

NAVIGATING POLITICAL DISAGREEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK

***An Analysis of Past Literature,
Ethical Guidance, and Case Examples***

Abstract

Political advocacy is a core tenet of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. As a profession, social work has the responsibility to remain aware of trends that threaten the well-being of diverse populations. The historic connection between oppression and policy is undeniable, and the standards and principles in the Code of Ethics require social workers to intervene and be aware of political trends. However, at times, social workers' political views may not reflect the clients' views. Navigating situations in which a client expresses political content with the social worker requires careful consideration and improvements in the available guidance. Prior literature addresses the political conflict in Israel, Palestine, and Northern Ireland during times of extreme tension in those cultures. Yet, stark contrasts between the United States and those cultures exist, thus justifying the need for specific guidance for U.S. social workers. Currently, the state of society and social work in the United States requires social workers to dedicate increased attentiveness to these types of situations. As such, the connection between social work and political action is undeniable and worthy of further investigation. To do so, two relevant case examples from a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) will be assessed in which guidance from the NASW Code of Ethics, existing approaches, and prior literature will be applied. The evaluation of these case examples is intended to inform the decisions of other U.S.-based social workers confronting political disagreement with clients in direct practice work.

Keywords

clinical social work, political conflict, political disagreement, self-disclosure, pragmatic approach, case examples, ethics

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INTRODUCTION

Political advocacy is a lasting tradition of the social work profession. Originally, social work was composed of staunch advocates engaged in groundbreaking work for historically underrepresented client groups. Clients from diverse groups and those experiencing poverty were the subjects of much of the early advocacy work. While social workers still serve those populations, the populations receiving services have expanded greatly since that time. Correspondingly, advocacy has grown exponentially to include positions that not all clients may support. As a result, there are increasing possibilities for social workers to encounter clients who disagree politically.

A heated 2020 election, tensions from the COVID-19 pandemic, and a divisive media worsened partisan lines. These points of conflict are not isolated to those engaged in political positions, but rather are pervasive across persons and settings. Social workers report that political tension exists to such a degree that disagreement must be navigated carefully and ethically in their work.

Cumulatively, the 21st century has witnessed an increase in the need for social services, due to a more diverse client population and an increase in advocacy efforts, resulting in a demand for social workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). The training of social workers prepares them for employment in a variety of sectors, including work with oppressed and marginalized populations as well as their oppressors. The dichotomy of these relationships requires an acute awareness of culture, political climate, and ethical behaviors in the context of providing services. This project aims to consider these factors and determine how social workers can most ethically navigate political disagreements with clients. This project will consider the international literature, the sociopolitical atmosphere of the United States, and two exemplary case examples in an effort to guide social workers encountering political disagreements with their clients.

PRIOR INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE

The context in which social workers provide services has been found to be highly contingent on the larger social environment (Saleebey, 2001). Recent tensions

accumulating from the COVID-19 pandemic, economic insecurity, and a divisive political environment culminated in societal division at a local and national level. When this division occurs between practitioners and clients, there exists a duty to maintain professionalism and navigate the situation in accordance with the values and ethics of the profession. To this end, there is a notable need for guidance in the literature. The situation emerging in the United States is unique to the country and diverges in several key ways from precedents that seek to provide insight into this kind of work.

The first noteworthy scenario of similarity emerged in Northern Ireland where social workers faced difficulties navigating long-standing political conflict. Following the partition of the country into the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (which is now part of the United Kingdom), the Catholic Irish-identifying people felt indignant as they became the minority in a country that they did not wish to be part of. The partition occurred in 1921 but continued to have effects on the Irish minority for nearly 40 years. More recently, outbreaks of political disagreement have been termed the “Troubles.” This societal conflict had negative physical and psychological impacts on social service users and providers, especially as social service providers were both experiencing and professionally observing the conflict. Even children showed effects of intergroup hatred during this time (Kilpatrick & Leitch, 2004), indicating that society was modeling divisive behaviors between groups (Over & Carpenter, 2012). As such, practitioners also had extreme difficulty in overcoming the political divide that inhibited them in their work and were simultaneously met by a lack of research in navigating political conflict situations (Ramon et al., 2006).

