, gender, level of education, and type of program attended affect political efficacy?

Methodology

The current study examines data collected from two programs. The first trains social work students, faculty, and practitioners to run for elected office and has trained more than 2,200 social workers since 1995. The second works through schools of social work to create opportunities for voter engagement with social work students. To assess the impact of the 2016 elections on social workers and social work student's perceived political efficacy and political engagement, we used survey data collected from 2015–2019 through these two programs. Because our goal was to examine the baseline levels of efficacy of both groups, we chose to use efficacy measures collected prior to the beginning of either the electoral training or the voter engagement training. Elsewhere, the authors have examined ways in which the electoral training described here can affect participants' political efficacy (Ostrander et al., 2017).

Sample and Data Collection

The present study involved secondary analysis of survey data collected from 2015 through 2019. The survey instruments collected through these trainings were designed for the main purpose of evaluating program efficacy as it relates to perceived political efficacy and political engagement of participant social work students and practitioners. Survey instruments were generally collected prior to (i.e., pre-test) and at the end of (i.e., post-test) each training. Only pre-tests were included in the present analysis in order to assess the impact of the 2016 elections on the dependent variables, rather than the impact of the trainings on those variables. Information about participants captured through pre-test instruments of trainings offered in 2015 and 2016 was compared to information about participants captured through the pre-tests of participants in trainings in 2017, 2018, and 2019.

Participants in the electoral training include social work students and practitioners. Some students attend as part of an elective class offered by their universities while others register independently. Participation in the training and survey is entirely voluntary. Practitioners register independently and may be offered continuing education credits for their attendance. Participants in

the voter engagement trainings are all students in required classes within their universities. While participation in the class and voter engagement project may be a required part of their curriculum, participation in the survey is voluntary. Surveys from 1,930 participants were included in this secondary analysis.

Data in 2015 and 2016 were collected in Connecticut, Maine, Minnesota, Nevada, and New York. Data in 2017, 2018, and 2019 were collected in Connecticut, Florida, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, and Washington, DC. Individuals participating in the trainings may have lived in states other than the location where data was collected.

Survey Instruments

The pre-test and post-test instruments for both trainings were designed by three of this article's authors, as well as other advisory committee members; these instruments were reviewed and updated as needed. At program inception, paper pre-test instruments for both programs were distributed, and they were collected immediately prior to the start of the first training session for both trainings. Starting in 2016, all instruments (pre- and post-) were transferred to Qualtrics, an online survey program, and data collection now takes place online. Website links for the pre-test instrument are sent through electronic mail to all registered participants prior to their participation in the training. The instruments and the survey collection methods have been approved by the relevant Institutional Review Boards.

The pre-test survey instrument for the electoral training consists of both closed- and open-ended questions that assess participants' perceived political efficacy, current and planned political activity, and political knowledge, as well as demographic characteristics. The pre-test survey instrument for the voter engagement training also consists of closed- and open-ended questions that assess participants' perceived political efficacy, current and planned voter engagement, as well as demographic characteristics.

Participants' perceived political efficacy on all instruments was measured using items from the American National Election Studies (ANES, 2012). Four items measure participants' belief that they are capable of effectively intervening in the political system (internal

efficacy). Another four items are used to measure participants' belief that the system is capable of responding to their intervention (external efficacy). The combination of the eight items measure participants' characterization of overall political efficacy in one scale measure. Each of the eight items consists of a statement or question, followed by a series of four possible responses. The ANES items in combination as one scale have each been evaluated for validity and reliability (Niemi et al., 1991). Political efficacy questions and responses are identical across all of the pre-test survey instruments used in the present analysis. For the purposes of the present examination, individual items, as well as the total scale score, were used in the data analyses.

Pre-test instruments for both the electoral and voter engagement trainings collect demographic information on participants using items allowing for self-identification. Demographic items gathered information on participant age, gender identity, racial and ethnic identity, and whether the participant was registered to vote. The demographic items in both survey instruments, while substantively consistent for content across programs and years, were revised for language at several points during the data collection under review here. For example, while all pre-test instruments asked respondents to classify their racial identity, over time the value labels available for selection in multiple-choice format changed for this question. Additionally, in the most recent iteration of the pre-test instrument, the question seeking classification of racial identity has been redesigned to require an open-ended, narrative, answer. In order to conduct analysis using data on the racial identity of participants, responses were recoded, where necessary, for uniformity across survey instruments.

