Chapter 71

The Future of Healthcare:
Political Participation of Nursing and Public Health Students

Christine Vandenhouten
University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, USA

Sylvia May Kubsch
University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, USA

Susan Gallagher-Lepak
University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, USA

Jan Strom
Northern Illinios University, USA

Derryl E. Block
Northern Illinois University, USA

Crystalmichelle L. Malakar
Bellin Health System, USA

ABSTRACT

The U.S. healthcare environment is undergoing rapid change. New policies have reshaped healthcare through reimbursement models focused on access and quality. Advocating for policies that improve population health is important for health professionals and students. For this reason, educators need to know how to prepare students to be active in the political process. Using the Civic Volunteerism Model, factors influencing nursing and public health students' political participation were examined. Both groups had relatively low levels of political participation and differences in types of political activities. The best predictor of political participation was found to be psychological engagement (e.g., political efficacy, partisanship, political interest). Students were more politically active if they attended school part-time, employed more than part-time, and were non-traditional students. Suggested educational strategies and use of social media were discussed. Further exploration of social media as a source of political information and recruitment is recommended.

INTRODUCTION

A continuing decline in political involvement among young adults has been shown (Levine, 2007). An opportunity exists for students to be prepared for social responsibilities, including political participation, through college courses and education. Students can gain knowledge and skills through a college education during a time at which they are forming a political identity. This is especially important in

health related fields during a time when health policy is being reformed and substantially changed to improve access and health outcomes. By strengthening their political acumen, they are better equipped to affect public policy both personally and as future health professionals. The purpose of this study was to determine the level of political participation in undergraduate nursing and public health (PH) students in one Midwestern university along with factors influencing that participation. Verba's Civic Volunteerism Model (CVM) was used as a model for predicting political participation. Using a descriptive, predictive design, the study examined differences in political participation, demographic variables, and effect factors by major. The study also determined the extent to which the CVM predicted political participation in this population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nursing, as one of the largest health professions with three million registered nurses across the United States, has the potential to drive policies that influence health. This large and trusted professional group accounts for one in every 44 voters (Spenceley et al., 2013; Phillips, 2012). The public expects nurses to provide compassionate and ethical care and advocate for clients and issues that are relevant. A recent Gallup poll found nurses rated highest in honesty and ethical standards compared to numerous other professional groups (Gallup, 2014). Despite the profession's potential to influence policy, advocacy by nurses has sometimes been characterized as invisible (Spenceley et al., 2013).

Exploration of the level and types of political participation among nurses and nursing students has been addressed in recent literature. Using Verba and colleagues' (1995) Civic Volunteerism Model (CVM), the authors identified political engagement in primarily "low cost" activities (e.g., voting, conversations about politics, contacting elected officials) among Midwestern RN to BSN students and RNs (Vandenhouten, Malakar, Kubsch, Block, & Gallagher-Lepak, 2011). Psychological engagement was found to be most predictive of political participation which was consistent with previous research by Ritter (2008) and Cramer (2002). Specific dimensions of psychological engagement most strongly associated with political participation were political interest, political efficacy and family influences. Resources (i.e., time/money, civic skills) significantly contributed to political participation as well (Vandenhouten et al., 2011). Social networking as a form of political participation was not addressed in this study (Vandenhouten et al., 2011).

Numerous barriers have been cited as reasons for low political participation by nurses and nursing students. Rains & Barton-Kriese (2001) identified in a qualitative study that nursing students had a "disconnect among personal, political, and professional expectations" and a "hesitancy in talking about themselves as political beings" (p. 222). Spenceley et al. (2006) cited the following barriers for political participation by nurses 1) lack of preparation from nursing education, 2) heavy workloads and lack of time, 3) professional silos and fragmentation, 4) risk averse personal qualities, and 5) tendency to view policy as removed from their scope of interest.

The level of political participation among other health professions is of interest as well. Disciplines such as social work and PH, similar to nursing, are oriented toward the publics good and this may impact their political engagement to some degree. Social workers, for example, have been shown to be more politically active than the general public (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001). Comparisons between nursing students and students from other disciplines have been performed to a small extent. Rains and Barton-Kriese (2001), for example, compared undergraduate nursing and political science students using qualitative

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