Getting on the Agenda: Assessing the Political Context and Developing Political Strategy

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Section 1: Overview

Political social work is most effective when it has a clear vision, goals, and strategy. Strategic planning must be a thoughtful process that takes into account an assessment of the context in which you are working. This chapter introduces and explains five steps of political strategy development, including:

1. Determining the specific purpose of the political change effort; that is, what specifically you are trying to change
2. Assessing the internal (organizational) and external (environmental) context
3. Identifying the change effort's goals
4. Selecting the specific targets of the political change effort
5. Identifying and selecting of tactics that are likely to influence the target or targets.

Activities throughout the chapter allow opportunities to practice skills in each of these areas.

Developing Social Work Competency
The Council on Social Work Education establishes educational standards for all social work programs in the USA. Content in this chapter supports building competency in the following areas that are considered core to the practice of social work:
COMPETENCY 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice
COMPETENCY 5: Engage in Policy Practice
COMPETENCY 7: Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities
COMPETENCY 8: Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Domains of Political Social Work	
1. Engaging individuals and communities in political processes	◄
2. Influencing policy agendas and decision-making	◄
3. Holding professional and political positions	◄
4. Engaging with electoral campaigns	◄
5. Seeking and holding elected office	◄

Section 2: The Importance of Political Strategy

Clear, calculated **strategy** is critical to effective political social work. While anyone can—and many people do—get frustrated about governmental policies and decide to engage in efforts to try to create change, what increases the likelihood of these efforts being *effective* is an intentional and deliberative focus on strategy.

Marshall Ganz (2005), a leading scholar and practitioner on social movements and organizing, explains that strategy is "how we turn what we have into what we need to get what we want" (p. 214). Essentially, this means that before starting a political change effort, we must make sure that we have a clear sense of what we want to accomplish. Why are we engaging in this effort? What, specifically, do we seek to achieve? In addition, we also need to assess what resources are available to help achieve our goals, and to think carefully and purposefully about what steps we plan to take to achieve these goals.

As social workers, our professional reality may include limited resources or time to achieve policy change or electoral goals. The nonprofit organizations that employ many social workers have limited money and staff time to devote to advocacy. The "usual suspects" who help facilitate newcomers into potential runs for office may be less open to us because of our gender, race, profession, or another outsider status. Particularly in the nonprofit and public worlds, we are also increasingly accountable to funders and other constituencies that require us to show that we are using our resources wisely in a relatively short time period.

Limited access to time, money, and other resources does not rule out success. These factors do, however, make it critical that we effectively and efficiently utilize our resources in a way best designed to achieve our intended results. For example, we need to carefully consider questions such as: Should our campaign spend limited volunteer time and money knocking on doors for the candidate on a street where very few residents have historically voted for our candidate's political party? Or, instead, should we focus our campaign resources on voter outreach efforts in a neighborhood with 100 individuals who have previously voted for candidates with similar policy platforms? Alternatively, should we spend our organization's limited time targeting a generally supportive legislator by organizing a grassroots letter campaign about a specific bill; or should we instead focus that time on building a relationship with a legislator who is on the fence about the bill and sits on the committee to which it was assigned? These—and much more complex versions of these questions—are common kinds of choices that we need to carefully consider as we plan political change efforts.

Ganz (2005) further explains the intersection of strategy and resources, as he states that strategy is "how we transform our resources into the power to achieve our purposes" (p. 214). Ganz's comments emphasize that strategy is not only about how we effectively use resources, but it is also a critical mechanism through which we address power imbalances. In Chap. 4's section *Engaging with your own power as a political social worker,* we identified six areas of power that social workers can use to counter opponents with greater financial resources. Each of these is an

FURTHER REFLECTION: Effects of Major Events

Listen to the story of US policy shifts in the wake of the September 11 terror-ist attacks as described in the Radiolab podcast *60 words:* http://www.radio-lab.org/story/60-words/.

How did these attacks shift policy-making, in social worker and Rep. Barbara Lee's (D-CA) eyes? Can you identify another example of where events or situations quickly shift the policy context?

example of a way, through careful attention to strategy, to convert our resources into power.

Of course, even the best-laid strategy must be adaptable, given the constantly changing nature of politics. In our current fast-paced social context, with new events quickly changing policy and political norms, we can become easily distracted. A false accusation is made about your candidate. A politician tweets something that quickly shifts the public's mood about a bill you oppose. A new amendment is pro-posed that undermines a bill for which you have been advocating, on the day it is being considered. A major news event happens and completely changes the priori-ties of the public, the legislature, or other decision-makers. Events like these can quickly throw us off of our focus, and require that we be able to determine whether and how our strategy should adjust to the changed political context within which we are working.

Clear strategic planning done in advance of your advocacy effort, legislative ses-sion, or political campaign can help keep the team rooted in their purpose. This guides political social workers in adapting to new circumstances and changing con-texts smoothly and effectively, while keeping focused on overall vision and goals. Planning can help identify challenges and avoid potential surprises (Breitrose 2011) and can guide us in preparing contingency plans and fallback positions (Richan 2006). In advocating for the importance of careful political strategizing, Ganz (2005) points out that successful change efforts also must involve creative thinking in order to adapt strategy to new challenges that arise.

In this book, we apply a five-stage approach to designing intentional and thought-ful strategy for political change, including both advocacy and electoral efforts. These five stages are as follows:

1. Determine the specific purpose of the political change effort.
2. Assess the internal (organizational) and external (environmental) context for the political change effort.
3. Identify the long-term, intermediate, and short-term goals of the political change effort.
4. Select specific targets for the political change effort.
5. Identify and select the tactics that will be used in the political change effort.

The subsequent sections of this chapter introduce you to each of these stages. Then, in the next two chapters, you will apply each of these stages more specifically to planning an advocacy campaign (Chap. 6) and an electoral campaign (Chap. 7).

Section 3: What Are You Trying to Change Through Your Political Change Effort? (Stage 1)

Without clarity of focus, it is hard to pursue an effective political change strategy. Therefore, the first stage in identifying a strategy is to determine the specific purpose of the political change effort; that is, what, specifically, are you trying to change?

- Is there an incumbent in the state legislature who routinely works against your values, and an opponent (maybe you!) who would vote more in line with your beliefs?
- Is there an upcoming policy issue before your local school board that could be decided by one vote, and an open seat in the upcoming election?
- Is there a specific social problem in your community that could be solved or improved through a policy change?
- Is there a current policy that is causing harm to vulnerable populations whose voices are not being heard by those in power?
- Is there a group of people in your community, maybe including clients of your workplace or internship, who have not been heard in the political process?

> **APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Identify a Political Change**
> Take a few minutes and reflect on a political change you would like to see in your local community. If you were to successfully achieve this change, what do you expect would look different in your community as a result?

In thinking about *what* you want to work to change, it is important to also think about *why* you want to see this change. Ganz (2005) argues that having clear *motivations*—deriving meaning from your work—is critical to engaging in successful policy change efforts. He illustrates this argument using the Biblical story of David standing up to Goliath, suggesting that David was ultimately successful against his stronger foe because he "knew why he had to do it before he knew how he could do it" (p. 217). We encourage you to reflect on your motivations as you begin to consider your political change strategy. Why do you want to make sure a new elected official is elected? Why are you choosing to run for office? Why is it important to you that a specific policy be changed?