Results

General Sample Characteristics

The sample for the present study included 1,930 participants who participated in the electoral or voter engagement trainings. Pre-test surveys were collected from participants at events from at least ten different states. Demographic characteristics of the entire sample can be found in Table 1. The general sample identified

overwhelmingly as female (86%). The majority of participants identified as white (67.5%). The average age of participants was 28.64 years of age.

Table 1. General Sample Characteristics

	Mean (sd) or %
Age	28.64 (9.69)
Gender Identity	
Female	86
Male	13
Transgender	0.3
Other	0.4
Racial Identity	
Black or African American	13.4
White	67.5
Latinx	18.3
Asian or Pacific Islander	2.6
Bi- or Multi-Racial	4.0
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.8
Some other race	11.7

Relationship between Demographics and Political Efficacy Scores

Bivariate analyses were conducted to determine any relationship of demographic characteristics of the entire sample to training participant responses to the political efficacy items and total political efficacy scale scores. Race and gender in the general sample were not found to be related to responses on individual political efficacy scale items, or total scale score. Age in the general sample was found to be significantly related to a number of the political efficacy scale items. Correlation analysis found that as the age of participants increased, participants reported higher levels of understanding of the important political issues facing our country [$r(1033)=.156$, $p<.001$], and were more likely to know who represented them in the US Congress [$r(983)=.158$, $p<.001$] and state legislature [$r(984)=.128$, $p<.001$]. As the age of participants increased, they reported decreased likelihood of feeling that politics and

government seem so complicated that they can't really understand what's going on [$r(1032)=-.114, p<.001$].

Program Participants Pre- and Post-2016

Nearly 400 study subjects (n = 384) participated in the electoral or voter engagement trainings prior to the 2016 election. A significantly larger number (n = 1,546) participated after the 2016 election. A comparison of the characteristics of these sub-samples (pre-2016 and post-2016 election) can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Pre-2016 Election to Post-2016 Election

	Before 2016 Election	After 2016 Election
	Mean (sd) or %	Mean (sd) or %
Sub-Sample Size (n)	384	1546
Age*	26.19 (7.9)	28.99 (9.69)
Gender Identity		
Female*	79	87.7
Male*	20.1	11.6
Transgender	0.5	0.2
Other	0.5	0.4
Racial Identity		
Black or African American*	18.7	12.1
White	69.4	67.1
Latinx*	12.1	19.8
Asian or Pacific Islander	4.8	2.1
Bi- or Multi-Racial	4.3	3.9
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	1.0
Some other race	2.9	13.8
Registered to Vote*	86.5	91.1
Know Congressional Reps*	37.2	50.1
Know State Leg. Reps*	34.6	46.6

*Significant difference, $p<.05$

Bivariate analyses found significant differences in some of the demographic characteristics of participants between the group that attended prior to, as compared to after the 2016 Presidential Election. Participants in the trainings after the 2016 Presidential election were significantly older than participants in the trainings prior to the election [$t(191.82)=-3.652$, $p<.001$, $d=9.65$]. Women made up a significantly larger percentage of training participants after the 2016 Presidential election, $\chi^2(1, N = 1928) = 4.893$, $p = .027$. There was a significant decrease in the proportion of training participants who identified as Black, $\chi^2(1, N = 1930) = 5.043$, $p = .025$, but a significant increase in the proportion of training participants who identified as Latinx in the group of training participants after the 2016 Presidential election, as compared to training participants prior to the 2016 presidential election, $\chi^2(1, N = 1118) = 6.929$, $p = .008$.

Most notably, participants in trainings after the 2016 presidential election were more likely to report being registered voters than participants in trainings prior to the 2016 presidential election, $\chi^2(1, N = 1571) = 4.59$, $p = .032$. Additionally, participants in trainings after the 2016 presidential election were more likely to report knowing who represented them in Congress, $\chi^2(1, N = 1930) = 20.29$, $p <.001$ and in their state legislature, $\chi^2(1, N = 1930) = 17.96$, $p <.001$, than participants in trainings prior to the 2016 presidential election.

