

MODIFIABLE FACTORS THAT SUPPORT POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BY NURSES



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Political participation is an opportunity for individuals to give their time and energy in such a way that it benefits others and advances relevant agendas. Political participation is a key issue for nurses because they are familiar with clinical issues that directly impact health care policies instituted at the local, state, and federal levels. Collectively, nurses also represent the largest number of health care providers in the United States and are among the most trusted health professionals. However, there are many obstacles that prevent nurses from taking a more active role in politics, creating a gap in how nurses pursue and respond to political participation, or civic engagement. The purpose of this exploratory review is to identify modifiable factors that support political participation among nurses. A review of the extant literature revealed three primary factors that promote civic engagement among nurses: (a) integration of political education in the nursing curriculum; (b) value of active psychological engagement, including a personal interest in political knowledge and information; and (c) value of collective influence such as membership in professional organizations. (Index words: Political participation; Nurses; Civic engagement; Social justice) *J Prof Nurs* 32:54–61, 2016. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Background

APPROXIMATELY 3 MILLION nurses in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013) represent the largest health care provider (HCP) group in the nation and have the potential power of having a remarkable collective voice. According to Gallup (2013), nurses are the most trusted professionals, ranking at least in the top three for 14 consecutive years. Nurses, by sheer numbers, provide most of the direct patient care in the United States and embrace their role as the most prominent HCP available for these services. They are recognized for their honesty and integrity in advocating for the needs of their clients and are trained to effectively communicate with an empathetic ear (Hall-Long, 2009). Furthermore, nurses gain direct insights while interacting with their clients, allowing them a personal perspective into how health care, or lack thereof, affects various populations and people (Short, 2008).

The health care literature abounds with studies that explore reasons why nurses have disengaged from political participation (Boswell, Cannon, & Miller, 2005; Donovan, Diers, & Carryer, 2012; Long, 2005). However, there are steps that can be taken to move nurses toward greater political activism. The aim of this exploratory review of the literature was to identify modifiable factors that positively affect the political participation of nurses, ultimately contributing to the larger body of knowledge regarding this subject.

Nurses possess several key qualities acquired through their training that are easily transferable into the political arena. These include strong negotiation and communication skills, patient advocacy, clinical expertise, and attentiveness and empathy. Their strong abilities to negotiate and communicate well are skills that can be readily transferred and are needed for political activism (Des Jardin, 2001). Competent problem solving and collaboration are other necessary aspects of nursing practice (Long, 2005). Boswell, Cannon, and Miller (2005) further elaborates the point and emphasizes that the skill set nurses acquire as part of their clinical training, which includes managing diverse personalities, responding to unstable circumstances, and conflict management, illustrates that strong communication skills are essential to effectively collaborate for a shared goal. The concept is also expounded upon by Warner (2003) in her identification of three common traits nurse activists share: the core nursing principles of assessment, strategic problem solving, and

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interpersonal relations. That is to say that when these basic principles are effectively shifted from the perspective of nursing to politics, political competence may be within every nurse's skill set. Through a qualitative phenomenological study, Warner presents a paradigm framing how nurses already possess the skills needed to excel in political advocacy. In essence, nurses are equipped to manage the demands of political involvement based on the intrinsic professional and behavioral traits integral to nursing.

Nurses also have the clinical experience to provide vital input when drafting policies related to protecting and promoting public health. By becoming more involved in political processes, nurses promote movement on many of the legislative measures that are discussed at the local, state, and federal levels. For example, environmental health is a major public health concern (Clark, Barton, & Brown, 2002; McDermott-Levy & Kaktins, 2012; McDermott-Levy, Kaktins, & Sattler, 2013) and is one such area where clinical knowledge from a nursing perspective is valued input as policymakers consider aspects of an environmental program. In addition, nurses are a fundamental component of the patient care model, in that they are the primary person who communicates with the client, regardless of the health care setting. This type of contact gives nurses firsthand experience and insight into patient problems, providing a unique clinical perspective to emerge. Thus, nurses can use firsthand accounts of patient care experiences to shape their messages to legislators while also offering recommendations and participating in policy development that fosters system-based