The majority of the limited research on navigating political conflict in social work pertains to the Israeli-Palestine conflict. Indeed, it is the most widely explored sociopolitical issue in the social work literature and must be understood within the specific historical context from which it developed. Historically, Israel desired to exist as an independent, legally recognized nation. In 1948, Israel became a nation. The territory it was granted had been inhabited by Palestinian Arabs, which caused anger and tension among the Palestinians against the Israelis. As a result, the 1993 Oslo Peace Agreement formally recognized that the Palestinian

Arabs were a legitimate group. Still, the area was highly regulated by Israel, and violence was occasionally propagated by the Palestinians against the remaining Israelis in the area.

Israelis—including Israeli social workers—continued to work in the geographic area, but distrust existed between Palestinian clients and the often Israeli social workers (Shamai, 1999). The research initiative into this conflict revealed that distrust existed among social workers from different groups (i.e., Palestinians/Israelis; Ramon, 2004); that Israeli social workers suffered compassion fatigue (Cohen et al., 2006); and that Palestinian social workers felt the same trauma as their clients (Blome & Safadi, 2016), among a surfeit of other results. Many of these articles did not exist when practitioners most needed this information, and thus, these findings were not necessarily widely applied by social workers to evaluate their effectiveness and overall generalizability. During this time, Israeli social workers neglected to discuss the inherent power differentials, which contributed to the Israeli social services practitioners being seen as untrustworthy by the Palestinians since Israelis were already part of a powerful, opposing group. The research that emerged was limited, yet it also yielded several unique applications of theory for effective practice.

THE U.S. CONTEXT

Given the existing literature, a noteworthy disconnect has emerged between prior work and the current political climate of the United States. The differences in culture, ethical standards, and the sociopolitical climate require careful consideration. Furthermore, the legal equality and power dynamic between clients and social workers in the United States is quite different from those in the aforementioned countries. Cumulatively, these differences require a distinction to be made between the prior literature and the current situation.

Culturally, religion is a core aspect of one’s identity, and this is one area in which the clinician-client relationship previously could have been affected. Identity threats, or when the image or personal identification with a group is challenged, are associated with feelings of sadness, anger, and shame (Ferguson et al., 2000; Matheson & Cole, 2004; Ysseldyk, 2011). Identity threat may have been

experienced by the marginalized Palestinians and Catholic Irish. In contrast, it is unknown if the United States has reached a point where political ideology is as strongly held as religious identities, and whether the reaction to an affront to a U.S. person's political beliefs is comparable to the ways in which the Palestinians and the Catholic Northern Irish would have reacted to a religious attack.

Another way in which the current situation diverges from prior work involves the relative power of the social worker and client. In previous work, the clinician may have been from a more privileged or socially valued social status (e.g., Israeli, Protestant, or English) than the client. In the current situation, political views are not dictated by social group, nor do they equate to higher or lower social status. This may provide a protective barrier to some of the negative effects that other countries experienced. It also helps to explain why the current situation of social workers has gone widely unacknowledged. It may appear that no guidance is needed for a situation in which two parties merely disagree; however, there is a need for guidance when social workers are confronting both the individuals negatively affected by political measures and those who support the same political measures. The complexity of this problem grows when the social worker's beliefs clash with a client's and the possibility of disclosure is considered. Disclosure occurs when a social worker opts to share their personal beliefs, identities, or characteristics with a client.

In the United States, another difference is that ethnic affiliation is typically not tied to beliefs. Within the Israeli-Palestine context, practitioner ethnicity or cultural identity generally indicated their beliefs. As a result, it was thought that disclosure by the social worker would lead to greater transparency in the helping relationship (Lee & Besch, 2018; Shamaï, 1999). Despite the differences, this literature provides guidance for social workers who are, for example, publicly associated with or vocal about political issues. If the social workers' beliefs or group affiliations could reasonably become known to the client, then perhaps the approach used by the Israeli social workers could be of benefit. Even so, Baum (2006) noted that a mere three works have begun to explore the impact of client-clinician relationships in a political conflict context, so more research is needed.

