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**Nurse Practitioners and Political Engagement:  
Findings from a Nurse Practitioner Advanced Practice Focus Group  
& National Online Survey**

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**Introduction**

Nurses occupy a unique and powerful position in our health care system. They spend more time than other health professionals in direct patient care and interact with patients and families, often during times of great need and distress. They are often the first to know when our health care system does not meet patient needs, and they have a deep understanding of how it fails to provide access to safe, affordable, and high-quality care to all Americans, regardless of their background or status.

Nurses know as well as anyone that our system is broken, and they are in a key position to improve it. Nurses are the largest sector of the professional health care workforce, numbering more than 3 million nationwide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). And they are consistently ranked as the nation's most trusted and respected profession (Gallup Organization 2014 annual poll; Porter-O'Grady & Malloch, 2011). Nurses are well-positioned to use their collective strength, their good reputation, and their unique set of skills and experiences to organize and agitate for change.

Despite their strength, reputation and unique skill set, many nurses underestimate their political power. Compared with other health professionals, nurses are active in national and state organizations but must take additional steps to transform the nursing profession to improve health and health care. This paper explores the reasons why nurse practitioners (NP), as a general rule, do not step outside of their clinical practice roles to participate in political processes and recommends steps nurse practitioners can take to play a more influential role in shaping health policy. Participation in these processes is critical in changing laws that restrict scope of practice, which undermines access to care and insurance reimbursement policies that discourage nurse practitioners from providing primary care services and has a negative impact on patients.

**Methodology**

On April 3, 2014, 15 advanced practice nurse practitioners convened at the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce in Philadelphia to discuss current levels of advanced practice NP political involvement and explore ways to increase NP participation in the political process. The group was diverse in terms of age, gender, and ethnic and racial background. Participants held a variety of professional positions, worked in a wide range of employment settings, and had different qualifications and education levels.

The group's objectives were to explore why advanced practice NPs engage in or abstain from participating in the political process and identify the benefits to health and health care of political engagement; learn how politically-engaged NPs became active and identify barriers to engagement; discuss strategies to increase NP involvement in the political process; and explore tools and resources that can effectively spur political activation.

After the focus group disbanded, the authors developed and disseminated an electronic survey to 50,000 advanced practice NPs around the country to gather additional information about NP political involvement. More than 875 advanced practice NPs, from 44 states and Australia, responded. This paper discusses the highlights from the Nurse Practitioner Advanced Practice Focus Group and the online Political Involvement Survey.

### **Findings**

- **Definition of Political Engagement**

Focus group participants listed the following words to define and describe the term *political engagement*. Please note that participants used the term *political engagement* interchangeably with the terms *political activism* and *political involvement*. As such, the three terms are treated as synonyms throughout this paper.

Terms			
Informed	Leader	Spokesperson	Voter
Aware	Pioneer	Dedicated	Passionate
A Member	Educated	Resourceful	Activism
Credible & Reliable	Changing Status Quo	Present	Knowing their Audience
Commitment to Patients & Practice	Systems Thinker	Flexible	Connections with Stakeholders

- **Levels of Political Engagement**

Focus group participants reported wide variation in levels of political engagement. Some participants reported heavy involvement in the political process, (i.e., participating in state and national NP organizations and taking an active role writing letters, meeting with their

representatives and keeping abreast of regulations affecting advanced practice NPs), while others indicated they had very little exposure to the legislative process. To get a broader sense of the level of political involvement among NPs, the online survey asked a number of questions about participation and experience with the political process.

On average, nearly three-fourths (73.3 percent) of respondents said they currently belonged to a *state* NP organization. Participation levels did not vary significantly by experience. About 75 percent (74.7) of NPs with three to five years of experience said they currently belonged to a state NP organization, and 73.6 percent of NPs with more than a decade of experience said the same.

Survey participants who are still in school had a much lower participation rate in state NP organizations (57.5 percent) than practicing NPs. Participation levels also varied by specialty. Specialists in ancillary services and public health were the least likely to be members of a state NP organization (50.0 percent and 42.9 percent, respectively), while NPs working in primary care, dermatology, cardiology and gerontology had the highest participation rates.

About seven in 10 (70.1 percent) respondents stated that they currently belonged to a *national* nurse practitioner organization. As above, participation levels did not vary much by professional experience but did vary significantly between students and practicing professionals. Only 42.5 percent of respondents who are still in school currently belong to a state or national NP organization. Further, only half (53.8 percent) of NPs who were not currently working, either because they are unemployed or retired currently belong to a state or national organization.

