

Political Primacy and MSW Students' Interest in Running for Office: What Difference Does it Make?

Patrick Meehan

Abstract: *Although social workers are understood to participate in politics more than the general public, little is known about their interest in running for office. To understand how individuals in “helping” professions like social work may think about running for office, this study introduces the concept of political primacy. Political primacy refers to the value individuals assign to elected office’s ability to make a difference, relative to alternative ways of making a difference. Using data from the Michigan Law & Social Work Study, representing a sample of 545 MSW and 200 JD students across Michigan, political primacy was shown to significantly predict MSW students’ interest in running for office at the local level. Consequently, the more MSW students see elected office as a more effective way of making a difference than alternatives, the more interested they will be in running for office. Implications for social work education are discussed, including the socialization of social work students into politics.*

Keywords: *Social work education; elected office; political primacy; political participation*

The rhetoric of difference-making in relation to social work is ubiquitous, particularly in schools of social work. Many of these schools describe their students as “change agents,” or consider changing society as an outcome of their instruction. However, it is not clear whether social work education emphasizes the political system in general, or elected office in particular, in relation to making change.

Although it has been understood for some time that social workers participate in politics to a greater degree than the general public, particularly as it concerns voting (Ezell, 1993; Parker & Sherraden, 1992; Ritter, 2008; Wolk, 1981), less is known about their interest in and attitude toward running for office. This notion should not sound far-fetched. Currently, in the 118th Congress, there were two social workers in the United States Senate, and two social workers in the House of Representatives in positions of leadership. Thomas (2014) finds that for women, in particular, professions like social work and education are more common pathways into politics than fields such as law and business. Indeed, it should be noted that the first woman ever elected to the House of Representatives, Jeannette Rankin, was a social worker.

Moreover, the issues that social workers are passionate about often find expression in legislation, which has been true for some time. Writing in 1953, for example, Schottland claimed “the great battles of social work today are being fought in the political arena” (p. 19). As a consequence, Patti and Dear (1975) argued “of all available avenues for social change...the legislative process would seem to demand the profession’s most urgent and informed action” (p. 113). More recently, Lane, Ostrander, and Rhodes-Smith (2018) connect educating MSW students for political campaign work to “the struggle to change

the oppressive social forces that keep” populations “from successfully utilizing existing structures and systems” (p. 1).

But running for office is not like other forms of political participation. Milbrath (1965), for example, classified it as a “gladiatorial” (p. 21) form of political participation (see also Hull, 1987; Rose, 1999). The rough and tumble imagery this conjures helps explain why many social workers see politics as a “dirty” business (Ezell, 1993, p. 82). Lane and Humphreys (2011) similarly acknowledge that social workers associate politics with power, and are trained to be skeptical of power.

In anticipation of this criticism, Mahaffey (1977) wrote “our efforts to achieve power [through political office]...must be for the goal of helping the have-nots, those who are hurt and are in pain, rather than for power as an end in itself” (p. 36). Mahaffey’s words offer a way of understanding when and under what circumstances social workers may take an interest in running for office. Helping the have-nots, or for the purposes of this study, individuals from oppressed communities (i.e., racial/ethnic minorities, those below poverty, survivors of domestic violence, etc.), is consistent with social work’s identity as a “helping” profession. “Helping” professions can be understood as those in the human and social services. They are characterized by concern for the welfare and well-being of vulnerable populations. Many kinds of social work practice fit under this label, such as clinical counseling, substance use counseling, case management, school counseling, community organizing, and many others. But clearly not every social worker sees elected office as a way of helping the oppressed and those less fortunate.

Consequently, this study offers a new concept for understanding social workers’ interest in elected office. I offer this concept as *political primacy*, which refers to the value individuals assign to elected office’s ability to make a positive difference, relative to alternative ways of making a difference. This concept is particularly useful in understanding the motivations of individuals in helping professions like social work. That is, social workers like Mahaffey value helping others, and may evaluate our political institutions by their ability to help others as well. To the extent social workers (and others) see elected office as a better way of helping others than available alternatives, they may be more interested in running for office than those who do not see elected office this way.