SELF-ASSESSMENT/FURTHER REFLECTION: What Motivates You?
Simon Sinek, a leadership expert and author of the book, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, reminds leaders to focus on their motivations; that is, the emotional core of why they do what they do (Sinek 2011). Visit the TED website (www.ted.com) and watch his talk, "How great leaders inspire action" by typing the title into the search bar.

As you watch this brief video, take some time to reflect and write notes about your personal "why." What motivates you to engage in political action? With a friend or classmate, reflect on your "why" and how this might guide you in pursuing political social work practice.

Stopping to consider our motivations is a step that we too often overlook. Instead, we find ourselves subsumed by the effort itself and lose sight of why we are engaging in it. Unfortunately, this can lead us to become distracted from our goals, or perhaps even face burnout. Clarity about your motivations—and reminding yourself about these motivations as you move forward—can keep you focused on your goals. This also can be a good source of self-care in the face of challenges you may face in pursuit of these goals.

As you examine your motivations for engaging in a political change effort, continue to revisit and refine your thoughts about what specifically it is that you are trying to change, and *why*.

Section 4: Assessing the Internal and External Context (Stage 2)

The second stage in planning an effective political change strategy is to assess the internal (organizational) and external (environmental) context in which we will act. The internal context refers to the assets and deficits you and your organization possess as you prepare to embark on your policy change effort. External opportunities and constraints exist within the broad context in which you are working: the specific social, economic, and political climate in which you seek policy change.

In our assessments, we need to clearly examine what resources are available to us, as well as the opportunities *and* challenges that we will face both internally and within the larger external context. As VeneKlasen and Miller (2007) state, "Being strategic means making careful choices about how to use and leverage scarce resources… Being strategic demands a careful analysis of external opportunities and constraints and internal organizational resources for addressing a problem" (p. 100). In this section, we present specific questions to guide your assessments. One tool that you may find helpful to use in conjunction with these questions is **SWOT analysis**, which stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. SWOT analysis is a process of looking internally at an organization's strengths and weaknesses, and externally at its environmental opportunities and threats. You may

have used SWOT analysis in other settings—it is very common in nonprofit strategic planning. See the Resource list to further explore ways that this tool might help you in assessing your effort's internal and external contexts.

Assessing Your Individual and Organizational Context

Before you move forward with any political strategy, take a serious and realistic look at both the resources you have available to expend on the policy change effort and any challenges you face. If you are working on your change effort as part of a larger group, campaign slate, coalition, human services agency, etc., these questions are best discussed and reflected upon as a group. Five core internal assessment questions are important to consider at this stage:

1. Are you and your allies fully prepared to embark on this effort?
2. What time, money, and people resources do you and your allies have to support these political change efforts?
3. What prior experience and expertise do you and your allies bring to support this political change effort?
4. What sources of political power do you and your allies possess relevant to this political change effort?
5. What challenges do you and your allies face as you enter into this political change effort?

Your answers to these questions influence subsequent decisions throughout the strategic planning process. Because answers to these questions will inevitably differ by individual and organization, your strategic plan may look different from that of another organization seeking the same policy change, or from another candidate seeking the same position.

Be self-reflective and honest about your individual and organizational capacity as you conduct this internal assessment. This is not the time to inflate your resources—for example, if a political campaign designs its strategy under the assumption that it can fundraise $1 million, then it will find itself in a world of trouble when it realizes 1 month before the election that it would have been much more appropriate to estimate that the campaign could raise $250,000.

APPLY YOUR SKILLS/SELF-ASSESSMENT: Assessing the Internal Context
Based on the political change you identified in Stage 1, briefly answer each of the five questions posed here about the internal environment. As you answer these questions, assume you are acting alone in your political change effort, not as part of an organization. Based on this assessment, what are the two biggest strengths you bring to this political change effort, and what are the two biggest challenges you might face?

Assessing the Social, Economic, and Political Environment

Your political strategy benefits from establishing a full understanding of the social, economic, and political environment surrounding the proposed policy change. Accessing as many sources of data as possible will provide the most complete picture of the environment and players. In this assessment process, seek to identify the critical contextual issues that will likely influence how key players and the public view your proposal.

Three sets of core questions should guide your assessment:

- What is the current **social climate** on the municipal, state, or federal level at which your change is focused? Social climate includes the social context and psychological climate in a given community or group. It is rooted in perception, not necessarily data or an objective fact (Bennett 2010). How might the social climate impact openness and/or resistance to your proposed change?
- What is the current **economic climate** on the municipal, state, or federal level at which your change is focused? This evaluates perception of economic issues, and may differ from what one might expect looking at numerical economic indicators. How might the economic climate impact openness and/or resistance to your proposed change?
- What is the current **political climate** on the municipal, state, or federal level at which your change is focused? What are people's opinions or attitudes toward the political system in their area? Is there likely to be a sufficient constituency open or resistant to your change? Is there realistic potential for this political climate to shift in the near future?

The two subsections below provide further information to help you conduct this external assessment. First, we discuss the relevant levels of government in which you might be working. Secondly, we overview helpful sources of information to gather information to answer these three sets of questions.

Levels of Government

To assess the external climate, you must first identify the level of government at which your change should be focused. To do this, we need to understand the differences in levels of government (municipal, state, federal) and the different responsibilities of each level. While the content below may be a review for some readers, it is important context to help ensure that you are focusing your energies effectively. It may be useful to review it with a specific social change in mind, to think about what aspect of the change is relevant to each aspect of government. Below, we distinguish between each of these core levels of US government and outline the key institutions involved in government policy-making at each level.

As you proceed in identifying the level of government at which you will focus your change effort, make sure to also consider which specific country, state, or municipality needs your attention. Consider that the geographic area in which you need to focus your change strategy is not always the area in which you are

geographically located. The policy change you seek may need to be put into place by a government to which you are not a constituent. For example, if you are working in a city center, but live in an adjoining town, key players in that city may be more relevant in creating policy change that affects your constituency.

Federal Government

The **federal government** is the level of government responsible for providing policy governance and oversight of the entire USA. The U.S. Constitution specifically delineates the areas of policy over which the federal government has authority (Constitution of the United States of America: Analysis and Interpretation 2016). These include issues related to national border security (defense, immigration), issues that cross state lines (transportation, drug enforcement), and providing for "the general Welfare of the United States," a clause that has been interpreted in a variety of ways and has been the focus of much disagreement throughout the nation's history.

The structure of the US federal government, as defined by the Constitution, is organized into three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial. The **bicameral legislature**, broken into two houses—the U.S. House of Representatives (where you are most directly represented by your district representative) and the U.S. Senate (where two senators represent your state)—*makes laws*. The **executive** branch, consisting of the president, vice president, and the executive branch agencies, *carries out the laws*. The **judicial** branch, which includes the U.S. Supreme Court and federal district and appeals courts, *evaluates laws* to clarify their meaning, decides how laws apply in specific cases, and determines whether laws meet the requirements of the Constitution. Some version of this three-branch structure is replicated at the state level and in many local governments across the country.

> **BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE: The Legislative Process—From Theory to Practice**
> Watch everyone's favorite video about government, "I'm Just a Bill" from Schoolhouse Rock: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyeJ55o3El0. Now watch this video providing an example of the Georgia state legislative process regarding the backlog of untested rape kits in that state: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrxTrR5_8Zo.
>
> As you watch these two videos, what similarities do you see between the process in theory (Schoolhouse Rock) and in practice (Georgia's process)? What differences do you see?