The findings indicate high levels of involvement among practicing NPs in political organizations at both the state and national levels, but comparatively low levels of involvement among students and unemployed and retired nurse practitioners. This illustrates the need and opportunity to educate and encourage NP students to participate in state and national advocacy groups.

- **Motivation for Political Engagement**

The survey asked respondents what motivated them to become politically active. The most common response (expressed by 33.5 percent of respondents) was frustration over the inability to practice with full authority. The second most common response (expressed by 22.5 percent of respondents) was frustration with a patient experience where practice restrictions limited the advanced practice nurse practitioners ability to care for patients.

More than half (55.0 percent) of respondents said a professional organization inspired them to become involved, and about one-quarter (26.0 percent) credited a professional mentor for motivating them to become involved. In a separate comment section, many respondents said they were influenced by family members who participated in the political process in some way.

- **Importance of Political Engagement**

Focus group participants unanimously agreed that political activism is extremely important for advanced practice nurse practitioners and to nursing. The following key themes emerged during the discussion:

- **Political activism is essential for patient advocacy.**

Nursing aims to provide safe, effective and compassionate care to patients and their families. If NPs are not conscious of current and/or proposed policies or legislation, patients and their access to care may be negatively impacted through policies or regulations that negatively affect access to care, scope of practice and reimbursement of NP services. In addition, nurse practitioners have the unique opportunity to care for individuals and their families on a daily basis and are in a strong position to advocate for issues regarding treatment and access to care. When the voice of advanced practice NPs is silent, patients and loved ones suffer.

Key medical associations and many physicians still oppose the expansion of the NP scope of practice. Many are unaware of research that demonstrates that NPs provide as high, if not higher, quality of care as physicians and have comparable treatment practices and clinical outcomes (U.S. Congress, 1986; Stanik-Hutt, et. al., 2013). NPs must become stronger advocates for their profession and spread the word about the benefits of advanced practice nurse practitioner-provided care, which include: high quality of care, high levels of patient satisfaction, more affordable care, and the ability to ensure more patients have access to care at a time of physician shortages.

- **Political activism is the essence of professionalism.**

Participants said NPs have a duty to be informed and politically active so they can ensure that health policies protect patients and families, improve health care for all, and help advance the role of the NP and the nursing profession. If NPs speak in a single, unified voice and educate their adversaries about the benefits of nurse-led care, they can advance the nursing profession and have greater acceptance as valued practitioners within the medical community.

- **Political activism is the most effective method to create change.**

Participants noted that change can come through a variety of avenues, including organizational change and change on the local and national levels. Participants identified insurance reimbursement policies and prescription power legislation for NPs as areas that need reform. Nurse practitioners need to take proactive steps for themselves, for their profession, and also for the individuals and groups whom they serve. Overall, participants emphasized the need to create a single, collaborative entity to advance the role of NPs in the healthcare delivery.

Findings from the online survey support the key themes identified in the focus group. The majority of survey respondents (72.2 percent) said political activism is a professional

responsibility. This percentage is consistent across NPs with different levels of professional experience. Some differences, however, emerged among NPs working in different practice settings. NPs practicing in emergency medicine, (83.3 percent), in colleges or universities (80.8 percent) and in mental health settings (76.7 percent) were more likely to rate political activism as a professional responsibility.

A little more than half (56.6 percent) of survey respondents also believe that political activism is the most effective method to create change. This percentage remained consistent across NP specialties. Only 30.0 percent of NPs working in long-term care settings believe political activism is the most effective method to change. A higher percentage of students (65.6 percent) expressed that belief.

The majority of survey respondents (70.2 percent) indicated that political activism is essential for patient advocacy. High percentages of students (75 percent) and NPs who have been practicing for fewer than two years (76.8 percent) expressed that belief.

### **Challenges/Barriers to Political Engagement**

The focus group discussed the topic of challenges and barriers to political activism. This portion of the discussion focused on challenges experienced broadly throughout the field as well as challenges participants experienced on a personal level. Several themes emerged, as indicated in the table below.