To test the robustness of political primacy as a motivator for pursuing elected office, this study used data from the Michigan Law & Social Work Study (MLSWS; Meehan, 2017). The study represents a sample of 545 MSW students and 200 JD students from four universities in Michigan, who provided observations on their interest in running for office and other political characteristics, such as political efficacy and partisan identification. With a unique measure of political primacy, the MLSWS allowed the strength of its relationship to their interest in running for office to be measured. The inclusion of JD students in the MLSWS also allowed this strength to be measured for individuals in a “non-helping” profession that otherwise has a close relationship to elected office (Fox & Lawless, 2005). “Non-helping” professions can be understood as generally lacking both a human service component as well as an explicit interest and concern for vulnerable populations. Public defenders do provide service to vulnerable populations, but this does not characterize the legal profession as a whole. Observing a similar relationship between

political primacy and interest in running between MSW and JD students may suggest the concept has wider applicability to running for office than simply for individuals in helping professions.

Theory and Literature Review

Political science has understood political participation largely through the lens of costs and benefits (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Leighley & Nagler, 2013; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). That is, the benefits of participation are not without costs. These can be understood in different ways. For example, time represents a cost. Some individuals have more time to participate in politics than others. Thus, understanding participation requires understanding how individuals overcome the costs of participation. Moreover, the costs of participation do not fall equally on all individuals.

The Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM; Verba et al., 1995) has been a popular way of explaining how certain individuals, including social workers, overcome the costs of participation (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Lane & Humphreys, 2011, 2015; Ostrander et al., 2018; Ritter, 2008). Three overlapping themes in the CVM help explain who participates. The first of these is psychological engagement, or an individual's interest in politics, party identification, family influences, etc. The more engaged an individual is with the political system, the easier it is to acquire the information necessary to participate. The second is resources such as income and education. Those with higher incomes have more freedom to participate. The third is recruitment; all things being equal, an individual who is asked to participate, or who is given transportation to the polling place, for example, is more likely to participate.

With respect to social workers, Hamilton and Fauri (2001) find that membership in social work organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) strongly predicts political participation. They argue membership provides a ready pool from which to recruit participants. Ritter (2008) corroborated this finding with 396 randomly selected licensed social workers, arguing that organizations also provide members valuable skills (organization, communication) that translate well to politics. Resources, on the other hand, did not significantly predict their participation.

As it concerns running for office, Lane and Humphreys (2011) find that membership in organizations like NASW matters less for recruitment. Of the 416 social worker candidates they surveyed, friends and acquaintances recruited 75% of them to run for office, with another 65% recruited by elected officials. They do find, though, that resources matter when running for office. Specifically, they find that the average income of social worker candidates was higher than the average social worker in general.

Political Primacy

The conundrum of political participation, generally, is that the benefits are widely distributed. Although an individual may derive personal satisfaction from participating, they will enjoy the "benefits" of their preferred policies regardless of their participation (Downs, 1957). The CVM attempts to account for this collective action problem by

inflating the value of intangible personal benefits to account for individuals' greater than expected participation in politics (Verba et al., 1995).

But the benefits of running for office are different from other forms of political participation. First, they are not widely distributed—they are exclusive to the individual running. This exclusivity can be thought of as a prestige benefit. Most of the literature that associates ambition with running for office makes allusions to the prestige benefit (Black, 1972; Fox & Lawless, 2005; Fox & Lawless, 2011). Those who crave the spotlight, for example, may relish the opportunity to run for office. Second, and more important, the benefits of running for office are instrumental. Unlike voting, donating money, volunteering for a campaign, or other forms of political participation, running for office allows the individual to shape the issues and policies under consideration during the campaign. This can be thought of as an instrumental benefit, and it exists regardless of the outcome of the election. Consequently, those who have a sincere policy goal may see running for office as a way of advancing movement toward this goal.

It is worth considering the attraction social workers might have to the benefits of running for office. Social work is not understood as a vainglorious profession, so the prestige benefit should have little value to social workers. Social work is understood as a helping profession, though, so the instrumental benefit may be of value to social workers, to the extent they see elected office as a way of helping others.