By design, the U.S. Constitution places these three branches in conflict with each other through a system of "checks and balances." At the federal level, this means that each of the three branches of government has the power to provide input into the work of the other branches. As a result, this can slow or even stop the work of another branch. In early 2017, this dynamic was illustrated by federal courts halting the Trump administration's Executive Order banning visas to travelers to the USA

from certain countries (Gerstein 2017). In practice, checks and balances work as follows:

- *Congress* is checked by the *President,* who can either sign or veto legislation passed by Congress, and by the *Supreme Court* (and other federal courts), who can declare passed legislation unconstitutional.
- The *president* is checked by *Congress,* who must approve his or her appointments and budget and who can impeach him or her in certain situations, and by the *Supreme Court,* who can declare the president's orders unconstitutional.
- The *Supreme Court* is checked by the *president,* who nominates judges that serve on it and other federal courts, and by *Congress,* who approves the nomination of these judges via the Senate and who can impeach judges in certain situations.

This process of checks and balances can be frustrating at times, especially when we watch one branch of the government stop a policy we like that originated in another branch. However, this framework was very intentionally designed by our nation's founders, to prevent any one branch from becoming too powerful. (If you've ever heard the song "Nonstop" from the musical *Hamilton*, you've listened to the process of designing these checks and balances (Miranda 2015).)

You may have heard the media referred to as the "fourth branch of government," the fourth estate, or the fourth power. While the media is not included in our Constitutional system of checks and balances, this term illuminates the role the media plays in providing informal crucial checks and balances to these three formal branches of government (Luberda 2014).

While the three-branch structure—and the accompanying checks and balance system—captures the broad essence of US policy-making, the reality of federal governmental policy-making is frequently more complex. In some cases at the executive branch level, for example, the president can use **executive orders** to make laws. Executive orders were designed to allow the president to directly manage executive branch operations (National Archives and Records Administration n.d.). In application, their uses seem to expand beyond this. While political rhetoric often treats the use of executive orders as a modern problem involving recent presidents, executive order usage stretches back to George Washington's administration (Zavis 2017). For example, the World War II-era Japanese internment camps discussed in Chap. 1 came about through an executive order, demonstrating that sweeping or controversial executive orders are not a new phenomenon. You can see the range of what executive orders may entail by looking at the Federal Register's compilation of executive orders from the last four presidencies (see a link to these downloadable, searchable spreadsheets in the Resources section). There are limits on the ability of a president to legislate via executive order. However, the practice of using these orders and the pushback from Congress and the judicial system has varied substantially over the years. Phillip Cooper's book (in the Resource section) provides an overview of this process up through the Obama administration.

The Schoolhouse Rock version of the law-making process requires that the legislative branch pass legislation and send it to the president for his or her signature.

However, to add another wrinkle to federal policy-making, legislation that Congress passes often includes just a broad overview of the law that Congress has in mind. Once a bill is passed and signed into law, the specific federal agency (or agencies) responsible for implementing the new law is required to further develop the law's details. These include determining who is responsible for implementing the law, how it will be implemented, and specific details of what the program or policy (including eligibility guidelines) will look like. Even after a law is implemented, the president can request that an agency modify the way it implements current legislation.

Executive branch agencies use a process known as the **regulatory process** to determine how laws will be implemented. Through the regulatory process, an executive branch agency puts forth or "promulgates" **regulations** specifying its proposed implementation details. These are disseminated through a document called the *Federal Register*, available both in hard copy and online. By law, once published in the *Federal Register*, proposed regulations are open for public comment for a specified time period; individuals, advocates, lobbyists, businesses, and the general public may provide public comment during this time period. The agency reviews public comments prior to issuing its "final rule"—these regulations then carry the force of law.

Regulations often directly address policy content related to issues of access, eligibility, and types of social welfare services, thus impacting the vulnerable populations that social workers serve. For example, agencies within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as well as agencies such as the U.S. Department of Labor, have issued large numbers of federal regulations related to health care. To get a sense of what federal regulations related to health care reform look like, see the Federal Register link provided in the Resource section.

> **APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Commenting on Federal Regulations**
> Go to https://www.regulations.gov/ and find a proposed regulation relevant to your community, employment, field placement, or interest that is currently open for comments. Submit a comment on this regulation.
>
> All of the following resources discuss the process of submitting comments and/or best practices for doing it well. Pick at least one of these to read as you prepare your public comment:
>
> https://www.regulations.gov/docs/Tips_For_Submitting_Effective_Comments.pdf
> https://www.regulations.gov/faqs
> https://www.reginfo.gov/public/jsp/Utilities/faq.jsp
> http://www.foreffectivegov.org/node/4059
> http://eli-ocean.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/2/files/Written-Commenting.pdf

There is often confusion—and sometimes partisan debate—around whether a law (either legislation or regulation) is being implemented as intended or whether it

applies in specific situations. In such cases, the law can be challenged through the courts of the judicial branch—potentially all the way up to the Supreme Court. Depending on the context of the challenge, the judiciary branch can rule on: (1) whether Congress correctly passed the law under the Constitution, (2) whether in implementing the law, the executive branch is correctly applying **legislative intent** (what Congress had in mind in passing the law), and (3) whether implementation of the law is consistent with the Constitution. Federal courts can uphold the entire law or declare the entire law unconstitutional. (While this isn't a history book, the process by which this choice developed is fascinating—see the Resources section of this chapter for more information.) However, federal courts often choose to find a middle ground, resulting in striking changes in the way a law may ultimately be implemented. One example of a middle ground ruling with far-reaching implications was the 2012 Supreme Court ruling in *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*. This ruling determined the Affordable Care Act's constitutionality, but struck down its requirement that all 50 states must expand Medicaid to low-income adults (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation 2012).

State Government

The US government is a **federalist system** (Ishiyama and Breuning 2010), in which power is shared between state governments and a central government in one political system. In crafting this system, the U.S. Constitution very specifically and deliberately states, "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people" (Constitution of the United States of America: Analysis and Interpretation 2016). This is a critical point in understanding the unique system of government in the USA—*all* governmental powers (though exactly what this means is subject to interpretation) that are not explicitly granted to the federal government within the Constitution belong to the 50 states (or the people) (The White House n.d.). Therefore, while the federal government has a great deal of power, there are many issues for which it is necessary or more effective to influence policy through **state governments**.

The role of state governments in policy-making saw an expansion during the latter half of the twentieth century and in the early part of the twenty-first century, through mechanisms such as **block grants**. Prior to the emergence of block grants, states were often required to implement certain federal programs (e.g., Aid to Families with Dependent Children) as designed by the federal government. In contrast, block grants give states a specific amount of federal money. The federal government broadly defines how the states are expected to use this money, but states have substantial authority to determine their own processes for eligibility, benefits, and other aspects of policy implementation (What Is a Block Grant? 2016). Block grants provide more discretion and flexibility for states than a typical federal program administered by the states. However, it is important to note that block grants are often instituted in order to place limits on federal expenditures; this then reduces the availability of funding to meet increases in need.

Block grants are used for programs as diverse as community development and income support (social welfare) and, at the time of this writing, have been proposed for Medicaid (Luthra 2017).

All 50 states are governed by their own legislature, executive branch (led by the governor), and judicial branch, with the three branches in each state performing the same basic functions as those described above. State structures may differ slightly, as defined by each state's Constitution. For example, unlike Congress and 49 other states, Nebraska's legislature is a **unicameral legislature**, meaning that there is only one house in its legislative body (Nebraska Legislature n.d.).

