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# Planning Electoral Activities for Social Work Students: A Policy Practice Approach

Ramon Salcido and Victor Manalo\*

This article describes a policy practice project developed to equip social work students with practical skills necessary for electoral campaigns. Included is a description of how social work educators can plan and utilize student participation in electoral activities in the academy and social policy courses.

The history of social work contains many examples of social work participation in the political arena (Mahaffey & Hanks, 1982). However, in recent years social work education has increased its focus on micro-level practice and has provided limited opportunities for learning about political social action (Abel & Kazmerski, 1994; Wolk, Pray, Weismiller, & Dempsey, 1996). The emergence of electoral politics as an arena for policy practice challenges the current state-of-the-art knowledge of policy practice. While political campaigns are a form of policy practice, the idea seems difficult to integrate into community organization and policy practice courses. Compounding the problem, academics, social work professionals, and students are not clear about how potential electoral activities fit into specific courses or into the academic setting. Furthermore, there is a lack of field placements that allow students to learn about campaign work.

This article describes how social work educators can plan and utilize student participation in electoral activities. The project involved several state electoral campaigns and statewide initiatives in which school of social work students participated in a combination of campaign activities: a voter registration drive, an absentee ballot drive, a student rally/forum, and a "get-out-the-vote" drive.

The political project was conceived to encourage social work activism, defined as "planned behavior designed to achieve social or political objectives through such activities as consciousness-raising, developing coalitions, leading voter registration drives and political campaigns, propaganda and publicity, and taking other actions to influence social change" (Barker, 1987, p. 2). This would be accomplished by involving students in political campaigns and political action designed to develop their political skills. In theory, social action groups are involved in educating their communities or constituencies about their issues, recruiting members for a variety of roles, and taking direct action (Weil, 1996). The role of the campaign worker in political campaign settings, however, is a more recent development (Haynes & Mickelson, 1992).

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Here political action is defined as coordinated efforts to influence the election of a candidate endorsed by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). In the context of this political activity, the campaigner's role is conceptualized as activism in electoral politics and working for a political candidate (Domanski, 1998). Participation in electoral campaigns, as a form of social work advocacy, can produce effective political influence for social workers and the disadvantaged community groups we serve. Active participation on behalf of electoral candidates procures future access and recognition of social work concerns (Domanski, 1998; Haynes & Mickelson, 1992; Jansson, 1994, 1999).

In this effort social work students and social workers were involved in political action through NASW's political action committee (NASW-PACE). It was hoped that student involvement in this type of social work action would expose them to this approach, thereby increasing the possibility that they (as future social workers) would become involved in other political action efforts as part of their professional development.

## **Background**

The setting for this model was a graduate school of social work in a private university. The purpose of this project was to heighten political awareness of graduate social work students by focusing on two types of political action: voting and campaign work. The activities were designed to illustrate the importance of voting and to encourage participation in the presidential, major congressional, and statewide elections of November 5, 1996. The goal was to organize several campaign activities within the school's structure that would result in social work student participation in the election. A joint collaborative strategy utilized students in the planning of the activities, policy instructors in supporting and encouraging student participation as part of their courses, and a field educator to support and encourage students and their field agencies to participate in the activities. The time frame for the project was four months. The organizing activities included service-oriented strategies (voter registration drive, absentee ballot drive) and electoral-oriented strategies (student rally/forum, "get-out-the-vote" drive).

## **The Action Plan**

Initially a policy instructor (faculty member) and field educator developed the logistical groundwork and assumed leadership in the planning committee formation. One policy instructor organized seven policy instructors who agreed to encourage and support students' participation in the planned campaign experiences, to give students credit for their participation as a class project, and to provide support for the activities (Jansson, 1999). The field educator, in addition to providing support to the students participating in the project, served as a liaison with the field agencies. In this capacity the field educator encouraged field agents to participate in the student-organized activities and to support political activities within their agencies organized by the student interns, and informed them of campaign activity progress.

A steering committee was organized that consisted of three student organization officers and four student volunteers, as well as the faculty member and field educator

(Jansson, 1999). The committee met once a week to plan and coordinate their tasks (Jansson, 1999). Once the plan was developed, the students, through the student organization, accepted their responsibility to provide leadership in implementing the plan. They met with the dean, presented the plan, and received approval to use the graduate school of social work as the campaign arena.

## **Implementation Process**

The key in implementing the school's electoral drive was its student organization, which was responsible for communicating with the students and informing them of upcoming events (Jansson, 1999). On September 10, 1996, the student organization sent a memo to 411 students that (1) reported on the upcoming campaign, (2) gave key dates for voter registration training, and (3) described the forum/rally. Similarly, a memo was sent to field placement agencies informing them of the campaign drive, to request their support of their interns in campaign activities at school and within their agencies, and to invite them to participate in the forum/rally (Jansson, 1999).

### **Service-Oriented Strategies**

*Voter registration.* The voter registration strategy included two distinct efforts: 1) student organization members were trained to train other students how to conduct voter registration activities in their field agencies; and 2) the students established and maintained a voter registration site in the school's student organization office. The anticipated outcome was to register a large number of persons at a variety of different settings.

The first task was to obtain mail-in voter registration forms from the county Office of the Registrar (election office) (Jansson, 1999). The second task was to train members of the steering committee and other interested students to train others to conduct voter registration activities within the school and within their field agencies. As a result, 11 students were trained, and they organized other students to become involved in voter registration activities. A total of 123 citizens from the school and field agencies registered to vote; 32 students registered to vote using their new addresses, and 91 people registered to vote from 7 field agencies that hosted student-organized voter registration drives (Jansson, 1999).