<b>Greatest Challenges/Barriers Identified</b>
Lack of knowledge and experience with the political process
Lack of time
Intimidation/Insecurity in regards to understanding the political process
Competing priorities
Lack of support (primarily from employers)
Stigma associated with politics

Survey findings supported the themes identified during the focus group. The three most common barriers to political involvement are lack of time (71.6 percent), competing priorities (54.2 percent) and lack of experience with the political process (40.1 percent). In addition, about one-quarter of respondents (24.6 percent) cited lack of knowledge, and intimidation or insecurity with the political process (24.1 percent.). About one-fifth said financial constraints (20.5 percent) posed barriers to becoming politically active.

### **Methods to Promote Political Engagement**

Focus group participants and survey respondents were asked to identify methods and techniques that could be used to increase NP participation in the political process. The techniques discussed are outlined below.

<b>Methods to Promote Political Engagement</b>	
<b>Redefine term "political engagement"</b>	Participants called for a change in the definition of "political engagement." Many noted that politics has a stigma and negative connotation associated with it, which prevents people from becoming involved in the process. Participants said the use of more neutral terms, such as "social activism" or "professional activism" and the use of personal stories to promote involvement.
<b>Develop coalition among other healthcare fields/providers</b>	Interdisciplinary teams should be developed among healthcare fields and providers. Participants suggested partnering with dietary, rehabilitation, physical therapy, and pharmacy organizations and associations. A combined effort would provide greater resources and a larger audience.
<b>Replicate successful campaigns from other organizations</b>	Participants identified a number of organizations that have completed successful social campaigns throughout the years, such as the American Medical Student Association, the American Pharmacists Association and the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, as well as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and the Susan G. Komen Foundation. Participants suggested that NPs evaluate the successful campaigns conducted by these organizations and try and implement similar strategies.
<b>Encourage companies to incentivize activism</b>	Participants identified employers as a potential resource to encourage engagement and suggested that employers include political involvement as a job responsibility that would be assessed during annual evaluations. Another participant suggested encouraging employers to offer membership in state organizations at a reduced rate. Politically involved advanced practice NPs can help employers ensure compliance with state regulations and better understand the changing healthcare environment, they said. Involvement can be a motivator to quality care delivery and retention for an organization.
<b>Utilize social media outlets to create successful campaigns</b>	In today's technologically-advanced world, the use of social media is essential for any type of campaign. Participants said that NPs do not currently have—but desperately need—a presence in this realm. Social media outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube were mentioned, and there was significant discussion around Generation NP, a secure and verified social network built by and for NPs. Generation NP aims to create a trusted online collaborative environment that allows NPs to share cases, gain feedback, seek consultation and access important and relevant medical information in one space. Many participants were unaware of the program but liked the idea.

<b>Create small forums</b>	Participants suggested hosting small forums and events on a monthly or quarterly basis throughout the year. Ideas included one-hour lunch sessions and introductory seminars (e.g. Political Activism 101) to introduce NPs to the political process. These types of educational events would provide NPs with an opportunity to gain an understanding of the political process and any issues related to their specialty area and would also facilitate networking. These forums/events could be held by nursing schools/universities, hospitals/health systems, or other NP employers. Continuing education credits could be offered to those who attend these events.
<b>Develop a mentoring program</b>	Participants spent a good deal of time discussing the creation of an advanced practice NP mentoring program. NPs who are more actively involved in the legislative process could become confidantes to novice NPs. These mentoring programs could be introduced at local levels or through NP education programs. The American Association of Nurse Practitioners was mentioned as a possible partner in this endeavor.
<b>Include political activism questions on board exams</b>	All new NPs need to receive national certification and state licenses. Participants suggested including a number of questions related to political activism on these exams. Doing so would force inclusion of the topic in nursing curricula, and NPs would have to be educated on the legislative process and pending legislative issues concerning scope of practice for NPs.
<b>Create internship program with local policymakers</b>	Participants suggested providing individuals with firsthand experience in the legislative process through short-term internship programs with policy-makers to ameliorate intimidation about the legislative process. Representatives could host a student or NP for a short time period, between two days and one week, and medical continuing education credits would be provided to participants. This would benefit the student/NP and also familiarize policymakers with nursing.
<b>Conduct practice-to-practice canvassing</b>	Participants suggested that state member organizations conduct campaigns to increase participation. Field canvassing or phone canvassing could be conducted by nursing organizations or employers of NPs. The task is time-consuming but is a proven method of campaigning that has worked in other fields.
<b>Join a state or national nurse practitioner organization</b>	The majority of survey respondents identified this method as a successful way to promote political engagement. Member organizations reach a large number of NPs throughout the country through their websites, e-mail communications, newsletters and events/meetings. These methods of communication could be very useful to promote political activism opportunities.