Each state also has a regulatory process similar to that of the federal government, through which state agencies develop regulations to implement state laws (see an example from Washington State in the Resource section). State-level regulatory processes may be of particular interest for political social workers interested in policy issues such as child welfare, mental health care provision, nursing home guidelines, social work licensing, etc., which are guided heavily by regulations by state government regulations.

Municipal Government

Within the USA, each of us lives within at least one local municipality: a town, village, city, parish, and/or county. **Municipal governments** manage issues at the local level. The names for municipal government structures vary. In Louisiana, your Parish Police Jury serves the same role as a Township Committee might in New Jersey or a City Council in Michigan. In Virginia, a Board of County Supervisors might govern your county, whereas in Texas, your county is governed by a Commissioners Court. Municipalities provide many services that touch our everyday lives. States often set parameters for how much power municipalities may have. This differs by state, but in some cases, may also differ by type or size of municipality within a state. In one example, the Georgia Constitution prescribes 16 different services that a municipality may provide (Chambers 2016):

- Police and fire protection
- Garbage and solid-waste collection and disposal
- Public health facilities and services
- Street and road construction and maintenance
- Parks, recreational areas, programs, and facilities
- Storm-water and sewage collection and disposal systems
- Water development, storage, treatment, purification, and distribution
- Public housing
- Public transportation
- Libraries, archives, and arts and sciences programs and facilities
- Terminal and dock facilities and parking facilities
- Codes, including building, housing, plumbing, and electrical
- Air-quality control
- Creation, modification, and maintenance of retirement or pension systems for local-government employees

- Planning, zoning, and community redevelopment

Some social workers may question whether many of these issues are relevant to social work; however, we encourage you to think and reflect on the ramifications each of these types of services may have for the well-being of vulnerable communities and for issues of social or environmental justice. Consider one initiative of cities across the country: to "respond to racial tensions in their communities and address the historical, systemic and structural barriers that further inequity and racism in our nation's cities" (National League of Cities 2016b). In a jarring example, an in-depth 2017 article in *The Atlantic* (see the full article in the Resource section) explores the decades-long persistence of lead poisoning among children living in New Orleans public housing developments (Newkirk 2017). Lead poisoning is known to have negative physical and behavioral impacts on children, along with lowered IQ scores. Despite consistent cases of children testing positive for high levels of lead, the city resisted efforts to abate lead in its public housing units or remediate lead present in city public parks.

A municipal charter generally defines the structure of a municipal government. A charter defines the organization, powers, functions, and essential procedures of the municipal government, although some structure also might come from the state constitution and laws (National League of Cities 2016a). Municipalities are most likely to use one of five major forms of organization: council-manager, mayor-council, commission, town meeting, or representative town meeting. Nearly 90% of US municipalities use either the council-manager system (where an elected city council oversees policy and budget and hires a nonelected professional administrator to oversee the day-to-day operations of the town) or the mayor-council system (where an elected council has legislative power, but a separately elected mayor has significant administrative and budgetary power).

District of Columbia and Puerto Rico
The District of Columbia (D.C.) and Puerto Rico deserve a special note here because their government does not fit the "level of government" model discussed above, and often leaves them with less representation and power than other US citizens (Duany 2017; Raven-Hansen 1974–1975). D.C. is a federal district, overseen by Congress, with the city of Washington inside it. The legislative body of the district is the Council of the District of Columbia, with 13 members including the chairman (often called the mayor). Every law passed by the Council is subject to congressional review (Council of the District of Columbia 2017). Puerto Rico is a commonwealth or unincorporated organized territory, with its own constitution, where the U.S. Constitution only partially applies. The legislative body is the Legislative Assembly of Puerto Rico, with a 27-seat Senate and a 51-seat House of Representatives (Ballotpedia n.d.).

Sources of Information for Your External Assessment

Now that you have the information necessary to determine which level of government is your focus, you are ready to gather indicator data to answer the three external assessment questions (social, economic, and political contexts) outlined at the beginning of this section. A good place to begin is to access and review reputable online sources, including government data, think tank reports, and reports issued by various research centers (see Resource section for a guide to assessing online resources).

Media sources that regularly cover the specific environment with which you are concerned are key sources of information. If you are trying to understand the political context within which policy decisions are being made at a federal level, *The Washington Post* is generally a must-read. If, for example, you are trying to assess the external context for a policy change at the state level in Texas, the media source that you would likely find most helpful is *The Texas Tribune*, as it regularly provides in-depth coverage of both politics and policy issues within the Texas legislature. There may be a newspaper or blog in your local municipality that covers the critical behind-the-scene dynamics of your local government, like the *Valley Independent Sentinel*, which covers several small towns in Connecticut.

While much of the information you need to answer the three external assessment questions is available online and through media sources, no amount of research on your computer can take the place of going out into the community and talking with people individually to get their perspectives of the social, economic, and political situation. This first-hand gathering of information is critical in political social work, especially because how people *feel* about their environment (and therefore potentially how they vote) sometimes differs substantially from the *reality* shown by data. For example, Pew Research Center finds that while national crime statistics showed a double-digit drop in crime rates between 2008 and 2015, the majority of 2016 voters believed that crime rates instead increased during that time period (Gramlich 2016).

The key to gathering information from people and groups in your political context is to engage your core social work practice skills, such as active listening (Cournoyer 2008b). As you meet with people to learn about the political context, listen more than you talk. Stay present, take notes, and reflect back what you hear to be sure you have understood them correctly. Also keep in mind that you will get different (sometimes wildly different) impressions of the same political situation from different stakeholders, just as you would if you were gathering information from different members of a family that you might work with in a clinical setting. Be thoughtful about the information you share from one interview to the next, and be respectful of the privacy of those who tell you their experiences. Consider a variety of ways of interacting with people. Regularly attending community events will give you a long-term sense of community issues and perspectives, while interviews or focus groups will give you a snapshot.

Where possible, supplement individual and group perspectives with resources such as polling data, letters to the editor in the community's newspapers, or engaging with people through online groups. Economic data can be located through local chambers of commerce, regional economic development councils or statewide departments of labor or economic development commissions. A community's perceptions of the economic climate might be understood through polls on economic anxiety or consumer confidence (Marketplace 2015). Those who live in different types of communities or who have different identities perceive these economic data in significantly different ways (American Psychological Association 2017). Combining bigger data with individual interactions can help you see a more nuanced picture.

APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Assessing the External Environment
Using the political change you identified in Stages 1 and 2 of this chapter, identify the appropriate level of government on which to focus. Briefly conduct an assessment in response to each of the three external environment questions (social, economic, and political contexts) posed in this section. What are your core findings? What are some ways in which these findings might impact the viability of your political change at this time?

A Special Note: Helping Clients and Client Systems Assess Their Political Context

Before we move on to the next section of this chapter, take a moment to consider how you can use the information you've learned so far in this chapter as an empowerment tool for the clients or communities with whom you work. What information about their political context is available and easily accessible to those in the community or local agencies? All social workers can incorporate this political information and assessment into practice with clients, whether or not your primary professional focus is political social work.

Whether we are educating clients about the voting process, providing resources that make it possible for community members to engage with their elected officials, or working with communities to create political power through voting or advocating, *all* social workers have the opportunity to increase the political empowerment of their clients. Social workers who work with clients who are unable to vote, perhaps because of their age, immigration status, or due to a felony conviction can help their clients find other ways to have their voices heard. Note: As we will discuss elsewhere in this book, in some states, ex-felons face substantial barriers to regaining the right to vote after completing their sentence (National Conference of State Legislatures 2016). Without asking, you may not know if your clients are interested in the political process. Leaving political power out of our assessment and work with clients and communities is disempowering, and antithetical to the values of the social work profession.