Political Efficacy Pre- and Post-2016

Bivariate analyses were used to examine the political efficacy scales as well as individual items. The analysis found no significant differences in the comparisons of the political efficacy total scale scores between participants of program events prior to, as compared to after the 2016 Presidential Election. There were significant differences on four of the eight individual items of the political efficacy instrument between trainees from prior to and after the 2016 presidential election; these compared using bivariate analyses. Participants in trainings after the 2016 Presidential election reported that public officials cared more about what people think ($\chi = 1.7$, $sd = 0.91$) than participants in trainings prior to the 2016 Presidential election ($\chi = 1.56$, $sd = 0.85$), $t(1595) = -2.101$, $p = 0.04$, $d = 0.90$. Participants in trainings after the 2016 Presidential election reported that politics and government were more complicated ($\chi = 2.09$, $sd = 1.05$)

than participants in trainings prior to the 2016 Presidential election ($\chi = 1.83$, $sd = 0.97$), $t(1600) = -3.509$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.04$. Participants in trainings after the 2016 Presidential election reported higher levels of agreement with the statement: “[u]nder our form of government, the people have the final say about how the country is run, no matter who is in office” ($x = 1.33$, $sd = 1.00$) than participants in trainings prior to the 2016 residential election ($x = 1.16$, $sd = 0.87$), $t(322.93) = -2.673$, $p = .008$, $d = 0.99$. Participants in trainings after the 2016 election were less likely to report understanding well the important political issues facing our country ($\chi = \chi sd = 0.99$), as compared to participants in trainings before the 2016 Presidential election ($x = 2.04$, $sd = 0.97$), $t(1601) = 2.112$, $p = 0.04$, $d = 0.94$.

Limitations

The major limitation of the present study is selection bias. The sample is drawn from participants in the electoral and voter engagement training programs. Participation in the former is voluntary, and thus the sample is not necessarily representative of any larger group. Participants in the electoral training likely had a pre-existing interest in politics and a higher level of political engagement than non-participants. Second, it is possible that some individuals are included in this study twice, having participated in both trainings. Because data is collected anonymously, there is no way to verify whether a participant was included in more than one round of data collection. Third, since data collection methods changed over the time period of the current analysis, some error could have been introduced into the research process. Finally, this article, and the underlying interventions, highlight voting and running for office as two methods of civic engagement, but there are many other ways that social workers can affect their political systems and policy decisions.

Discussion

One notable finding from this study is the numbers of participants before and after 2016. The significant increase post-2016 (from 384 to 1,546) reflects one additional year of data collection, but also

reflects a significantly increased interest in both the electoral and voter engagement trainings; in 2015–2016, trainings were held in five states, and in 2017–2019, trainings were held in nine states.

The wider political narrative about political involvement suggests that gender and racial identity are significant factors in political involvement. The story about race and gender is more complicated among the results of this study. While the post-2016 group did include more women, neither gender nor race was found to have significant relationships with political efficacy among this group. The post-2016 sample included more Latinx respondents and fewer Black respondents, which could have to do with participants' interest in the training, with the geographic areas in which trainings were offered, or some other factor.

A significant amount of effort has been taking place, particularly within progressive political groups, to recruit more young people to political involvement. Within this sample, the post-2016 group was older. Interestingly, among both pre- and post-2016 participants, older participants reported a higher knowledge of politics, including knowing their federal and state legislators, and feeling more confident in the political process.

Reflecting the expectation that there was more engagement with political topics in the post-2016 time period, respondents in that time were more likely to report being registered voters and more likely to report knowing who represented them in Congress and in their state legislature. We hope this also reflects an increased attention to political engagement within schools of social work.