Political primacy represents a way of quantifying how social workers (and others) value elected office as a way of helping others. It is important to note that, in terms of running for office, this value does not exist in isolation. It exists alongside (a) alternative ways of helping others, and (b) the costs of running for office. Accordingly, political primacy quantifies the value of elected office's ability to help others, relative to alternative ways of helping others, while the costs of running for office are held constant. Individuals may be unable to separate the costs of obtaining and holding elected office from its ability to help others when valuing it against alternative ways of helping others. This is not to suggest political primacy is an unreliable measure. Rather, these perceptions of cost may be built into how individuals evaluate elected office.

It is reasonable to expect variation in political primacy among social workers. After all, most incoming MSW students are not interested in public policy or politics (Ostrander et al., 2018). Most MSW students want to use their degree to help others on an individual basis (Butler, 1990; Ostrander et al., 2018; Rubin & Johnson, 1984; Rubin, Johnson, & DeWeaver, 1986).

However, the likelihood of running for office among social workers cannot be reduced to facile micro-practice and macro-practice distinctions (Ostrander et al., 2018). It may be that micro-practice social workers with a generalized interest in helping others evaluate our political institutions with this interest in mind. It may also be that macro-practice social workers prefer helping others through community organizing because they see our political institutions as incapable of helping them.

Taken together, these nuances are an indication that running for office is a unique form of political participation. The CVM literature's concentration on the differential costs of

participation (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Ritter, 2008; Verba et al., 1995), while meaningful, ignores the instrumental benefit available to social workers through running for office. Political primacy offers a way of understanding how social workers weigh this benefit.

Methods

Sample

Data for this study come from the Michigan Law & Social Work Study (Meehan, 2017). The sample consists of graduate students in social work and law, respectively, and was recruited from four universities in the state of Michigan, each with law and social work schools. The schools were the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Wayne State University, and Western Michigan University. Email invitations were sent to students—3,000 in total—through the respective university listservs. The invitations were emailed between February and March 2017, and included a link to the survey instrument. The language of the invitation invited students to participate for their “attitudes on several subjects.” No mention was made of the specific content of the survey. Students received a \$5 Amazon.com redemption code for completing the survey. A total of 854 surveys were started by social work and law students. Of these 109 had to be discarded, leaving 745 usable responses, for a response rate of 22.8%.

Although several studies have used non-probability sampling to understand the political participation of social workers (Felderhoff, Hoefler, & Watson, 2015; Ostrander et al., 2018; Swank, 2012), most studies on this subject have used random sampling (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001), often of NASW members (Ezell, 1993; Parker & Sherraden, 1992; Ritter, 2008; Rome & Hoehstetter, 2010; Wolk, 1981). The MLSWS is a non-probability sample. Although this sampling method limits the generalizability of the findings to all MSW and JD students, it is not inherently biased toward identifying a relationship between political primacy and interest in running for office. The schools included in the MLSWS, for example, operate at different levels of prestige, and draw students from a variety of income and educational backgrounds. The mix of national-serving and regional-serving MSW and JD programs also means the students included have different intentions of working in Michigan and working outside the state. This may relate to their interest in running for local and higher office in that students from national-serving universities who intend to leave Michigan may not know where they will be living in order to run locally.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument used in the MLSWS consisted of 42 items. Among these was an original measure of political primacy inspired by Seiz and Schwab's (1992) study of social worker values. In their questionnaire, respondents were asked to rank-order a list of value statements, under the assumption that social workers in private practice have a different value system than social workers who work for an agency.

Social workers understand there are many ways of helping people and making a difference in a community. A measure was needed in this study that forced respondents to rank order various ways of making a difference, with elected office as one of the options.

Such a measure would indicate the value individuals give to elected office as a way of making a difference, relative to alternative ways of making a difference.

The list of alternative ways of making a difference, much as Seiz and Schwab's (1992) list of value statements, was not meant to be exhaustive. It was kept sufficiently brief so that respondents could weigh all options against each other.

The language of the item referenced "contributing to the community" rather than making a difference or helping others specifically. This avoided different interpretations of making a difference, particularly across professions. Social work students may have a different idea on what making a difference means than law students.