LONG-TERM GOALS

Your most distant goals, long-term goals keep you focused on gaining the results you truly hope to 'win' at the end of your efforts.

INTERMEDIATE GOALS

Goals that are set and achieved along the way to realizing your overall goal, intermediate goals can address the near future as well as later points in the process of achieving long-term goals.

SHORT-TERM GOALS

A goal that is aligned with your long-term goal, a short-term goal can be set now and achieved in the near future.
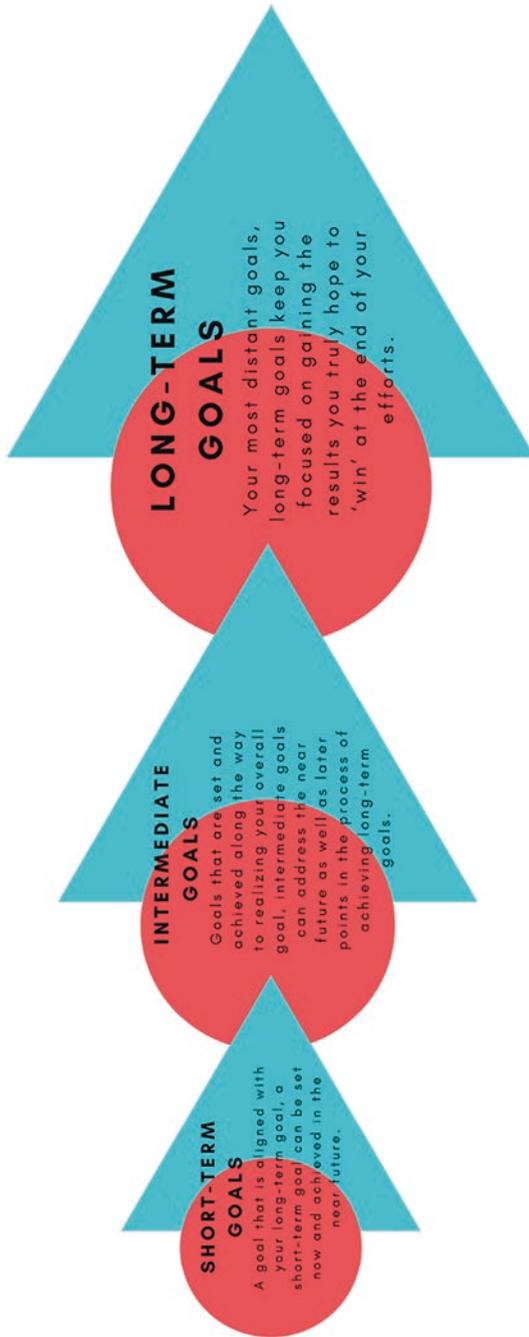
Fig. 5.1 Relationships between advocacy goals

Section 5: Identifying Political Social Work Goals (Stage 3)

In other parts of your social work program, you have likely learned a great deal about setting goals with your clients or other constituencies. In political social work, you also need to set goals as part of designing and implementing well-planned strategy. Thus, the third stage of planning a political change strategy is to identify the change effort's goals. These goals may be **incremental** and move you in small steps toward your overall goal or, in the case of some large-scale advocacy campaigns, focused on **fundamental** change that changes a system or a policy at its roots.

Goals guide our strategic planning and can keep us focused as we begin to engage with the real-life messiness that is politics. This can be particularly helpful at times when it no longer seems possible for us to achieve our original goal(s). Clarity in what we are aiming for can help us make difficult decisions such as whether to move from our ideal goal and instead put our energy behind a possible **fall-back position**, an alternative, often less-than-ideal goal.

A helpful tool for approaching strategizing in political social work practice is to apply the SMART Goal mnemonic (Cournoyer 2008a). As you develop goals for your political social work efforts, specify goals that meet the following criteria:

Specific—are very clear
Measurable—you know if you are successfully making progress toward your goals
Achievable—can practically be attained, given the external environment
Realistic—are based on realistic assumptions about your internal context
Time-bound—have a specific timeline by which they need to be achieved

Keeping the SMART Goal criteria in mind will help you craft goals that can meet your needs as well as the needs of the organizational and political contexts within which you are working. Goal clarity also can help you continually evaluate progress throughout your advocacy or electoral campaign.

In setting goals, we need to distinguish between different types of change goals, split up by time-frame (Breitrose 2011):

Short-term goals: These are typically achievable within a short timeframe, providing your effort with proximal benchmarks to meet. They move you closer to achieving one or more of your intermediate goals. Achieving short-term policy-focused goals often provides celebration opportunities as you continue to work toward your long-term goals.

Intermediate goals: These move you much closer to your overall goals. They serve as building blocks toward your long-term goal(s). Like short-term goals, these can provide celebration opportunities that motivate staff or volunteers involved in the change effort.

Long-term goals: These focus on the specific policy or political outcomes you want to have achieved at the end of your change effort. Long-term goals often require more time and effort, and build upon achieving your short-term and intermediate goals (Fig. 5.1).

In setting these goals, think carefully about the kinds of change you want to achieve through your political efforts. Goals for any *particular* effort may not necessarily be the same as the policy change we are *ultimately* working to achieve. Why? Because often in politics and policy, we do not achieve our preferred policy change on our first try. While we certainly aim high and hope that we achieve our preferred change quickly, it is also the reality of politics that it typically takes many years for legislation to move from the idea stage to being enacted into law. So, while we may have a long-term goal of getting House Bill 235 passed by our state legislature, our short-term goal for this legislative session may more realistically be for the bill to have a committee hearing. In terms of electoral campaigns, it is not uncommon for candidates to lose races before winning election to their desired office. Even strong campaigners such as Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama lost their first Congressional races, before later being elected president of the USA.

The contextual assessments we conducted in Section 4 can help us identify appropriate goals for our specific effort. In a political environment where our bill is not favored by the political party in power, our advocacy campaign's short-term and intermediate goals may need to look different than they would with a different political make-up of the legislature. (This may even mean that we will also want to consider an electoral strategy, to change the makeup of the legislature.) Similarly, short-term and intermediate goals for an electoral campaign might differ based on the nature of the current political climate. For example, is this likely to be a "**wave election**," an election where one political party is expected to make substantial gains in the number of seats it holds, shifting the political status quo? Is this wave expected to be in our candidate's direction or away from it, and if so, how might that impact the numbers of voters we need to get to the polls?

Section 6: Identifying and Selecting Targets (Stage 4)

Once your goals are clearly defined, the fourth stage of a political strategy is to select the *specific* **targets** of your political change effort. That is, you need to determine who will be the focus of your efforts to bring about your goals. We start this target selection process by assessing key players with the power to influence whether or not your specified goals can be achieved.

Key Players in a Political Context

Often social workers and others assume that only legislators or the executive (mayor, governor, president) can make policy change. In reality, there are a significant number of other individuals who can play key determinative roles in making policy change. Such individuals may include those responsible for policy changes within executive branch agencies, those who can control access to other key players, and those who can assert influence from outside of government. In the authors' social

work careers, we have served as staff members in legislative offices, worked for executive agencies, and conducted research that influenced policy, all roles in which we had the opportunity to create change as well as to influence other key decision-makers. Below, we outline how to identify and assess key players and the power they have to influence policy changes.