*Absentee ballots.* As part of a service-oriented strategy, the use of absentee ballots ensures participation by voters who might not otherwise vote. In fact, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1998), nearly 5 million registered voters said they did not vote because they could not take time off from work or school or were otherwise too busy. It was hoped that students who might not otherwise vote would use the absentee ballots and vote for NASW-endorsed candidates and issues.

The faculty member contacted the county election office and obtained current information on absentee ballot procedures (Jansson, 1999). Two students went to the county election office and were trained on how to conduct an absentee ballot effort (Jansson, 1999). On September 30, 1996, the student organization sent an official letter to each student providing information on how to apply for an absentee ballot. A total of 420 letters were sent, each of which included a request form for an absentee ballot application and the telephone number for the county Office of the Registrar (Jansson, 1999).

Surprisingly, based on an informal survey of the policy instructors, about 30% of the student body voted by absentee ballot. Some of the reasons given for voting by absentee ballot ranged from "It was convenient" to "I moved since the last election." Although the least written about of the campaign activities in social work literature (Haynes & Mickelson, 1992; Salcido & Seck, 1992), the absentee ballot in this campaign was shown to be a service.

### **Electoral-Oriented Strategy**

*Rally/forum.* Organizing for the rally/forum was the most management-intensive of the campaign activities. The purpose of the rally/forum was to provide information on all of the statewide ballot measures, including the California Civil Rights Initiative (Proposition 209), and to inform the participants of NASW's position on these initiatives as well as its slate of endorsed candidates (Jansson, 1999). Because the rally/forum was held at an educational institution, it had to be educational. The task was to stress the importance of social workers' participation in the political process as policy practitioners. Two weeks before the event the dean sent a memo announcing the school-sponsored rally/forum to all students, faculty, and social work agencies. Policy instructors also emphasized the importance of the rally/forum, making attendance a class assignment.

The student organization president was master of ceremonies for the event (Jansson, 1999). Key speakers included a representative of the NASW California Chapter political action committee (CAL-PACE) and a representative of a political action committee concerned with persons with disabilities, who spoke about the impact of the so-called California Civil Rights Initiative on this population. Acting as a role model, professional social worker and Los Angeles city councilperson Laura Chick, MSW, a graduate of the school, spoke about the importance of voting and getting others to vote (Jansson, 1999). CAL-PACE provided the forum with the list of NASW-endorsed candidates for federal and statewide offices and positions on the ballot initiatives (Jansson, 1999). After the presentations, political district maps were displayed and students were asked to locate their residences in order to identify their political representatives (Jansson, 1999).

Sign-in sheets indicated that 82 students, 3 agency clients, 6 faculty, and 9 field instructors representing their agencies attended the forum/rally (Jansson, 1999). The benefit of this event was that members from the school and the social work agencies actively participated in the political process.

*Get-out-the-vote.* One week before the election, the student organization sent letters to students reminding them to vote on election day and to contact the NASW student representative if they wanted to participate in any NASW PACE-targeted races (Jansson, 1999). Student leaders made personal contacts with a total of 120 (29%) students and left messages with 216 (51%) reminding them to vote. All students received the NASW slate endorsements on the candidates and initiatives. A total of 62 students volunteered to work on NASW-targeted races or on the anti-Proposition 209 campaign (Jansson, 1999).

## Evaluation

Anecdotal information supported the efficacy of the campaign experience in enhancing students' understanding of political action. Informal surveys with policy faculty and students provided some evidence that the class project met this goal. Of the 120 students surveyed, 96 (80%) stated that the experience was useful. Most of them (n=86) were satisfied with the experience and intended to become involved in political action activities in the future.

## Discussion

For the class instructor or faculty member who wishes to implement a similar activity, essential organizational skills are needed. A faculty person needs to be able to effectively organize disparate groups such as the dean or director's office, faculty, the student organization, and social work students toward a common goal. The faculty member may find that students have dissimilar levels of concern or are apathetic. In this case he/she must assume a more aggressive organizing role with other faculty members, perhaps by enlisting policy faculty or field educators for planning committees to develop ideas on how best to integrate activities with class content.

The support of the school and the student organization was essential to the success of this political activity. The leadership of the student organization, their passion for social justice, and their willingness to motivate their fellow students led to high student involvement. The policy faculty were highly involved in this model and wholeheartedly supported the activities, since the faculty member personally contacted all of them to secure their participation. They were asked to give course credit for student participation, and they allowed student leaders to sign up students and give updates on the activities during policy classes. The school sponsored and was the setting for the activities.

Since it served as the setting for the activities, the graduate school of social work could not endorse candidates, campaign for candidates or issues, or raise money to be used for political purposes. The events had to be educational, rather than political (Jansson, 1999). With this in mind, the activities provided a forum for increasing knowledge and providing information. Students were educated on a variety of issues and candidates. They were provided a list of campaigns from NASW and were free to volunteer, *if interested*.

The authors of this article realize that faculty may not want to commit to an intensive experience such as this one. Partializing this model into separate activities such as registering students to vote, supplying absentee voter information, or informing students on candidates and issues through e-mail, newsletters, or class presentations may be more feasible.

Beyond individual faculty members and social work programs, NASW can use these models as means to devise localized strategies to influence targeted statewide and national campaigns. In this way NASW would gain valuable professional exposure and develop closer relationships with social work programs. Future implementations of these or similar models should be evaluated for their ability to educate students, to empower them, and to encourage their ongoing political participation, as well as their ability to influence political campaigns positively.

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