No significant differences were found in overall political efficacy or on sub-scales of internal or external efficacy. However, half of the individual articles had significant findings. This echoes the finding of the pilot study that social workers and social work students' efficacy is more complicated than a simple up or down measurement (Ostrander et al., 2017). In the two significant items related to external efficacy, the post-2016 respondents were more likely to say that public officials cared what they thought, and to say that people have the final say about how the country is run, no matter who is in office. In the two items related to internal efficacy, post-2016 respondents were more likely to say politics and government are complicated and less likely to report understanding well the important political issues facing our country. Combined, these

results suggest that post-2016 respondents retain a measure of their faith in our political system, but may be feeling overwhelmed by the systems themselves and the political world in which we ask them to engage.

Implications for Social Work Education, Practice, and Research

Overall, there is much room for improvement in political awareness and engagement among social work students. This should be considered in how we present our profession and recruit individuals into the profession, in addition to interventions within social work education. There are many social work educators actively engaging students in political social work across the country (Pritzker & Burwell, 2016). The results of this research suggest that political efficacy among students and social workers is complex, and therefore our strategies in the classroom to affect efficacy must also be complex. Beaumont (2011) reminds us that students enter the classroom with the political resources they have gathered over their lifetime, which is very dependent on their socioeconomic status and background. These resources “often persist and compound over time, disempowering large segments of the population” (p. 216). Beaumont encourages us to consider equity in the classroom as we address political issues. One option for increasing political efficacy is the use of social learning theory, which “takes place in relation to social contexts through observations and interactions, and the ways in which people come to interpret, practice, and internalize the perspectives and behaviors they see around them” (p. 217). Approaches to political social work practice education that center student voices and decision-making, for example through popular education models of group work (Carroll & Minkler, 2000; Hill et al., 2019), may provide opportunities for a parallel development of individual and political efficacy within the classroom environment.

Social learning of political content suggests that real-life settings are key to the construction of political efficacy (Beaumont, 2011). Thus, we urge social work educators to actively seek ways to engage students in class activities that are rooted in advocacy practice, such as legislative advocacy days (Beimers, 2016), meetings with legislative officials, submitting written testimony to committees, and/or registering voters (Hill et al., 2019). Given the options

available to social work educators to use field settings, experiential learning, trainings, workshops, and engage students in real-life events, these combine to provide multiple opportunities for social work educators to increase efficacy among students.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of context for understanding social workers' political engagement. The agency or organizational environment—educational or professional—will have a profound impact on a social worker's ability to engage in political social work practice (Mosley, 2013). As students move into practice, they will need to be able to situate their political practice within the policies and procedures of their employers. The variation in approaches and value placed on political social work practice by different organizations will impact the efficacy of the profession as a whole. Many agencies that employ social workers are reluctant to engage in policy or political activities, despite the significant effects these policies and electoral actions have on the clients and communities with whom we engage. Social work students will need to develop tools they will use to conduct advocacy within their agencies as well as within the larger community.

Additionally, the local and state context for political engagement will also impact social workers' perceived and realized political efficacy. The variation in voter engagement laws nationally, for example, will have a profound impact on how social workers may be able to work with clients around voter access, as well as the larger civic engagement "culture" of their state or locality (Hill et al., 2019). We echo McCabe and colleagues' (2017) call for increased civic literacy in social work education, so that social work practitioners enter the field with the baseline knowledge and skills necessary for effective political practice.

Future research in this area will have to address the challenges of the quickly moving political climate. Since the data for this study was collected, two significant events, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Capitol insurrection of January 6, 2021, may have changed the ways in which social workers view political efficacy. As we noted earlier, much of the literature on civic engagement and political social work practice pre-dates the 2016 elections. There is a critical need to revisit many of the past studies to assess the impact of the rapidly changing political and social climate on this area of practice.

Conclusion

The results of this study support updating political social work research, practice, and course content to reflect the current context and increase student/practitioner efficacy. Past work suggested that social work educators perceived students as uninterested in political content; our results challenge these assumptions. Additionally, the social work literature on political engagement should also be updated in order to reflect the changes in the U.S. political and social context. Social work's ethical commitment to social justice and advocacy remains strong; in order to maintain an equally strong practice commitment, it is important that the research and educational base be continually updated to be responsive to the contexts within which social workers are practicing.

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