As you meet with individuals who are politically involved within your context, ask them questions such as: *Who else should I get to know? Who really understands this process/issue/problem?* You will find that from answers to these questions as well as from discussions with your contacts, you will be able to create a list of the key players in your area. Make this a living document—one that you constantly update as key players are elected, retire, move, or gain prominence. (Keep this document safe and backed up in multiple locations. Use a password-protected flash drive <u>and</u> cloud storage!)

Key Players in Government

At all levels of government, there are potential key players who have the power to make decisions around the policy issues in which you are interested. Some of these key players are obvious and in very visible positions—e.g., the president and members of Congress, the governor and members of the state legislature, or the elected leaders of your municipality. Others are less obvious and, therefore, may need to be sought out.

Executive Branch Players

As described earlier in this chapter, a tremendous amount of policy-making happens within executive branch agencies at all levels of government. Therefore, one set of key governmental players are those in the executive branch with the direct ability to influence policy through the regulatory, budgetary, and implementation processes (Hoefer 2016). These include presidents, governors, and mayors, as well as leaders of executive branch agencies (e.g., the Secretary of Education and her deputy and assistant secretaries). Political social workers also work with career and appointed (political) staffers within executive branch agencies who write regulations. They work with municipal, state, and federal government agency staffers charged with implementing legislation and those involved in writing draft versions of municipal, state, and federal government **budgets**. Budgets are documents that lay out a government's proposed spending and revenue and are a critical way to communicate and reinforce policy priorities.

Legislative Branch Players

Legislative bodies provide a window into many ways in which someone may be considered a key player or decision-maker. All US citizens have elected officials in their municipal, state, and federal legislatures who specifically represent their home and the district in which they live. Even if you are not a US citizen, these elected officials have responsibility for the well-being of your neighborhood and community. As a constituent of these elected officials, your direct representatives are the

ones most likely to be responsive to your efforts to influence them. They are, essentially, your employees—which makes you their boss.

As you identify a legislative target(s), it is helpful to understand the approximate number of constituents each legislator serves. The 400 members of New Hampshire's State House of Representatives represent about 3300 New Hampshirites each. In contrast, the most populous state, California, has only 80 members of the lower house (the California State Assembly), so each member represents about 475,000 Californians. Accordingly, in designing an advocacy strategy, it is important to know that it will be easier to gain the attention of a New Hampshire representative by rallying her constituents than doing so to try to get the attention of a California state assembly member.

In addition to your direct representative, other members of these legislative bodies have power to influence your policy issues. In particular, this includes those who serve on legislative committees that oversee policy in your area, hold official or unofficial leadership positions, or can participate in floor votes related to your policy area of interest. If you are working within the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature, with only 49 total legislators or in Alaska with 60 legislators, it is important to realize that each one of these members has a significant amount of comparative power. If you are working in New Hampshire, with 424 senators and representatives in its General Court (that is not a typo; the next biggest legislature is Pennsylvania's with 253), each member has proportionally less power (National Conference of State Legislators 2013a). You would need to build relationships with a larger percentage of these members.

The National Conference of each state legislature's keeps track of state legislatures' leadership. View your legislature's leaders on the list in the Resource section (National Conference of State Legislators 2017). This list can help you find out how many members hold leadership positions, although some titles may not clearly tell you what the leader does. For example, one common leadership position is a **whip**, generally responsible for "counting votes." This person is responsible for knowing how many members are planning to vote for their party's proposals (National Conference of State Legislatures 2013b). Of Connecticut's 36 state senators, 25 hold leadership positions; 18 of Hawaii's 51 state representatives are leaders.

Formal leadership positions do not necessarily tell you much about how power is actually held in a legislature, or who possesses influential informal power. Legislative bodies commonly have distinct power dynamics that influence policy outcomes. These dynamics differentially determine individual members' ability to influence final results. Some dynamics are related to the political party distribution within a legislative body. Other dynamics have to do with the personalities and leadership approaches of those elected to legislative leadership positions. For example, New York's state government's leadership style is often described as "three men in a room," meaning that the governor, majority leader of the State Senate, and speaker of the State Assembly "work in secret and without accountability to decide most vital issues" (Santora 2015). Worth noting: In recent years, the men holding two of the three of those offices have been convicted of corruption—one more reason that more social workers can and should be elected officials (Clark 2016).

Many legislators at all levels of government have long-standing interpersonal and professional relationships among themselves that influence whether they entertain different pieces of legislation. Leaders of opposing parties may have a positive relationship in which they communicate regularly with each other, as was the case between former Senators Tom Daschle (D-SD) and Trent Lott (R-MS) when they were the U.S. Senate majority and minority leaders. Their friendship remained strong long after, including authoring a book together (Lott et al. 2016). In other cases, leaders of different parties may refuse to be in the same room together, as reported about Illinois state leaders in 2015 (Kadner 2015).

Other interpersonal dynamics also shape the informal power structure within legislatures. For example, it is not uncommon for legislative leadership to "punish" a member who acts in a way that they do not approve of. This might involve assigning the member to less influential committees or even burying all legislation that the member proposes. Such dynamics are important to learn as you prepare to pursue any political endeavor. For example, if you are planning a run for office, are there elected officials, who, if they were to endorse your campaign, would result in other officials refusing to support the campaign? Would work with members on the "other side of the aisle" or for an unpopular executive mean that members of the party you identify with would essentially disown you?

To effectively influence policy, political social workers need to learn about legislative power dynamics. Start by creating relationships with those who work regularly in the legislature. Refer to websites such as Vote Smart that can provide you with basic information about your elected officials, including those in the state and federal legislatures and executive offices. You also can find useful information about key players from the editorial and opinion pages of your local newspaper, popular accounts on social media, and websites and meetings of legislative bodies and your local political parties.

While not always feasible, the best way to assess legislative power dynamics is by immersing yourself in the political contexts you seek to influence. Former social work student Chenelle's reflection on her experiences interning in a state legislature demonstrates the depth of learning about informal politics that one can gain through immersion.

A REFLECTION ON POLITICAL DYNAMICS AND POWER IN A STATE LEGISLATURE: The Grey Area in Politics
By Chenelle Hammonds, University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work Austin Legislative Internship Program intern

My time serving as an intern during the Texas 85th Legislature was extremely informative. Perhaps one of the biggest lessons I learned during my time here is that politics is not black and white; voting decisions and political stances are not always as simple as a vote with Republicans or a vote with Democrats, at least in Texas anyway. Before arriving, I previously thought that Republicans and Democrats, for the most part, voted a certain way and

seldom agreed with one another. However, after being here I've learned that various other "factions" exist beyond political affiliation. In Texas there seem to be "coalitions" formed along geographical lines, and between rural and urban elected officials. Often times there would be debates between rural members on issues specific to their districts like water access and the abatement of feral hogs, which would then turn into pretty contentious debates against members representing more urban districts. Sometimes there would even be division between urban districts as well, with members from large-city districts forming their own coalitions to advocate for issues unique to their cities (i.e., Houston delegation, Dallas delegation, Austin delegation, etc.). Some of the more prominent issues that created a division between large cities were property tax relief reform, pensions for local firefighters, and state-wide regulations for ridesharing applications like Uber and Lyft. To see Democrats and Republicans come together as members of rural districts, or come together as members of the Houston Delegation was something that I had not anticipated prior to my experience in the legislature. While it was pleasing to witness bipartisanship across party lines, it was also a bit concerning seeing bickering *within* the two political parties.

