

Editorial

Now is the Time: Promoting Social Change through Policy Research, Teaching, and Innovation

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The aphorism, “May you live in interesting times” certainly resonates today. As we write this editorial, for the third time in U.S. history, the Senate is deciding whether or not to impeach a sitting president. Critical foundations of our constitutional democracy are being undermined before our eyes—including the balance of powers, access to the voting booth, and freedom of the press—while policy decisions are being made that further threaten the well-being of those already marginalized in our society, including (among others) people in poverty; refugees and other migrants; women; and racial, ethnic, religious, gender and sexual minorities.

How did we get here? What can we do? Because of the versatility of our profession, which prioritizes both the person and the social environment, social workers are well-positioned to influence the course of events. We have the practice wisdom, the knowledge, and the skills. We understand how systems operate, and we know how to empower clients. While some of us are doing important work to heal wounds at the micro level, others of us are conducting research of social consequence, engaging in analysis and advocacy to influence government decision-making, educating our students for action, running for office, and fighting to ensure that everyone votes and every vote counts.

Meanwhile, the centrality of policy to social work is increasingly being recognized by the profession. The number of MSW students enrolled in macro specializations is rising (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015, 2019). Organizations including Influencing Social Policy (ISP), the Congressional Research Institute for Social Work & Policy (CRISP), and the Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work are laying the groundwork for engagement. The Special Commission to Advance Macro Practice in Social Work (SC) has helped make macro practice more visible (CSWE and the Special Commission to Advance Macro Practice in Social Work, 2018). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Council for Social Work Education (CSWE), and Society for Social Work & Research (SSWR) are featuring policy speakers at their respective conferences. The Grand Challenges for Social Work (2020) have generated important policy recommendations. The National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign (n.d.) is educating and mobilizing schools of social work for action. And, the *Journal of Policy Practice & Research* (2020) is gearing up to publish and elevate policy research.

This special issue of *Advances in Social Work*, which focuses on Promoting Social Change through Policy Research, Teaching, and Innovation, contributes to our understanding of how policy impacts the social good, and how we as social workers can

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impact policy. It is a testament to the numerous ways in which social workers can intervene: through policy analysis, teaching, research, advocacy, and electoral politics. There is a place for social work on the policy front; we need to claim it, without apology. Below is a brief discussion of the historical and current contexts, followed by a brief description of the articles that comprise this special issue.

The Context

Over the last 40 years, neoliberalism and free market capitalism have dominated the American policy landscape, resulting in deregulation, decentralization, increased privatization, and austere social policies (Bullock, Twose, & Hamilton, 2019; Piven & Cloward, 1993; Schram, 2018). In neoliberal environments, powerful interests become more privileged, while the voices of individuals who are most vulnerable are muted or silenced. A few quick examples illustrate the point.

In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed, and President Clinton signed, the Personal Responsibility & Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (known as “welfare reform”) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services [HHS], 1996). This overhaul of the country’s primary income support program for low-income families with children prioritized reducing dependence (getting recipients off the welfare rolls) over poverty reduction. It eliminated the existing federal entitlement and substituted a block grant to be administered through a decentralized system in which each state – and, in some instances, each county – develops its own rules and programs. Under this policy, receipt of benefits is premised on work, and limitations are imposed on the length of time people can continue to receive aid, regardless of need (HHS, 1996). In keeping with neoliberal and capitalist traditions, these changes reduce the social safety net for citizens who experience inadequate or low-incomes in exchange for increasing economic productivity.

Another example is the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission [FEC]* (2010). In this case, the Court reaffirmed that money is a form of speech and that campaign contributions are thus protected under the first amendment. Specifically, the Court overturned previous decisions that had put limits on corporate campaign spending; there are now no limits to the amount corporations can spend for political advertising (contributed independently of a specific candidate or campaign through “super PACs”). *Citizens United* concentrates this political influence among a few extremely wealthy individuals. For example, during the 2018 mid-term election, nearly 78% of all super PAC spending was contributed by the top 100 donors (Lau, 2019). The effect of this decision was to put more power in the hands of big business, diluting the influence of individual citizens and increasing racial bias in electoral politics (Lau, 2019).

In 2013, the Supreme Court issued another critical decision that typifies the trends of the last decade. In *Shelby v. Holder* (2013), the Court invalidated a central provision of the Voting Rights Act. This change had the effect of derailing the “preclearance” requirement under which states with a history of voter suppression had to get permission before implementing any changes made to their voting systems. Until Congress acts to remedy

the situation, voters in many states—particularly in the South—will have few protections at the ballot box.