The item read as follows: "What is the best way of contributing to your community? Please rank from 1 (best) to 5 (worst).

- Giving money to good causes, such as non-profit, community, or religious organizations.
- Volunteering your time to good causes, such as non-profit, community, or religious organizations.
- Speaking at meetings of local government, including the school board, city council, or other municipal boards.
- Serving in local government, such as on the school board, city council, or other municipal boards.
- Other (specify).

Respondents could then move the answer choices into their preferred order. Those who moved "serving in local government" to the top were indicating it as the best way of contributing to the community. Importantly, the order of the answer choices themselves was randomized, except for "other," which always appeared last. This prevented response bias through the ordering of the answer choices.

To account for the prestige benefit of running for elected office, the instrument included a measure of "competitive traits" (Fox & Lawless, 2005). Two items asked students to indicate how important it was that they: (1) "earn a lot of money from their job," and (2) "have an important and influential job." Their answer choices were "not important" (1), "somewhat important" (2), "important" (3), or "very important" (4). Their answers to these items were combined to form a competitive traits scale, with a Cronbach $\alpha = 0.43$. This represented low reliability, so these items were not necessarily consistent with how respondents understood competitiveness. The scale was used in analyses to conform with previous research (Fox & Lawless, 2005).

The dependent variable in this study was modeled after Fox and Lawless' (2005) Citizen Political Ambition Study. They use the term *nascent political ambition* to refer to "the embryonic or potential interest in office seeking that precedes the actual decision to enter a specific political contest" (p. 643). Accordingly, students were asked to indicate their interest in running for offices at all levels of government, including school board, parks commission, city council, county commission, mayor, state legislature, and U.S. House or Senate. Their answer choices were "not at all interested" (1), "not very interested" (2), "somewhat interested" (3), or "very interested" (4). Their answers were divided into

separate scales for local and higher office. The local office scale combined their interest in school board, parks commission, city council, and county commission, with a Cronbach $\alpha = 0.74$. The higher office scale combined their interest in mayor, state legislature, and U.S. House or Senate, with a Cronbach $\alpha = 0.89$.

Additional items on the survey instrument covered political efficacy and partisan identification. The survey instrument also included a broad swath of demographic characteristics. Importantly, the instrument was pretested twice on Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk platform. The first test occurred on June 29, 2016, while the second test occurred on December 29, 2016. The combined responses across both tests was 1,285. Respondents were paid \$0.25 for completing the survey. In both instances the items on the survey instrument performed as expected and produced results consistent with expectations. Specifically, political primacy was shown to strongly predict interest in running for office, controlling for a variety of additional factors.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Table 1 displays the characteristics of the two groups in the MLSWS. The MSW sample was older, more likely female, and had a higher percentage of married respondents than the JD sample. The JD sample also came from more educated households, as more than 37% of respondents had mothers who completed graduate school.

Table 1. *Demographic characteristics of MSW (n=545) and JD (n=200) students in the MLSWS*

| | MSW* n (%) | JD* n (%) |
|---|---------------|--------------|
| Non-white | 156 (28.6%) | 64 (32%) |
| Female | 485 (88.9%) | 146 (73%) |
| Democrat | 418 (76.7%) | 162 (81%) |
| Married | 118 (21.7%) | 20.8 (10.4%) |
| Children less than 6 years old in the household | 39 (7.2%) | 5.2 (2.6%) |
| Mother's highest degree | | |
| Graduated 8 th grade | 26 (4.7%) | 3 (1.5%) |
| Graduated high school | 101 (18.6%) | 17.4 (8.7%) |
| Some college | 105 (19.2%) | 22.4 (11.2%) |
| Graduated college | 207 (38.0%) | 81.6 (40.8%) |
| Graduated graduate school | 107 (19.6%) | 75.6 (37.8%) |
| *Age: Years (SD)-MSW 28.6 (7.2), JD 26.4 (2.7) | | |

Bivariate Statistics

As it concerns competitive traits, Table 2 shows the average score on this scale for MSW and JD students, respectively.