In the Texas Legislature you have intraparty divisions, most notably between "Conservative Democrats," "Moderate Republicans," and "Freedom Caucus Republicans." Similarly, it was not uncommon to see Conservative or Southern-border Democrats supporting pro-life legislation or voting for measures that reinforce traditional gender definitions. Interestingly enough, I would witness moderate Republicans like Representative Sarah Davis standing up for gay rights and a woman's right to choose. I was moved to see Republicans like Representative Byron Cook stand up against the "Show Me Your Papers" amendment to Senate Bill 4 and tell his Republican colleagues to follow suit. Although he authored a bill requiring burials for aborted fetal remains, interestingly enough, he also carried HB 3771 which removed ectopic pregnancy surgery from the State definition of abortion and withheld various overreaching pro-life bills (like women being charged with murder for abortions). He also kept bills like the bathroom bill (the "Texas Right to Privacy Act") and ending in-state tuition for DREAMers from passing out of committee as Chairman of the House State Affairs Committee. Others like Republican Representative John Zerwas came out publicly against school choice vouchers and the "bathroom bill."

Representative J.D. Sheffield, another moderate Republican and a physician, stood with Democrats this session against anti-vaccine measures and attempted to pass bills aimed at educating parents about the life-saving benefits of vaccinations. He also was the lone member of the House Republican caucus last session who voted against campus carry. Hence, the lines between "Republican" and "Democrat" in the Texas legislature can sometimes be blurred. This gave me a bit of hope, seeing that even in such a hostile political

climate as we are living in today, there are still elected officials who believe in voting their conscience, voting for what's right, and not merely "cosigning" on whatever positions their colleagues have taken.

Moreover, one might find it strange to know that even the most hard-line Conservatives in the Texas legislature, known as the "Texas Freedom Caucus," actually worked alongside Democrats on a few issues. Most notably, the Freedom Caucus and House Democrats joined forces on two key pieces of legislation relating to criminal justice reform authored by Representative Harold Dutton: HB 122 which proposed raising the age of criminal responsibility to 18, and HB 152 which would have allowed offenders to make an appeal to restore their constitutional rights if previously convicted in Texas. To my surprise, coming to the defense of Representative Dutton's proposed justice reforms were Tea Party members like Representative Matt Schaefer and Representative Jonathan Stickland urging other Republicans to vote with them in support of these bills. Even more shocking was hearing one of the most Conservative members in the Texas House and Tea Party member Representative Kyle Biedermann admit that he had been staunchly against raising the criminal age of responsibility to 18, but after hearing countless testimonies arguing about the positive impact this law would have on Texas, he shifted to support of this law. Although both of these criminal justice bills ended up dying eventually, it was astounding to see the same Republicans who caught heat this session for killing hundreds of good bills and tacking on controversial amendments to others be amenable to siding with the Dems on a few important issues. (The "strengths-based perspective" is coming in handy right now!)

So why is this information important to know for social workers? As social workers, we are likely to encounter other professionals in the workplace who have different values, perspectives, and ethics from us. We may not always agree with a colleague's value system or their perspective on what is the best way to handle social issues that harm our clients or even the logistics behind a not-for-profit startup; however, we must still work together. What my time in the Texas Legislature has taught me the most is that common ground can be found even among the unlikeliest of sources. Dismissing others whom you seemingly disagree with "on paper" only takes away opportunities for teamwork, coalition building, and community advancement for the greater common good. Although we all have our own set of beliefs, whether they be informed by our life experiences, our careers, our political identification, etc., we all can stand to put personal differences aside and focus on what we *can* agree on. Due to the complexities of social work practice, which is inundated with several "grey areas," I encourage all of us to dig a little deeper for that common ground each time we find ourselves conflicted by personal disagreements both in and outside of the workplace.

Previously posted online at the blog of the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work's Austin Legislative Internship Program: https://gcsw-legislativeinterns.wordpress.com.

Judicial Branch Players

Political social workers also work with judiciary branch clerks and other judicial staff in order to create policy change. While judges make the ultimate rulings in the judiciary branch and cannot be directly lobbied outside of the courtroom, relationships with clerks and judicial staff can be a helpful source of information. One common way for social workers to work through the judiciary branch is through submitting **amicus curiae**, or "friend of the court" briefs that offer information relevant to the case under consideration. (A great resource for social work in the judicial policy realm is *Social Work and Law: Judicial Policy and Forensic Practice* by Sunny Harris Rome (2012)).

Key Interest Group Players

Interest groups are often referred to as special interest groups (SIGs), advocacy groups, lobbying groups, pressure groups, or special interests (Hoefer 2016). Members and leaders of these groups are key players in the political process. These include interest groups that share a concern with you, as well as lobbyists and advocates working for these interest groups who have a thorough understanding of legislative or regulatory processes. In some cases, they already work on your issues or in support of your campaigns. In other cases, you will want to develop a relationship with these players.

Significant interest group players may have power via a key endorsement that helps a candidate stand out in a crowded field. They may be able to access donors who can contribute to an advocacy or electoral campaign. They may help you establish relationships with legislators who will be willing to take a meeting with you if the right person recommends it. They also can be great sources of information about what they have learned through successes and failures in past legislative sessions or election cycles.

Key Players in Media

As discussed above, the media play a key role in the political context in the USA. A 2013 survey of social workers in Texas (Felderhoff et al. 2015) found that respondents got their political news most frequently from Internet-based news services (69%), public radio (49%), conversations with friends and family (58%), television news (53%), newspapers (51%), social media (43%), public television (42%), email newsletters (42%), and television news stations (30%). Those who control the way news about the political world is reported and shaped in these circles are key players in the political process.

Both traditional and social media influence what information about the political realm gets to voters, policy-makers, and other stakeholders. Social media plays a key role in today's politics—or, if you ask some people, is ruining it (Carr 2015). Two-thirds of Americans use Facebook, and half of them get their news from that site, totaling 30% of the US population (Anderson and Caumont 2014). If you add in YouTube, Twitter, and Reddit, the social media landscape's influence on how the

public views elections and policy becomes even more significant. In 2013, the national periodical *Campaigns and Elections* named 50 of the most influential people in national politics; of these, 13 had connections to digital and social media (Campaigns & Elections Staff 2013). The methods and strategies used by politicians and the media to communicate with the public have changed significantly in the last 20 years, and continue to change rapidly. The rise of partisan cable news and the methods used to gain audience by those networks (Sobieraj and Berry 2011), as well as the extensive use of Twitter by President Donald Trump to communicate his message directly to the public, highlight a remarkably different environment in political news.

While alternative media sources have increased their influence, those who investigate and report the news in traditional media sources (including newspapers, television, and radio) still wield considerable influence in shaping public opinion and in publicizing candidates or issues. Later in this book, we provide an in-depth discussion of how to identify the specific reporters (targets) who are most likely to influence media coverage on your specific policy issue.

Other Key Policy Players in the Community

As discussed previously, many sources of power accrue to specific individuals and groups within our local, state, or national communities. These sources of power (money, information, status, etc.) can result in key players who are able to influence policy, even without specific positions in government, interest groups, or media. For example, numerous articles and interviews appeared after the inauguration of President Donald Trump, writing about the persistent influence of the billionaire Mercer family on Trump's campaign and policy decisions (Fresh Air 2017). Similar stories have been written about the influence of George Soros on Democratic campaigns and elected officials (Vogel 2016).