Another difference is that there is legal protection for all citizens of the United States, which may provide a buffer to some of the inequality and distrust that were observed in prior political and social disagreements. The U.S. Constitution provides equality for all people, whereas it took years for the Palestinians residing in Israel to be formally recognized. Thus, there is a difference in the cultures of equality.

Finally, and most notably, differences in the current context of a global pandemic, increased awareness of racial injustices, and a divisive political environment have heightened the polarization that has been noted in the past in the United States (Garimella & Weber, 2017; Keena & Knight-Finley, 2019). The stress of such events has led to psychological expressions of distress (Holingue et al., 2020), but it has also manifested in protests and aggressive outbursts against those who disagree with one's group affiliation. Therefore, U.S. social workers are currently addressing an environment that varies significantly from the existing literature. Navigating the current dilemma requires careful consideration and will be investigated in the next section.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Social workers fulfill a number of roles in society: they often administer social services and are involved in political advocacy efforts. Additionally, following several Black Lives Matter protests, calls for social workers to work alongside law enforcement gained media attention. This prospect increases the need for guidance on how to best address political disagreements that arise in the course of social work. Indeed, U.S. social workers must acknowledge the surrounding environment in order to effectively help clients and to fully comply with the code of ethics.

To address these political situations, the NASW provides a code of ethics (2017) that social workers are expected to utilize when navigating complex situations. This code is a valuable resource but does not provide specific guidance, which the current political climate warrants. As such, this code will be considered as one component of addressing the emerging sociopolitical atmosphere that social workers confront as they work with clients in a variety of contexts.



FIGURE 1. Mentor Robin Miller and student researcher Saige Addison reviewing case example summaries.

To demonstrate the type of interactions that social workers have recently had, two case examples will be provided and applicable theories will be discussed. Support for the action(s) is generated through novel applications of existing theory and use of the NASW Code of Ethics. From these examples and further discussion of prior work, this project identifies strategies for social service providers who encounter clients with strongly held political beliefs.

Case Example 1

The first example involves a woman participating in individual therapy with a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW). As such, the interaction was voluntary and was sought as a result of the client's genuine desire for help.

This woman had a history of suffering abuse within her family. When she was a child, her father would pull her by her scalp, which caused serious psychological distress. Later in life, she married someone who began to sexually abuse her. This continued until her husband became disabled. Her next partner also sexually abused her and despite recognition of this maltreatment, she continues her pattern of engaging with these types of men. Furthermore, she continues to support Donald Trump, despite knowing that he has had allegations of sexual assault brought against him. She supports President Trump because she identifies that he respects women. Although there seems to be no cognitive dissonance arising for the client, there is a disconnect when the situation is viewed from an outside source. Especially when the practicing social worker holds a different belief from the client's, this interaction introduces the question

of how to best address the problems without negatively impacting the client.

Given the current political climate in the United States, outright opposition to this belief would likely result in termination of services and invalidation of the client. The social worker finds it implausible and unnecessary to agree with the client while maintaining unconditional positive regard and respecting the self-determination of the client. Navigating this interaction requires a theoretical reframing and careful consideration of the most ethical course of action.

The pragmatic approach addresses sensitive matters involving individuals or groups by emphasizing the importance of evaluating the consequence of a course of action. Pragmatism has been widely explored within philosophy and has been employed by social workers involved with individuals who hold certain religious beliefs (Gokani & Smith, 2019). The underlying principle of pragmatism emphasizes that any interaction or guidance by the social worker should be productive to the previously established treatment goals of the client. Hence, the most acceptable reaction by the social worker in this scenario would be to respond to the statements of the client rather than the ideology behind the statement. As such, the social worker asked the client to identify her perspective regarding how Trump respects women (for the purpose of exploring what a respectful interaction looks like). Thus, this discussion that initially addressed an area of potential disagreement was utilized as a pragmatic step toward the client's goals of improving her interactions with members of the opposite gender.