Although these are just a few examples, they are emblematic of the challenges our democratic republic has endured under neo-liberal, corporate-privileging, and austerity-focused policy. Power has become more concentrated, and the divide between those whose voices get amplified and whose voices do not has become more profound. These and other recent policies have a direct impact on individual self-determination and empowerment, and represent an assault on social, economic, environmental, and political justice.

Although the overwhelming policy trend of the last few decades reflects austerity, there were also significant policy developments that advanced individual well-being and community quality of life. Ten years ago, in 2010, the Affordable Care and Patient Protection Act (ACA—commonly known as, “Obamacare”) was enacted into law by the 111th Congress and signed by President Barack Obama (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019). Although the ACA is primarily considered an expansion of the private health insurance market, it is the most significant healthcare policy since Medicare and Medicaid were enacted in 1965 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). Since its full implementation in 2014, the ACA is credited with 20 million people gaining health insurance coverage—either through accessing coverage through the ACA marketplace or through Medicaid expansion (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2019). Despite its great promise, however, shortcomings remain. Most notably, as of the printing of this editorial, 14 states have not adopted Medicaid expansion: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin, and Wyoming (Kaiser Family Foundation [KFF], 2020). An estimated two million adults who are characterized as low-income and uninsured fall into the Medicaid coverage gap (Garfield & Orgera, 2020). These uneven outcomes are geographically concentrated in the South, which has intersectional implications for communities of color that are already likely to experience health disparities, along with inadequate access and coverage. Note, too, that there is significant overlap between preclearance states impacted by the Shelby decision and the states that have not adopted Medicaid expansion.

In addition to the implementation of ACA, there have also been policy advancements at the state-level. For example, following the horrific aftermath of gun violence at Sandy Hook, the Connecticut General Assembly passed bipartisan-supported legislation limiting access to guns by individuals perpetrating domestic violence, banning bump stocks, and implementing expanded gun storage rules (Larson, 2019). Following gun violence at Parkland School, Florida was also able to pass gun safety legislation (Mazzei, 2018). In addition, several states and localities have implemented minimum wage increases (Arnholz, 2019). The lessons learned here are that advocacy efforts at the state and local level can also have a significant impact on policy.

Challenges of the Moment

The advent of the Trump administration raised the stakes for social workers and for our clients. Eight in ten Americans feel political discourse has become less respectful and

more negative over the last several years (Pew Research Center, 2019). Further, 75% think violence is more likely toward groups that are the target of “heated and aggressive” rhetoric by elected officials (Pew Research Center, 2019, para. 7). These perspectives are not outside of our current reality. Following a three-year reported rise, in 2017, hate crimes increased by 17% (Federal Bureau of Investigations [FBI], 2018). Further, recognized hate groups in the United States are also increasing (FBI, 2018). From roughly 2014 to 2018, there was a 30% increase in the number of documented hate groups—representing a 20-year high (Beirich, 2019). Demonstrations and rallies promoting hate-filled ideology have increased, along with violent acts. In 2018, 50 people were murdered by U.S.-based domestic extremists, representing the fourth-deadliest year for killings linked to domestic extremism since 1970 (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.).

Our campuses have not been spared from this growing ideological extremism and associated violence. Several bigoted and racially-motivated acts have occurred on numerous university campuses over the last several years. One of the most notorious and hate-filled crimes occurred at the “Unite the Right” gathering of noted white supremacists on the University of Virginia campus in Charlottesville, which tragically culminated in the death of a counter protestor, Heather Heyer, and injured at least nineteen other individuals (Atkinson, 2018; Hartzell, 2018). Grievously, there are more campus incidents than we can reflect upon here. Yet what we witnessed at UVA and Charlottesville represents the inevitable outcomes that lie at the intersection of the increasing incivility and hate we are experiencing in our society—including on our campuses. In addition to the tragic loss of life, such extremism and resulting tragedies also have a chilling effect on civil discourse and engagement.