Table 2. Average characteristics of MSW (n=545) and JD (n=200)* students in the MLSWS

| Subscales | Range of Subscale Scores | MSW Avg (SD) | JD Avg (SD) | t | df | p |
|---|--------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------|-----|--------|
| Competitive traits | 2-8 | 5.45 (1.39) | 5.55 (1.40) | -0.85 | 743 | 0.39 |
| Serving in local gov. is the best way to contribute to community* | 1-5 | 3.54 (1.11) | 3.89 (1.02)*** | -3.71 | 685 | <0.001 |
| Interest in running for local office | 4-16 | 9.09 (2.83)** | 8.37 (2.87) | 3.05 | 743 | 0.002 |
| Interest in running for higher office | 3-12 | 6.53 (2.77) | 7.31 (2.81)*** | -3.39 | 743 | 0.001 |

*For this subscale, n= 496 (MSW); 191 (JD)
** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

No statistically significant difference was observed between MSW and JD students in terms of their competitive traits. Table 2 also shows the average political primacy for MSW and JD students, respectively. The answers to the political primacy scale were reverse-coded so that higher values meant greater value to elected office over the alternative answer choices. Five indicated serving in local government was the best way of contributing to the community.

JD students had significantly greater political primacy than MSW students. In other words, JD students were more likely to feel serving in local government was a better way of contributing to the community than MSW students.

Table 2 reports the average interest MSW and JD students have in running for local and higher office. MSW students were significantly more interested in running for local office than JD students, while JD students were significantly more interested in running for higher office than MSW students.

Multivariate Analysis

To observe the relationship political primacy had with students' interest in running for office, a multivariate regression model was applied to respondents' interest in running for office at the local level. The model included political primacy, as well as Fox and Lawless' (2005) notion of competitive traits. It also included items related to political efficacy, along with several demographic controls. Table 3 displays the results of the regression model.

Political primacy was significantly related to MSW students' interest in running for local office. For every one-unit increase in political primacy, their interest in running increased 0.29 ($p < 0.009$). The relationship was marginally significant ($p < 0.066$) for JD students. Male MSW students were also significantly ($p < 0.004$) more likely to be interested in running for local office than their female counterparts. This relationship was not observed in JD students. Similarly, non-white MSW students were marginally ($p < 0.05$) less interested in running for local office than white students.

Table 3. *Regression results on interest in running for local office for MSW (n=484) and JD (n=185) students in the MLSWS*

| | <u>MSW</u> | <u>JD</u> |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|
| | <u>β Coef. (SE)</u> | <u>β Coef. (SE)</u> |
| Political primacy | 0.29** (0.11) | 0.41 (0.22) |
| Competitive traits | 0.03 (0.10) | -0.21 (0.15) |
| Sometimes politics is too complicated for people like me to follow | -0.39*** (0.11) | -0.11 (0.20) |
| Public officials don't care what people like me think | -0.07 (0.13) | 0.04 (0.21) |
| Age | -0.03 (0.02) | 0.13 (0.08) |
| Non-White | -0.55 (0.29) | 0.69 (0.51) |
| Male | 1.11** (0.38) | 0.44 (0.51) |
| Mother's education | -0.12 (0.10) | 0.00 (0.22) |
| Married | -0.10 (0.38) | 0.89 (0.73) |
| Children under 6 at home | -0.55 (0.72) | -0.08 (1.96) |
| Children over 6 at home | 0.24 (0.54) | -1.14* (0.65) |
| <i>R</i> ² | 0.08 | 0.08 |

SE= Standard errors in parentheses
 p*<0.01, *p*<0.001

Table 4 reports the results of the regression model on students' interest in running for higher office.

