

Measuring the Political Pulse of the Louisiana Registered Nurse

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Abstract

This study examines the political activism of Louisiana Registered Nurses (RNs) by assessing the political capital, social capital, awareness, and power of Louisiana RNs. The study explores the potential impact that political activism, carried out by Louisiana RNs, has on the nursing profession and health policy, both in Louisiana and nationally. With almost four million RNs in the United States (www.bls.gov, 2007) and over forty-seven thousand RNs in Louisiana (Louisiana State Board of Nursing, 2007), the nursing profession is clearly the largest group within the healthcare community. Nurses need to be aware they have both the power and the skills to engage in political activism. Providing nurses with an awareness of the problems facing healthcare and the nursing profession, informing nurses of the consequences of not acting, and making nurses aware of the resources available to them in confronting these problems should lead to a greater involvement in political activism by Louisiana RNs.

Introduction

While the American Nurses Association (ANA), the National League for Nursing (NLN), and many other nursing organizations engage and participate in political discussions that help shape health policy, the majority of nurses in the profession remain idle as other healthcare professionals and political leaders shape the nursing profession and health policy. Within the nursing profession, there is a critical need for nurse involvement in healthcare policy. Rains & Barton-Kriese (2001) emphasize the need exists in nursing for interdisciplinary dialogue and faculty modelling of political competence and that faculty need to better articulate the importance of political activism in making policy decisions. Rains & Barton-Kriese (2001) underscored the need for a greater nursing presence not only in shaping its own future, but also in debating healthcare policy as a whole. Hall-Long (2001) conclude that once unified, nursing will better serve the goal of patient advocacy.

Registered Nurses (RNs) have the education, training, skills, and power to engage in the health policy debate. Utilizing a framework of power published by Berle (1967), Sweeney and Witt, (1990) explored the question, “Does nursing have the power to change the health care system?” (p. 284) and concluded that nursing does have the power to change and positively influence healthcare.

This study examined the political activism of Louisiana RNs by exploring the political capital, social capital, awareness, and power of Louisiana RNs and what impact they have on the nursing profession and the healthcare system. For the purpose of this study, social

capital is defined as membership in community, professional, and political organizations, as well as political interactions with family, friends, and co-workers. Awareness is defined as having the knowledge of the potential impact of political activism on the nursing profession and on healthcare, having an awareness of the issue(s) impacting nursing and healthcare, knowing who the political players are, and an awareness of the political process. Power is defined as education, belief in the ability to affect change, understanding of the political process, and previous experience with activism. Political capital is defined as the unification of awareness, power and social capital. Political activism is defined by use of political capital to influence or change public policy by engaging the political arena.

In an attempt to determine the political activism of the Louisiana RNs, eleven research questions were posed; (1) Do Louisiana RNs believe that they have the power to influence the future of nursing and healthcare?, (2) Is there a relationship between education and a feeling of political power among Louisiana RNs?, (3) Do Louisiana RNs believe that being politically active is an essential element of the nursing role?, (4) Do Louisiana RNs recognize the need for improvements in the healthcare system in the United States?, (5) Do Louisiana RNs know who their elected Representatives and Senators are, at the state and federal level?, (6) Is there a relationship between RNs in Louisiana who have friends, family and co-workers that are politically active and political activism?, (7) Are members of the Louisiana State Nurses Association (LSNA) more politically active than nurses who are not members of LSNA?, (8) Are Louisiana RNs who are members of politically active civic organizations more politically active than nurses who are not members of this type of organization?, (9) Have Hurricanes Katrina and Rita affected the political activism of Louisiana RNs?, (10) Does the nursing curricula taught at

the various schools of nursing in Louisiana include political activism?, (11) Do awareness, power, and social capital assist in establishing political capital and political activism?

Power

Based on the results of this study, it appears that Louisiana RNs do believe that they have the power to influence the future of their profession and healthcare. When asked to agree or disagree with the following statement, “Nurses do not have the power to influence the nursing profession or healthcare,” only 17% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with 81% of the respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Louisiana RNs do feel that they have the power to influence what the government does. Only 26% of the respondents agreed with the following statement, “people like me don’t have any say about what the government does” while 72% percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

A large number of these nurses did feel that politics and the government seemed too complicated for them to comprehend or grasp. Responding to the following statement, “politics and government seem so complicated, that I can’t really understand what is going on,” 48% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed and 52% disagreed or strongly disagreed. These nurses did not have a strong sense that elected officials cared a great deal about what people in their districts thought or wanted. When presented with the following statement, “elected officials care a great deal about what people in their districts think or want,” 53% agreed or strongly agreed with 47% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. A large majority (63%) of these Louisiana nurses felt nurses with advanced degrees were more likely to be politically active. Only 21% of the respondents reported that they had worked on a piece of legislation in the past. When asked if the faculty where they attended nursing school were politically active, 30% of the RNs responded yes, 37% responded no, and 35% stated they did not know.