Although many factors beyond this increasing extremism likely influence people’s perceptions of political and civic engagement, it is relevant to consider that most people now find it “stressful and frustrating” to have political dialogue with individuals of differing perspectives. The number of people who report experiencing this frustration has grown from 46% in 2016 to 53% in 2018 (Pew Research Center, 2018). Approximately 66% of each of the youngest generations (Generation Zers, Millennials, and Xers) have a negative perception of the direction in which the U.S. is headed (Parker, Graf, & Igielnik, 2019). Although those who are youngest have the bleakest outlook regarding our national trajectory, the majority of all generations indicate that we are “going in the wrong direction” (Boomers, 61%; Silent Generation, 53%) (Parker, Graf, & Igielnik, 2019, para. 26).

Several well-being indicators demonstrate logical rationales for why most of the public holds a negative perception about our country’s future. Although we are experiencing a cumulative low unemployment rate (currently 3.7%), the rate remains notably higher for Black/African-Americans (6.6%)—reflecting outcomes of the U.S.’s long legacy of historic and systemic oppression (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). According to the most recent Census data available, 13 million U.S. workers (8.3%) have more than one job, with 6.9% of multi-job workers holding more than two jobs (Beckhusen, 2019). Further, women (8.8%) were slightly more likely to hold a second job than men (8.0%) (Beckhusen, 2019). The need to hold multiple jobs reflects insufficient pay, inadequate hours available at the first job, and/or limited growth potential. Nationally

and in many states, the minimum wage is \$7.25 an hour—where it has remained since 2009 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). At the current minimum wage, a full-time worker would have to put in 127 hours every week to afford the Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom rental home (National Low-Income Housing Coalition, 2019). There is no locality in the U.S. where a minimum-wage worker, working 40-hours a week, can afford the Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom rental.

Meanwhile, although we have successfully expanded coverage of individuals with health insurance following the implementation of the ACA, attempts to weaken the policy have resulted in two million more Americans being without health insurance in 2017 compared to 2015 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). We are also seeing an increase in “deaths of despair” (Case & Deaton, 2017) or, what is understood to be a combination of drug overdoses, suicides, and alcohol-related deaths, resulting in a decrease in life expectancy for mid-life, non-Hispanic Whites with low-educational attainment. These bleak statistics represent the dire circumstances that our clients face and which we must confront through policy practice, teaching, and research.

The Next Decade: From a Moment to a Movement

Amy often uses a quote appearing on the street art of the political activist known as Banksy, “*If you get tired, learn to rest, not to quit,*” to encourage her students on the days when they feel particularly overwhelmed—offering further guidance that they *can rest but they cannot retreat from the harsh and oppressive realities of the current policy and political landscape*. Particularly when it is hardest—when it is on the days that we learn the Violence Against Women’s Act (VAWA) has not been reauthorized, when we learn another Black person has been killed by law enforcement, when we learn we have lost more of our young people at another school shooting, when we learn there is an oil spill at Standing Rock, when we learn another state is purging voters from its voting rolls, when we learn Puerto Rico still has not received all of the emergency aid it was promised, when we learn more than 5,000 children were separated from their parents when seeking asylum...when we learn, when we learn, when we learn. It is on those days when the outcomes are most bleak, that the individuals, families, organizations, and communities we serve require us—in our unique and valuable capacity as research-informed social work advocates—to remain engaged alongside them in the pursuit of social, economic, environmental, and political justice.

In this challenging policy moment, it would be understandable to choose to drop out of the fight. Yet there is reason for hope. In 2018, despite attempts to disenfranchise voters through unconstitutional identification requirements, closing polls in certain localities, and other counter-civic engagement strategies, voter turnout increased for all age categories and major racial groups (Misra, 2019). Voter turnout in the 2018 mid-term elections was 11 percentage points higher than in 2014 (Misra, 2019). The largest turnout increase was achieved by 18 to 29-year olds, a historic low-voting demographic (Misra, 2019). Their voting participation increased from 20% in 2014 to 36% in 2018—still room for growth, but representing a 79% increase in turnout (Misra, 2019). This growing civic engagement and investment is encouraging.

Over the next decade, as we have in the past, social workers will continue to encounter challenging social issues and oppressive policy prescriptions. Yet we also have opportunities to make things better. Most immediately, this coming year, the 2020 Census will be undertaken to count ALL people for the critical purposes of determining how approximately \$675 billion will be allocated to our communities, providing demographic information on which voting maps will be constructed, apportioning 435 congressional representatives, and providing accurate and relevant data to inform the development of social programs. Decisions made based on Census data will last and be multiplied over 10 years. It is critical for social workers to become engaged in local outreach efforts to ensure all people are counted. This year is also an election year—primary elections will be taking place soon. Getting out the vote is a critical social work activity. If you are not already, we encourage you and your students to become involved. As we step into this new decade full of social work policy challenges and opportunities, it is our hope that the research you find within this special issue will both inform and inspire you to advance social change through policy research, teaching, and innovation.