Table 4. *Regression results on interest in running for higher office for (n=484) and JD (n=185) students in the MLSWS*

| | <u>MSW</u> | <u>JD</u> |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|
| | <u>β Coef. (SE)</u> | <u>β Coef. (SE)</u> |
| Political primacy | 0.19 (0.11) | 0.46* (0.21) |
| Competitive traits | 0.14 (0.10) | 0.02 (0.15) |
| Sometimes politics is too complicated for people like me to follow | -0.65*** (0.10) | -0.13 (0.19) |
| Public officials don't care what people like me think | -0.01 (0.13) | 0.01 (0.20) |
| Age | -0.02 (0.02) | 0.13 (0.07) |
| Non-White | -0.45 (0.27) | 0.27 (0.44) |
| Male | 0.98** (0.37) | 1.09* (0.45) |
| Mother's education | -0.13 (0.11) | -0.17 (0.21) |
| Married | -0.14 (0.36) | -0.01 (0.63) |
| Children under 6 at home | -0.08 (0.66) | -0.35 (1.66) |
| Children over 6 at home | 0.03 (0.53) | -1.14* (0.58) |
| <i>R</i> ² | 0.12 | 0.09 |

SE= Standard errors in parentheses
 p*<0.05, *p*<0.01, ****p*<0.001

The relationship between political primacy and interest in running for higher office remained marginally (*p*<0.071) significant for MSW students, while it became significant (*p*<0.034) for JD students. Similarly, gender remained a significant predictor of interest in running for MSW students and became significant (*p*<0.017) for JD students as well.

Discussion

In the wake of the 2016 Presidential election, schools of social work are grappling with how to channel student activism toward the political environment, and what the role of the profession should be in the political arena. Political social work refers to using political mechanisms and institutions to create social change (Lane & Pritzker, 2018), and running for office is one way social workers can influence the policy debate in the United States, as well as policy outcomes.

But it is not the only way. Social workers who care about helping others have many options for working with individuals and communities, so running for office will have greater appeal to some social workers and less for others. Indeed, running for office is not like other forms of political participation. The prestige and instrumental benefits of running are exclusive to the individual running. In order to take advantage of the instrumental benefits of elected office, social workers (and others) must see it as an effective way of making a difference. Political primacy offers a way of quantifying the value individuals place on elected office's ability to make a difference, *relative* to alternatives.

Using data from both MSW and JD students in the MLSWS, political primacy was shown to significantly predict students' interest in running for office at all levels of government. It was speculated that social work's identity as a helping profession would make political primacy more meaningful to MSW students than to JD students. The results on this point were inconclusive. Political primacy mattered to nascent political ambition for both groups, but at different levels of government. This may mean MSW and JD students view the difference-making potential of elected office differently at different levels of government. Social work students may place greater value on the difference-making potential of local government, while law students place greater value on that of higher office. There are likely other unobserved characteristics between the groups contributing to this difference that future research will need to tease out.

The fact that law students had more political primacy to begin with may mean many things, including the notion that running for office is more accepted and socialized in law school than in social work programs. That is, political primacy may be endogenous to law students with a pre-existing interest in running for office in ways it is not for social work students. Sorting out the temporal order of political primacy's relationship to nascent political ambition will require further research. For social work educators especially, it will be important to know if political primacy is malleable (Fox & Lawless, 2011), or if students have fixed opinions on the value of elected office when they enter the classroom. Swank (2012) also notes that social work students care about the legitimacy of political institutions when they participate in politics. This speaks to the power of the political efficacy items included in the MSW regression models. If students see political institutions as illegitimate, it will be difficult to persuade students that political institutions can be a venue for making positive change.

Data from the MLSWS indicate gender acted as a significant predictor of nascent political ambition across social work and law students, respectively. It may be necessary to interact political primacy with gender to see if its relationship to nascent political ambition is stronger for women than it is for men. The gender distribution in the MLSWS

did not allow for interactions to be calculated. Meehan (2018) observes that female MSW students doubt their qualifications to run, so it is necessary to remember that the costs of running are not distributed equally across gender identities. In other words, no matter the instrumental benefit of running for office that political primacy measures, women face greater costs to running for office than men.

This disparity speaks to the challenge of understanding all aspects of what is known as the candidate emergence process (Maisel & Stone, 1997). Political primacy may be a necessary condition for candidacy, but it may also be insufficient on its own to inspire an individual to run for office. Relatedly, although nascent political ambition is an accepted dependent variable in political science, it is not clear it is predictive of who ultimately runs for office. Fox and Lawless (2011) find that an individual's interest in running waxes and wanes in response to the political environment. This study, for example, did not account for recruitment, which matters to running for office, particularly for women (Fox & Lawless, 2010). Future research on political primacy will need to account for a wider array of characteristics included in the CVM to see if its relationship to nascent political ambition holds.