Nursing curriculum needs to include strategies designed at building skills and confidence that is necessary for nurses to engage in political activism. Role modeling of political activism by nursing educators needs to occur, where the importance of political activism is demonstrated. Some examples of this would include: highlighting legislation to students that nurses were active in helping enact and the impact this legislation had on the nursing profession and healthcare, frequently discussing issues in class that affect nursing and health policy locally and nationally, taking nursing students to the state and/or federal capital to observe the legislation process first-hand, asking legislators or nursing leaders involved in political activism to come speak to students, requiring nursing students to identify and research an issue related to nursing and/or healthcare and then write and call a local and a federal official to articulate their position, encouraging nursing students to engage in testifying at legislative and executive bodies on the behalf of adequately funding nursing education, etc.

To examine if there was a relationship between education and a feeling of political power among Louisiana RNs an ANOVA statistical analysis (see figures 1 & 2) was utilized. It can be concluded that those with graduate degrees are more confident in their ability to influence politics and health policy compared to those with associate, diploma or bachelor degrees. The greatest difference was between nurses who held graduate degrees and nurses with associate degrees (p value of 0.0024).

Figure one

Educ4	Power LSMEAN	LSMEAN Number
1	15.1818182	1
2	15.9230769	2
3	16.1842105	3
4	17.6000000	4

Figure two

Least Squares Means for effect Educ4				
Pr > t for H0: LSMean(i)=LSMean(j)				
Dependent Variable: Power				
i/j	1	2	3	4
1		0.4099	0.1267	0.0024
2	0.4099		0.7670	0.0884
3	0.1267	0.7670		0.0639
4	0.0024	0.0884	0.0639	

Therefore, it can be concluded that those Louisiana RNs with graduate degrees are more confident in their ability to influence politics and health policy compared to those Louisiana RNs who hold associate, diploma or bachelor degrees. This reinforces the need for undergraduate curriculum which emphasizes the importance of political activism.

Awareness

This study yielded some very positive findings with respect to awareness of Louisiana RNs regarding political activism. When asked if they felt political activism was an essential element of the nursing role, 63% of these Louisiana RNs responded that they did feel political activism was an essential element of the nursing role. To gauge the awareness of Louisiana RNs

regarding the state of the healthcare system, respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements, “the healthcare system in the United States is okay as it exists,” and “the Medicare system is ok as it exists.” Only 12% of the respondents answered affirmatively that they believed the current healthcare system was okay. Likewise, only 17% of the nurses felt that the current Medicare structure and response was okay. A large number (81%) of the nurses reported that they knew who their state and federal elected officials were. So, Louisiana RNs do appear to be aware of the political players, the importance for nursing to be active in the political activism process, and the need for some healthcare reform.

While this is encouraging, nursing educators, other nursing leaders, and political leaders need to continue educating nurses on the issues impacting the nursing profession and healthcare. These educators and leaders also need to emphasize to nurses the importance of political activism on the profession and healthcare. This education and informative process needs to begin at the undergraduate level in schools of nursing and needs to be threaded throughout the curriculum. Various nursing organization also need to do a better job by articulating to all nurses the issues that impact the nursing profession and healthcare and by encouraging all nurses to engage in the political process.

Social capital

To determine if social capital was a predictor for political activism among Louisiana RNs, the study examined if there was a relationship between RNs in Louisiana who had family, friends, and co-workers that were politically active and the political activism by these nurses. Regression analysis was used to evaluate the relationship between the respondents’ family voting patterns ($p = 0.1193$), voting patterns of friends ($p=0.3286$), voting patterns of co-workers ($p=0.9052$) and political activism. With p values all greater than 0.05, there appears to be no

relationship between the political activism by RNs in Louisiana and Louisiana RNs who have family, friends, and co-workers that vote. After using variance selection, a statistical technique used to clean up the data set, there did appear to be a positive relationship between family voting patterns and political activism among Louisiana registered nurses ($p=0.0332$). The study also investigated if there was a relationship between Louisiana RNs who engage in political activism and Louisiana RNs who talk to their family, friends, and co-workers about political issues. With p values of 0.5799 (RNs who talk to family about political issues) and 0.6974 (RNs who talk to friends and co-workers about political issues), there appears to be no relationship between political conversations and political activism. So, overall, it can be stated that there is no relationship between RNs in Louisiana who have friends, family and co-workers that are politically active and political activism.