As was noted, this approach can be effective when working with clients different from the social worker. It directs the personal reactions of the social worker toward a focus on the treatment goals of the clients. This example provides necessary guidance to practitioners who may be faced with an immediate situation requiring acknowledgment of a sociopolitical issue related to the client.

Case Example 2

The second example involves an adult male client, again working with the same social worker described above.

This man identifies a clear belief that males are generally superior to females and has previously struggled with a number of relationships. Although he sees a female social worker, he generally believes women should stay in the home. He recently married his third wife, and they are attending counseling together to resolve the problems that were emerging, one of which is that the wife and the husband hold opposing political beliefs. As a result, these political disagreements entered their counseling sessions, and the social worker became responsible for incorporating them into the treatment plan.

Because of this, the social worker found it acceptable to disclose—or share information about her personal beliefs—even though self-disclosure is often avoided in social work. She admitted that she was more politically aligned with the wife due to her adherence to the NASW's core values and her professional identity as a social worker. Because it was both professional and in line with the NASW Code of Ethics, self-disclosure was the best path forward for working with this couple.

The choice to disclose is situated within the growing professional and scholarly literature that encourages this practice. *Social Work Today* initiated a conversation surrounding this topic in a practice-relevant article (Reamer, 2019). The article cited parts of the NASW's Code of Ethics and addressed conflicts of interest and the (social) media presence of social workers. It was recommended that the social worker disclose any conflicts of interest that arise and evaluate whether termination is necessary. Although premature termination is associated with a variety of negative consequences (Swift & Greenberg, 2012), the social worker is justified in sharing information that may play a role in the client's perception of the provider and the provider's care. This information levels the metaphorical playing field between clients and social workers and allows the treatment to move forward in the direction that the client indicates.

Relatedly, exploration of the NASW Code of Ethics revealed an update that addressed how media presence can affect a social worker's need to disclose: when the social worker's beliefs or group affiliations are available on the Internet or could otherwise reasonably become known to the client, then the social worker should carefully act with this information in mind. Often, this

means that transparency will be the best way to address a conflict of interest that has emerged within the helping relationship. To put it succinctly, information online poses the same threat as would disclosing personal beliefs directly to the client, and social workers have an obligation to be aware of and to navigate this type of situation in accordance with the NASW Code of Ethics.

Further support can be found in prior literature. Israeli social workers sometimes opted to share their personal stance and identity with the client. This was warranted since prior to disclosure, the client may have already known that the social worker was not from their ingroup. Addressing—rather than obscuring—the obvious differences between the client and social worker allowed a foundation of trust to be built.

To return to this case, the man decided—consistent with his previously controlling tendencies—that politics would no longer be discussed while working with the social worker. The social worker now provides strategies to the couple to discuss these disagreements outside of their session. Although the client has now restricted the conversation from this area, work with these clients continues to move forward in an ethical manner. Despite the reaction to this disclosure, the social worker’s decision was justified and the disclosure was handled in an ethical, productive, and professional way.

CONCLUSION

During times of extreme political disagreement, there is a significant need for guidance for social workers. The existing literature provides a starting point for navigating these complex situations, but the circumstances in the United States differ drastically from those found in Northern Ireland and Israel with regard to religious identity, relative power, and the salience of ethno-political beliefs. These differences create a new situation for social service users and providers in the United States. The dissimilarity of the precedents is compounded by the stresses of a global pandemic, growing economic instability, and increasingly highlighted racial injustices and protests. Altogether, the situations cannot be directly generalized to each other, so this exploration was necessary.