interventions for population-based health care problems. Additionally, legislators would value more nursing input, especially when delivered in the context of public health (Perry, 2005). Without nursing input, which includes expertise in health promotion, policy makers remain uninformed of how illness impacts their constituents. The intimate spaces shared with patients, provided from a nursing perspective, allow a candid view of patient problems; delivered in an influential way to legislators, nursing testimony has the potential to have a profound effect on the way health policy is drafted.

The ability to draw from nursing experience and knowledge is also valued when engaging in political discussions. Using nursing knowledge as valued "currency" allows nurses to expand their expertise, or clinical knowledge, to developing health care policy (Warner, 2003). The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) echoes this sentiment in their report *From Patient Advocacy to Political Activism* (2010) by recognizing that there is a connection between nurses' increased level of political participation and both improved health care outcomes and enhanced quality of health care delivery systems through the development of political efficacy and competence. The implication here is that nurses must strive to practice to the full extent of their education and training, the latter being one of four goals listed in the Institute of Medicine's (IOM) report *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health* (2010). As advocated by the AACN, the IOM report suggests that the social responsibilities of a civic servant can be

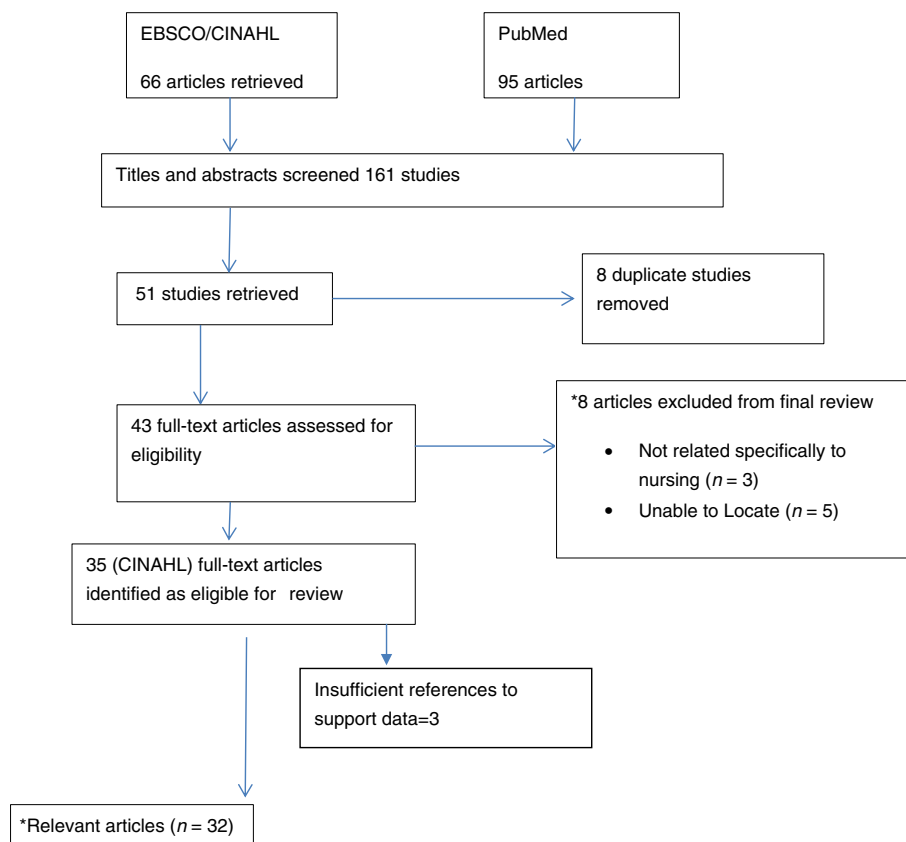


Figure 1. Flow chart of the systematic review literature study selection.

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