Several limitations are worth considering in relation to the results of this study. The MLSWS, for example, was not a representative sample of MSW and JD students, respectively, in general or at the participating institutions specifically. Although the email invitation did not address the content of the survey instrument, in the case of MSW students it only reached students who elected to participate in the university listserv.

Moreover, the exploratory nature of much of this research requires that the results around the key concepts be interpreted with caution. Competitive traits have meaning in the political science literature (Fox & Lawless, 2005), but the scale as measured in the MLSWS may not have adequately measured this concept. Consequently, ambition may still have meaning for nascent political ambition that the MLSWS did not account for. The same holds for political primacy. Given that the concept behaved differently for MSW and JD students, respectively, there is likely greater variation in how individuals in these groups value the difference-making potential of elected office than is captured in the MLSWS.

Nevertheless, social work educators can take heart. In this moment of political turmoil, students are interested in running for office. Although law students show a greater interest in higher office, social work students in the MLSWS show an interest in their local political institutions such as school boards and city councils. And the more they see holding office in one of these institutions as a way of making a difference in their community, the more likely they are to express an interest in running for one of them. This is not insignificant; local governments play important roles in providing services to populations social workers interact with. Having social workers in the rooms where decisions are made will make it more likely those decisions reflect the values of the profession (Lane & Humphreys, 2011).

It is worth asking, if not social workers, then who? Someone is going to occupy our elected offices; social workers cannot afford to hold their nose at the unseemliness of politics and hope that those in positions of power will make the right decisions. As Ribicoff (1962) noted, "the public business is an undignified business only if we abandon it to those of narrow or selfish motives" (p. 5). If schools of social work truly want to make their

students “change agents,” then they cannot avoid discussing politics and running for office, where real change happens.

References

- Black, G. S. (1972). A theory of political ambition: Career choices and the role of structural incentives. *American Political Science Review*, 66(1), 144-159. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1959283>
- Butler, A. C. (1990). A reevaluation of social work students' career interests. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 26(1), 45-56. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.1990.10672133>
- Downs, A. (1957). An economic theory of political action in a democracy. *Journal of Political Economy*, 65(2), 135-150. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1086/257897>
- Ezell, M. (1993). The political activity of social workers: A post-Reagan update. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 20(4), 81-97.
- Felderhoff, B. J., Hofer, R., & Watson, L.D. (2015). Living up to the code's expectations? Social workers' political knowledge sources, expectations, and behaviors. *Social Work*, 61(1), 29-35. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swv053>
- Fox, R. L., & Lawless, J. L. (2005). To run or not to run for office: Explaining nascent political ambition. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(3), 642-659. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2005.00147.x>
- Fox, R. L., & Lawless, J. L. (2010). If only they'd ask: Gender, recruitment, and political ambition. *The Journal of Politics*, 72(2), 310-326. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381609990752>
- Fox, R. L., & Lawless, J. L. (2011). Gaining and losing interest in running for public office: The concept of dynamic political ambition. *The Journal of Politics*, 73(2), 443-462. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381611000120>
- Green, D., Palmquist, B., & Schickler, E. (2002). *Partisan hearts and minds*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hamilton, D., & Fauri, D. (2001). Social workers' political participation: Strengthening the political confidence of social work students. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 37(2), 321-332. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2001.10779057>
- Hull, G. H. (1987). Joining together: A faculty-student experience in political campaigning. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 23(3), 37-43. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.1987.10672082>
- Lane, S. R., & Humphreys, N. A. (2011). Social workers in politics: A national survey of social work candidates and elected officials. *Journal of Policy Practice*, 10(3), 225-244.
- Lane, S. R., & Humphreys, N. A. (2015). Gender and social workers' political activity. *Affilia*, 30(2), 232-245. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109914541115>