<b>Stay informed of state scope-of-practice regulations</b>	A large percentage of survey respondents recognized the need for NPs to stay up-to-date regarding state and national regulations. By keeping informed, advanced practice NPs may be more likely to join state organizations and react to state legislation by sending letters to state legislators and educating others (including physicians).
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The most popular way to promote political engagement is a mentoring program. Two-hundred and fifteen survey respondents said they were interested in participating in a NP mentor program as either a mentor or mentee, and an additional 244 respondents (32.2 percent) said they might be interested in participating in such a program. NPs with three to five years of experience showed the highest interest in the mentor program, with more than one-third (35.4 percent) indicating they would be interested in participating in the program as either a mentor or mentee. NPs working in acute care, primary care, and mental health practice settings were more likely to be interested in participating compared with NPs in other specialties.

The mentoring program would aim to connect volunteer mentor NPs with NPs seeking mentoring and would focus in part on increasing political activism among advanced practice NPs. The program goal would be to grow ongoing outreach efforts of national organizations, NP leaders and participants.

### **Tools to Disseminate Information about Engagement Opportunities**

Focus group and survey participants identified a number of tools that could be utilized to disseminate information about political opportunities and spread information.

<b>Tools to Disseminate Information</b>	
<b>Encourage word-of-mouth communication among all APRNs</b>	Word-of-mouth communication is still one of the most effective and efficient marketing strategies available today. Individual NPs tend to trust referrals from someone they know rather than from other forms of media or marketing. NPs should spread the message about the importance of political activism and share engagement opportunities with colleagues, classmates and friends. NP educators can lead with a strong student outreach.
<b>Utilize nursing schools and nursing programs</b>	Participants identified nursing schools and nursing programs as an effective, but rarely utilized, tool to disseminate information and encourage involvement. Participants suggested contacting directors of nursing schools, professors, advisors and teaching assistants. Other resources such as school websites, directories, textbooks and even alumni lists were mentioned as other communication tools. National Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculty was also mentioned as an avenue to disseminate information.
<b>Utilize state member organizations</b>	Member organizations reach a large number of NPs throughout the country through their websites, electronic communications,



	newsletters and events/meetings. Members are provided with myriad professional development, education, and networking opportunities. Participants suggested using these member organizations to also promote political leadership/engagement opportunities.
<b>Increase patient education about APRN issues</b>	Participants suggested creating a marketing plan that aims to educate the general public, including patients, about issues facing NPs. Many participants noted that patients were a personal motivator for becoming engaged. If patients are aware of issues important to advanced practice NPs, they could communicate their concerns during appointments and inspire their attending NPs to become involved. When properly informed, patients can become key advocates for the nursing profession and the role of the nurse practitioner.
<b>Promote engagement opportunities through social media outlets</b>	Participants noted the need to increase activity on social media outlets to jumpstart political involvement. Resources mentioned included Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Generation NP, YouTube, LinkedIn and Tumblr/other blogs. Participants also suggested that NP membership organizations pay for advertising space on some of these social media sites.

### **Additional Findings**

A number of additional themes emerged from the survey, including:

- **Survey respondents want more formal instruction on political activism.**  
More than eight in 10 survey respondents (81.7 percent) said they want nursing curricula to include content on politics and policy. A number of respondents told personal stories about their political involvement as students and how these experiences inspired them to stay politically active for years after graduation.
- **Few respondents received formal education in politics and policy.**  
Fewer than half of all practicing NPs have received any formal health policy instruction. Only 43.1 percent of NPs who have been practicing for fewer than two years have received any formal instruction in the political process. Additionally, only 45.2 percent of NPs who have been practicing for more than 10 years have received any formal instruction. Students had a higher rate of formal instruction in the subject (55.0 percent).

Of those who had received formal training, 45.6 percent noted that they received it during school; 26.6 percent said they received it at professional conferences (26.6 percent); 7.0 percent said they received it on the job (7.0 percent); 6 percent from personal pursuit (6.0 percent); and 2.5 percent from a colleague. Formal training during

school classes consistently scored the highest, regardless of NP specialty or workplace setting. These findings illustrate the need for continued education and training about the political process and health policy beyond the classroom.