Articles

The articles in this special issue address how to promote social change through policy research, teaching, and innovation in the United States. The shared message they convey is the urgency of the moment and the promise of building a sustainable movement as we embark on the decade before us. The variety of this collection of 15 articles pays homage to the multiple ways in which social workers engage in the policy process, - including research, analysis, advocacy, and political action. There is a wealth of content here that reflects our collective expertise: policy analysis frameworks, pedagogical and curricular strategies to strengthen policy content in the classroom, research that advances policy development over a range of critical social issues, meaningful connections forged between clinical and policy practice, and, opportunities for deeper political engagement and participation.

The first set of articles provides three distinct and innovative approaches to conducting policy analysis. *Kanenberg, Leal, and Erich* revisit McPhail's feminist policy analysis framework by updating it with a focus on privilege, oppression, and intersectionality—a change that the authors assert is particularly relevant in today's polarized political climate since it prompts the analyst to consider how an individual's multiple identities intersect in experiences of discrimination, oppression, and other possible forms of marginalization. By using the resulting framework, the authors suggest researchers, practitioners, and students will become better informed advocates and agents of change.

Power and complexity are also addressed by *Manit, Kolpakov, and Eubank* in the policy analysis perspective they present, a Network perspective. The authors contend that both formal and informal network partnerships, consisting of capable governments, not-for-profit organizations, and for-profit private actors, are required to address increasingly complex social problems. In addition to providing a conceptual framework for understanding network analysis, the authors share an empirical case illustration to demonstrate how social work researchers and policy practitioners can advance policy development and implementation. Such network analyses can inform strategies to build

partnership capacity, illustrate power and resource constraint considerations in policy implementation, and explain how network relationships influence policy outcomes.

The importance of context intersects with *Barretti's* analysis of how social problems are constructed. Barretti contends that language is important in how social problems are framed—influencing how a problem is perceived and ultimately how policy interventions are developed or not. In her article, she provides an overview of common policy analysis frameworks, summarizes findings of how social policy texts instruct analysis of social problems, and, presents an alternative matrix, Problem-to-Policy, which applies a social constructionist lens to the historical development of social problems and policy outcomes. An illustrative assignment is included to demonstrate how students may deepen their awareness and critical thinking about historical context, political/social/economic influences, claimsmaking and claimsmakers, ideological explanations and theories, policy responses, and new social problems.

Although many articles in this special issue have implications for teaching, the second set of articles focuses specifically on program, curriculum, and pedagogical considerations. *Curry-Stevens, Hawash, and Bradley* describe the journey of strengthening the macro concentration in the Master of Social Work (MSW) program at Portland State University. This development is presented in four phases: hiring and curriculum improvements; reaccreditation opportunities; online innovation; and longer-term influence of horizontal and vertical integration. Through their successful efforts in attracting more students into their “Practice and Leadership with Communities and Organizations” specialization, they gleaned valuable insights that will be useful to other universities and programs.

Lane, Hill, Ostrander, Powers, Rhodes Smith, and Hylton focus on voter engagement and the cultivation of political power as critical elements of social work practice. Given the place of field education as social work's signature pedagogy, they implemented a voter engagement model that was embedded in the field component at two schools of social work. Their results have implications for empowering social workers to increase voter turnout of marginalized communities; leveraging linkages between field experiences and classroom activities; and, a number of relevant policy responses. At a time when voter disenfranchisement remains a significant concern, this article is timely for social work students, practitioners, and educators.

The third set of articles addresses a variety of specific policy topics. Several years post-implementation of the Affordable Care and Patient Protection Act, *Faubert, Weller, and Ault* explore the unmet health care needs of youth by health insurance type and status. The results of their study inform whether unmet health care needs are best addressed by public, private, or no health insurance. The results have implications for future healthcare policy decisions concerning Medicare for all, not-for-profit public options, or expansions of the private health insurance market.

Using a critical analysis that integrates life course and equity perspectives, *Oswald, Gardner, and Giunta* examine the LGBT Elder Americans Act. The authors' application of a life course perspective allows both social workers and policymakers to respond to historic and current circumstances that may be either oppressive or empowering for the community. Their equity lens brings intersectional issues to the forefront for policy

development. The authors also advocate using their analysis framework to help shape an LGBT aging policy agenda.