- Lane, S.R., Ostrander, J., & Rhodes-Smith, T. (2018). 'Politics is social work with power': Training social workers for elected office. *Social Work Education, 37*, 1-16. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1366975>
- Lane, S. R., & Pritzker, S. (2018). *Political social work*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-68588-5>
- Leighley, J. E., & Nagler, J. (2013). *Who votes now? Demographics, issues, inequality, and turnout in the United States*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mahaffey, M. (1977). The evolving role of social workers in socio-political situations strategies in interventions. *International Social Work, 20*(2), 35-43. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/002087287702000207>
- Maisel, L. S., & Stone, W. J. (1997). Determinants of candidate emergence in US house elections: An exploratory study. *Legislative Studies Quarterly, 22*(1), 79-96. doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/440292>
- Meehan, P. (2017). Michigan Law & Social Work Study Dataset [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.sites.google.com/umich.edu/patrickmeehan/projects/michigan-law-social-work-study>
- Meehan, P. (2018). "I think I can...maybe I can...I can't": Social work women and local elected office. *Social Work, 63*(2), 145-152. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swy006>
- Milbrath, L. W. (1965). *Political participation: How and why do people get involved in politics?* Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Ostrander, J., Bryan, J., Sandler, A., Nieman, P., Clark, M., Loveland, E., & Smith, T. R. (2018). The political participation of first year social work students: Does practice specialization matter? *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, 45*(3), 39-59.
- Parker, M., & Sherraden, M. (1992). Electoral participation of social workers. *New England Journal of Human Services, 11*(3), 23-28.
- Patti, R. J., & Dear, R. B. (1975). Legislative advocacy: One path to social change. *Social Work, 20*(2), 108-114. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/20.2.108>
- Ribicoff, A. (1962). Politics and social workers. *Social Work, 7*(2), 3-6.
- Ritter, J. A. (2008). A national study predicting licensed social workers' levels of political participation: The role of resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks. *Social Work, 53*(4), 347-357. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/53.4.347>
- Rome, S. H., & Hoechstetter, S. (2010). Social work and civic engagement: The political participation of professional social workers. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, 37*, 107-129.
- Rose, S. J. (1999). Social workers as municipal legislators. *Journal of Community Practice, 6*(4), 1-15. doi: https://doi.org/10.1300/J125v06n04_01

- Rubin, A., & Johnson, P. J. (1984). Direct practice interests of entering MSW students. *Journal of Education for Social Work, 20*(2), 5-16.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220612.1984.10778733>
- Rubin, A., Johnson, P. J., & DeWeaver, K. L. (1986). Direct practice interests of MSW students: Changes from entry to graduation. *Journal of Social Work Education, 22*(2), 98-108. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.1986.10671744>
- Schlesinger, J. A. (1966). *Ambition and politics: Political careers in the United States*. Chicago, IL: Rand McNally.
- Schottland, C. I. (1953). Social work issues in the political arena. In *The social welfare forum: Official proceedings of the annual meeting, 1953* (pp. 18-33). NY: Columbia University Press.
- Seiz, R. C., & Schwab, A. J. (1992). Value orientations of clinical social work practitioners. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 20*(3), 323-335.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00754643>
- Swank, E. W. (2012). Predictors of political activism among social work students. *Journal of Social Work Education, 48*(2), 245-266.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2012.200900111>
- Thomas, S. (2014). Introduction. In S. Thomas & C. Wilcox (Eds.), *Women and elective office: Past, present, and future* (3rd ed., pp. 1-26). NY: Oxford University Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199328734.003.0001>
- Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wolfinger, R. E., & Rosenstone, S. J. (1980). *Who votes?* (vol. 22). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Wolk, J. L. (1981). Are social workers politically active? *Social Work, 26*(4), 283-288.

Author note: Address correspondence to: Patrick Meehan, PhD candidate, School of Social Work, University of Michigan, 1080 S. University Ave, Ann Arbor, MI 48197. E-mail: pjmeeh@umich.edu

Acknowledgements: Shauna Shames, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University-Camden, was instrumental in the development of political primacy as a concept, and helped design the measurement used in the MLSWS.