In sum, the investigation of the literature and the two representative case examples show how U.S. social workers may approach working with clients who hold different political beliefs. It was found that when political beliefs or topics are introduced during the course of a social worker’s duties, the social worker must evaluate whether the statement from the client can be used to work toward the client’s previously established goals or if disclosure is warranted. (A concise diagram of guidance is provided in Figure 2.) If possible, social workers should continue to provide ethical and

TABLE 1. Self-Disclosure of Political Beliefs in Social Work: Guidance from Past Literature

Availability of Political Beliefs from the Social Worker (Public/Nonpublic)	Approach	Effects and Results	Supporting Research
Public (e.g., internet, social media, community involvement, mutual friends, word of mouth, etc.)	Disclose prejudice, beliefs, and position Remain neutral toward the client Respect the client’s beliefs	Greater trust Increased understanding In some cases, the client and the social worker eventually agreed	Shamai (1999)
Nonpublic (e.g., information that is not available in any form conveniently accessible to the client)	(Generally) do not disclose Evaluate whether the political content emerged from another issue Redirect the client	Maintenance of the helping relationship	Gokani & Smith (2019)

Based on Gokani & Smith’s (2019) and Shamaï’s (1999) work and the NASW Code of Ethics (2017).

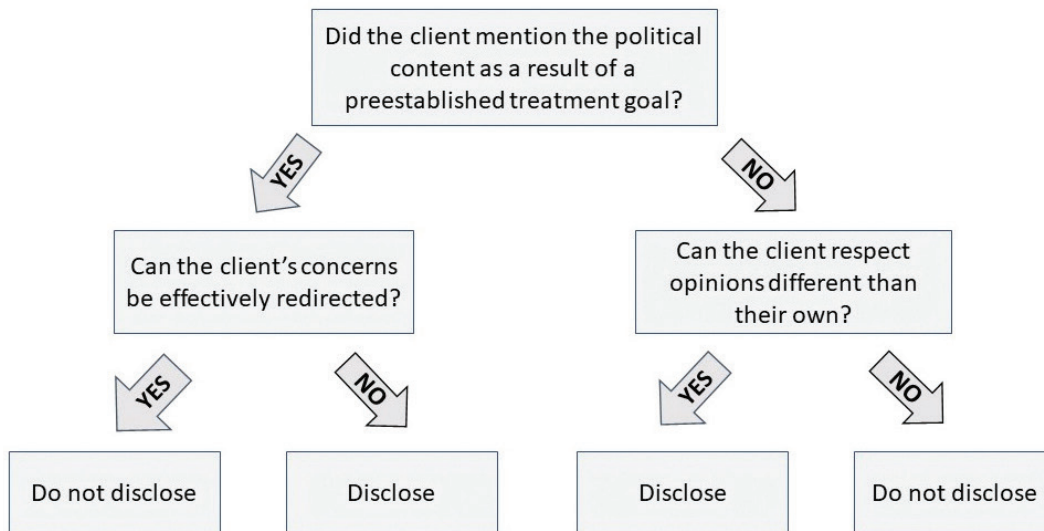


FIGURE 2. Practice recommendation: When to disclose political disagreement.

impartial care to their clients—even as political disagreements are addressed. Although this can be a sensitive topic, social workers must be prepared to address it and to create a safe space where clients can continue to receive services despite their differences with the social worker. Indeed, political differences will continue to exist in the United States regardless of the other factors that have exacerbated tensions. Social workers must have an understanding of how to best navigate political disagreements with clients and an acute awareness of how the larger sociopolitical environment affects that. The prior international literature was summarized here and practice-relevant recommendations were made for effective social work practice. In this project, the goals of better understanding the state of the profession and determining strategies for U.S. social workers currently dealing with these situations were accomplished.

This project provides guidance for social workers confronting political content with clients. Using the case examples, models, and knowledge generated through this project, social workers can identify ethical courses of action regarding disclosure of political beliefs. Indeed, by reflecting on the client's goals and determining the likelihood of a client discovering public information about the social worker's political views, social workers can identify the most appropriate actions following this guidance.

Moving forward, it may be helpful for additional guiding questions to be developed that may help practitioners determine how to proceed in similar situations. It may also be helpful to further discuss how and why some social service users are more likely to bring political topics into their work with the social worker. Beyond these, a greater understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected people, in general, may be useful in comprehending the sociopolitical environments in which social workers are providing services.

However, literature is still emerging on these topics, and social service providers are adequately addressing the issues that they have been faced with. This discussion contributed to the depth of literature on navigating political conflicts in the United States and provided practice-relevant strategies to those in the field of social work.

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