- **Many survey respondents want to be politically involved.**

More than 3 in 10 survey respondents (32.6 percent) who are not currently politically active said they were interested in becoming active, and 45.8 percent of who are not currently active said they may be interested in becoming active in the future.

Of those who want to become politically active, 63.5 percent said they would be interested in becoming a member of a state nurse practitioner organization; 51.3 percent said they would be interested in becoming a member of a national nurse practitioner organization; 62.3 percent said they would be interested in becoming better informed and more aware of state regulations and scope of practice regulations; and 46.3 percent stated they would be interested in continuing professional education.

- **Survey respondents seek a more unified nursing movement.**

In addition, survey respondents identified the need to consolidate member organizations to create a more unified movement. Many believe NP campaign efforts are spread among too many organizations and that NP organizations attempt to take on too many issues. A more centralized and unified network of nursing organizations would “provide volume to our voice.”

These findings are encouraging and highlight the potential for more NPs to become more politically involved. NPs can use the activities identified above to expose non-active NPs to the political process and hopefully inspire, with long-term political engagement and commitment.

### **Conclusion**

The focus group and national online survey provided insight into current NP political involvement levels and into the challenges and barriers blocking engagement. The findings identify several innovative methods, tools and resources to promote and/or encourage NPs to become politically active. Highlights are summarized below:

- **The majority of NPs recognize the importance of political activism for patient advocacy and the overall nursing profession.**

NPs aim to provide safe, effective and compassionate care to patients and their families. NPs must be conscious of current and/or proposed legislation that affects their patients and the nursing profession. In order to continue to advance the nursing profession and to better position NPs in the health care ecosystem, NPs must become advocates for their role and promote it across all professional environments and the general public. While it is apparent that NPs support these ideas, many face challenges when putting them into practice and lack the tools and skills they need to play in the political arena.

- **A high percentage of NPs are currently politically active to some degree.**  
The majority of survey participants are members of a state or national nurse practitioner organization. However, NPs' level of participation within these organizations is unknown. Other political activities that NPs participate in include, but are not limited to, sending letters to legislators, attending lobbying days, contributing financially to advanced practice organizations and campaigns, engaging in social media, staying informed, and educating others. Political involvement does not need to be a time-consuming activity; any small amount of time and effort helps. Half of all survey respondents (49 percent) reported they only spend two to five hours per month being politically active.
- **Innovative techniques and methods must be used to increase NP political activism and dissemination of information.**  
Innovative techniques to promote political engagement include, but are not limited to, redefining the term "political engagement," encouraging companies to incentivize activism, creating internship programs with local policymakers, and the development of a mentoring program. Numerous survey respondents indicated the need for more innovative, online activities. Suggestions included creating more online forums where discussions can be emailed and posted to social media with notifications about opportunities to be politically active.
- **There is a significant potential for growth in NP political activism.**  
A large number of NPs want to be politically active in some way. Implementing some of the tools and methods listed in this report will encourage and support more NPs to take action.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations have the potential to advance the level of political activism among NPs. Taking these steps will not only advance the role of the nurse practitioner and the nursing profession, but also improve health care, patient outcomes and our entire health care delivery system.

- **Develop national mentorship programs to be housed on Generation NP.**  
This mentorship program will connect volunteer mentor NPs with NPs seeking mentoring/mentorship. The program will increase ongoing outreach efforts of national organizations, NP leaders and participants. Generation NP is the perfect medium because it is an online, HIPAA-compliant, closed-loop professional networking site. It is used solely by NPs to educate, collaborate and communicate. With over 50,000 registered and verified members, Generation NP is an unmatched medium to disseminate educational information for NPs and is positioned to be one of the nation's premier platforms for web-based communication, collaboration and education in the field of nurse-managed health care. ([www.generationnp.com](http://www.generationnp.com))

- **Create an innovative marketing campaign.**

An innovative marketing campaign could use social media such as YouTube video and other and educational materials to spread a message about the importance of political activism among NPs. It could be distributed among NPs, with a specific focus on NP programs at colleges and universities.

- **Disseminate research on NP political engagement.**

Present findings from the focus group and online survey at national conferences to increase awareness about the need for enhanced NP political activism. Conferences should include, but not be limited to, ones held by the American Association of Nurse Practitioners and the National Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculty.

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Additional information:

<https://generationnp.com/NursePractitionersPoliticalEngagementGroup>

*\*A FREE registration on Generation NP is required.*