Perkins and Grossman address a critical issue in domestic violence but one that is rarely discussed, i.e., sibling violence. Their article provides statistics on the prevalence of this problem, as well as key definitions. They discuss roles for social work practitioners and advocates, as well as future directions to advance policy responses to mitigate sibling violence. Also related to domestic and intimate partner violence, *Steiner, Johnson, Hadley, Lin, and Postmus* discuss a provision introduced in the 1996 welfare reform policy, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The family violence option (FVO) allows states to waive specified requirements for individuals who are survivors of intimate partner violence. The authors address the absence of a standardized method for practitioners to assess this risk. Their article presents results from a study to develop and test an instrument to be used for this purpose.

Also dealing with issues related to violence against women, *Maxwell and Robinson* examine the Violence against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 and its implications for American Indian/Native American (AINA) women. They contend there is a high prevalence of gender-based violence perpetrated against AINA women. By using an indigenous-focused perspective, acknowledging social construction and historical context, integrating tribal critical race theory and using a feminist lens, they address implications for policy development that are responsive to AINA women. *Lim and Shafer* also address policy issues for American Indian (AI) families by conducting a replication of the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study. Their research specifically looks at the participation of American Indian families in marriage promotion programs and how the AI community views the relationship of marriage and beneficial outcomes for children.

The final policy-specific article addresses issues in the criminal justice domain. *Rhodes, Robinson, Archibald, and Van Sluytman* conducted a consent decree analysis examining U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) investigations of law enforcement practices between 2008 and 2018. Their findings indicate that social work values, advocacy interventions, and cultural training may help to decrease the number of excessive force complaints.

The next article illustrates an example of where the interests of clinical social workers align with advocacy efforts. *Cooper-Bolinskey* presents an emerging theory to guide clinical social workers who are seeking changes to the regulation of their practice. The article discusses variations among jurisdictions with different scopes and categories of clinical practice and how these disparities impact clinical practice and client protection. She addresses barriers that social workers experience in attempting to influence the regulation of clinical practice. Implications of her study include a discussion of public protections, professional fidelity, portability, and accessibility of clinical services.

The last two articles focus on political participation of social workers. We intentionally end with these articles to not only share their informative empirical results but also as a call to action for more social workers to become active change agents in political spheres. *Ostrander, Brian, and Lane* discuss the importance of political participation in creating social change while also noting that little has been explored about how clinical social

workers participate in large societal change. Their study presents findings from clinical social workers and particularly explores the challenges that female clinicians experience, which may result in barriers to political engagement.

Meehan explores involvement in running for political office. His study presents results comparing MSW and JD students. His results are discussed within the concept of political primary, which he defines as the value individuals assign to the ability of those in elected office to make a difference. He discusses the role social work education may offer in socializing students to political participation as part of their social work practice.

We are encouraged to see an increase in interest among social work practitioners, advocates, and researchers in developing policy-informed research. The number of initial submissions to this special issue was overwhelming—in a very welcomed way. Yet the special issue also reveals several gaps in research and advocacy that we hope our fellow social work practitioners, advocates, and researchers are currently exploring or will be inspired to do so with this message. Among the issues notably missing from this issue are reproductive rights, migration, housing, mental health, education, food security, and gun violence. Although we think the inclusion of refugee and migration content is certainly relevant to the focus of this issue, we want to acknowledge and thank *Advances in Social Work* and guest editors, Dr. Popescu and Dr. Libal, for their recent special issue, *Social Work with Migrants and Refugees*. Clearly, there is no shortage of opportunity for social workers to add to the scholarly work in these and other areas that are vital to informing social policy. We also note the absence of articles addressing global concerns: climate change, wealth inequality, the decline of democratic governments, and the growing impact and influence of social media—including widespread disinformation campaigns that contribute to apathy and disempowerment around the world.

We hope you find the articles in this issue informative, useful, and motivating. Although we are facing some daunting challenges, we celebrate the involvement in social workers in policy research, teaching, and practice. In that spirit, we acknowledge the heroes and sheroes who reflect our macro and policy roots: Jane Addams, Dorthea Dix, Dorothy Height, Francis Perkins, Harry Hopkins, Whitney Young, and the many social workers who hold public office at the national, state, and local levels. We recognize the enduring importance and impact of their work, and join them in shaping the future through policy change.

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