Continuing to explore the relationship between social capital and political activism among Louisiana RNs, the study examined if there was a difference in political activism among RNs in Louisiana who were members of the Louisiana State Nurses Association (LSNA) compared to those RNs in Louisiana who are not members of the LSNA. Also, the study tried to determine if there was a relationship between political activism and belonging to politically active civic groups. It was determined, with a $p=0.1382$, that being a member of the Louisiana State Nurses Association was not a good predictor of political activism. However, being a member of a politically active civic organization, $p=0.0050$, is a good predictor of political activism. This could be attributed to civic organizations typically addressing grass roots social issues that individuals feel more passionate about and in control of. State and federal organizations, such as LSNA and ANA, focus more on state, federal and global issues that nurses may not feel as connected to. This is why it is so critical to begin teaching and role modeling

political activism early in undergraduate education and why it is important that nursing educators provide students with opportunities to participate in political activism in undergraduate nursing programs. Encouraging students to belong to student government and student nursing organizations does not go far enough. Role modeling must occur with consequences of not acting clearly articulated. Perhaps the ANA and its state affiliates need to focus more energy and resources towards their local districts and to issues important at the grassroots level.

Political capital

To ensure that awareness, power, and social capital assist in establishing political capital, and that when acted upon, political capital leads to political activism, regression analysis was utilized. The p value was <.0001 (see figure 3). So, it can be concluded that when combined, awareness, power, and social capital are indeed good predictors of political capital. However, looking at these concepts independently (see figure 4) the following observations were made; social capital had p <.0001, power had p =0.0010, and awareness had p =0.1743. This means that social capital and power both are good independent predictors of political capital, but awareness alone is not a good predictor of political capital.

Figure 3

Analysis of Variance					
Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Value	Pr > F
Model	3	209.7343	69.9114	17.02	<.0001
Error	10	410.8810	4.10881		
Corrected Total	10	620.6153			

Figure 4

Parameter Estimates					
Variable	DF	Parameter Estimate	Standard Error	t Value	Pr > t
Intercept	1	0.39713	1.53285	0.26	0.7961
Aware	1	-0.11481	0.08391	-1.37	0.1743
Power	1	0.27913	0.08239	3.39	0.0010
SocCaptl	1	0.63215	0.11222	5.63	<.0001

Katrina & Rita effect

With the unique circumstances facing south Louisiana in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, this study examined if these storms affected the political activism of Louisiana RNs. Respondents were asked if they were registered to vote pre and post Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The percentages (97%) of the respondents who were registered to vote before and after the storms were exactly the same. Only 22% of the respondents said that they were more likely to write a letter or call a public official as a result of the hurricanes. Only 12% of the respondents stated that they were more willing to work with others to solve a problem affecting healthcare or nursing as a result of Katrina or Rita. An even lower percentage (2%) said that the two hurricanes impacted the voting patterns of their family members and only 30% of the respondents reported that political discussions had increased with their family members as a result of Hurricanes Katrina or Rita. So based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that hurricanes Katrina and Rita have not impacted the political activism of Louisiana registered nurses.

Conclusion

Political activism is an important role for the nursing profession to assume. For nurses to engage in political activism, they must first have the political capital. Political capital is the combination of the concepts: awareness, power, and social capital. Awareness is having the knowledge of the issues, players, and the impact of political activism to the nursing profession and to healthcare. Power consists of self confidence, education, and experience. Social capital is the socialization through professional and civic organizations, as well as relationships with family, friends and co-workers. Political activism is simply political capital put in action. Some examples of such action include voting, writing a letter or placing a call to an elected official, organizing a march on the state capital or Washington D.C. or even running for political office.

It is imperative that nursing leaders articulate the role and impact of political activism on the nursing profession and on healthcare. Nurses should be educated on the issues impacting nursing and healthcare. This education needs to begin in undergraduate curriculum. Nursing organizations and nursing leaders must do a better job motivating all nurses to engage in the political activism process. Political activism is indeed an important way for nurses to exercise their roles of caring and patient advocacy.

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