Coalitions are another type of community player with the capacity to influence policy. A coalition is a collection of organizations that comes together for a common goal (Bobo et al. 2010). They are commonly used as part of political change efforts, with many advantages for social change. (A variety of coalitions are listed in the Resources section as examples.) Coalitions may be defined by an issue (e.g., Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice), geographic area (e.g., Midwest Coalition for Human Rights), constituency (e.g., African-American Health Coalition), and often by a combination of those. They may work on one issue or on a range of issues, or even in support of an electoral campaign. Coalitions frequently bring in several types of collective power: the power of the people, the power of knowledge (when they include groups of experts), the power of networks, the power of solidarity, and the power of passion for a cause.

Some coalitions are temporary, coming together for a short period of time (e.g., one legislative session) to work together on a single policy change strategy. Others are permanent, working together year after year on issues of interest to the coalition's member organizations. For example, CAC2 (the Coalition Against Childhood

Cancer; a link is provided in the Resources section) has dozens of member organizations and has worked since 2011 to unify organizations working on solutions to childhood cancer. They coordinate their actions, leverage the strength of their community, and work to minimize duplication of effort by multiple organizations.

Before embarking on a political change strategy, identify whether there are any coalitions already working on your policy issue and which individuals and organizations are part of this coalition. As some coalitions are stronger and more effective than others, assess the power and influence that this coalition has previously had on relevant policy decision-makers. As part of your strategy, you may want to consider joining up with a larger coalition or creating your own.

BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE and APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Finding Key Players
Create a map of the key players in your state or municipal political context. Include key players in government, interest groups, media, and/or communities. Start by following a key player in government or media on their column, blog, Twitter, or Facebook. Add to your map other key players who are mentioned, retweeted, followed, or connected. How are they connected? Use the layout of your map to show which players have higher numbers of connections. Do those with more connections seem to be more influential?

Selecting Targets

As you identify the specific key players who can most help bring your proposed policy change to fruition, you are developing a list of individuals who both have power over your specific area of policy interest and are located in your specific geographic area of interest. This forms the basis for "targeting" in political social work. In examining the various key players that you have identified, now it is time to determine who, specifically, is your target(s); that is, who has the direct power to make possible the particular policy goals you seek.

Understanding Your Target

Once you identify your target(s), it is critical that you seek to understand as much as you can about what factors influence them. This is where a tool like the Decision-Maker Matrix can come in handy, as it provides you with a clear framework for identifying potential contextual and personal factors that affect your target's decision-making process.

POLITICAL SOCIAL WORKER PROFILE: Sally Tamarkin, MSW
Senior Editor, Buzzfeed Health (Fig. 5.2).

Fig. 5.2 Sally Tamarkin, MSW

Sally grew up and attended public school in New Haven, CT. "I grew up going to schools that were racially and economically diverse… and I had a seed planted in me at a very young age about equality and justice." Identifying as both a queer person and a person with privilege, Sally feels that she was able to recognize the marginalization of people around her. In Sally's early work for Leadership, Education & Athletics in Partnership (LEAP), she was introduced to the community development aspect of social work. She realized that the social work lens to community organizing "gelled with my interests and also my approach to making change."

With an MSW focused on community organizing, her career path included work at Planned Parenthood of Southern New England, "training college students around the state on how to do organizing and political advocacy around reproductive justice" and then as an organizer for ctEQUALITY, formerly known as the Anti-Discrimination Coalition. The main focus of the Coalition at the time was to "get a bill passed that would add gender identity and gender expression to Connecticut state non-discrimination law." Prior efforts on this bill had not made it out of committee in multiple legislative sessions. Sally was hired to try to bring the whole coalition together as one cohesive unit. "My job was to take the infrastructure that was already there, and strengthen it" by building a bigger base, reaching more people around the state, and working more with lobbyists to connect to representatives. A lot of Sally's work involved empowering people from all backgrounds to become involved in the political process. She held trainings where lobbyists explained to community members how to become citizen activists.

The coalition "was trying to get queer identified people to stand up for rights that didn't have to do with same sex marriage, which was a very big deal at the time." In order to get new people involved in the fight, Sally made education and awareness-raising an important part of her organizing

activities. The goal was for more people to see and understand the extent to which transgender people in Connecticut were being denied basic civil and human rights. It was difficult to get people to rally around trans rights in 2010, so a lot of the organizing work centered around educating the community on what trans folks needed and where their rights were being limited. When the citizens of CT became empowered, they were better equipped to make their representatives feel that they were demanding equality in their state. This, along with the tireless work of a lobbyist and coalition volunteers and the allyship of the governor and several outspoken legislators helped pass the bill.

Currently, Sally is a senior editor for Buzzfeed Health. Even though Sally is not practicing social work in a traditional setting, her social work background is integrated into her outlook and informs her work. She feels that social work values and the Code of Ethics influence everything she does in her current position. "I believe that the Code of Ethics set social work aside from any other 'helping' profession," Sally says. She presents stories that counter the "mainstream narratives around health and our bodies, particularly the bodies of women and queer people," which present bodies as only a means for consumption. Sally cites her social work education as the reason she feels empowered to bring these stories to light with "compassion, generosity, humility, and an open mind."

Section 7: Selecting Tactics for Political Intervention (Stage 5)

The fifth and final stage of the political strategy planning process is selecting tactics that are likely to influence your target. To carry out a political strategy, you need to identify specific activity steps, also known as **tactics**, which will help you move forward toward achieving your goals. Tactics are "short-term activities undertaken as part of a change-oriented strategy" (Hardina 2002). Think of them as the actions that will make your change happen.

Too often, we let our preferred tactics lead our political change efforts. For example, we may think protests are a great way to get our voice heard, so we plan a protest before strategically thinking through whether a protest is actually the most effective tactic for our priority goals and our intended targets. Bobo et al. (2001) underscore this point in their handbook for community organizers and advocates for social change, stating, "The worst mistake an organizer can make is to act tactically instead of strategically" (p. 49). Hardina (2002) notes that rather than selecting tactics on the basis of the specific political situation or one's resources, tactic selection is too often guided by personal values or one's comfort level with tactics.

Instead, selected tactics should be carefully chosen as part of your strategic planning process. They should be chosen on the basis of what will best support your full strategy. That is, what tactics will help you build the leverage necessary to persuade your target(s) to advance the policy goal(s) you have identified? In this tactic

selection process, decisions are made such as: whether an advocacy organization will hold a protest at the City Council steps or, instead, recruit community members to provide testimony at the next City Council meeting. Similarly, tactic selection is involved when deciding whether a political campaign will seek to shape perceptions of its opponent via a commercial on local TV or through a Facebook ad.

Careful and intentional selection of tactics is crucial to effective political strategy. Selection of tactics needs to be logical and systematic, but also creative and flexible. Key considerations in selecting tactics (Bobo et al. 2001) include:

- *Which tactics are most likely to help you achieve your goals?* Tactics should be linked <u>directly</u> to the types of goals you are seeking. If you are raising money for your campaign, do so in direct service of your campaign goals. For example, if your electoral campaign decides to hold a press event, it should be for the purpose of making the message of your campaign clear. Getting press for the sake of garnering attention will not further your goal.
- *Which tactics are most likely to influence your target?* Tactics should be selected based on your knowledge about your target(s), contextual influences on your target, and your relationship with the target. A classic episode of the TV show, *The West Wing* (although not strictly procedurally accurate) highlights the way that a politician's identification as a grandfather might influence others who are also grandfathers to behave in a certain way (Sorkin 2001).
- *What is your individual and organizational capacity?* Here, we apply our earlier assessments to determine which tactics you and/or your organization are able to carry out effectively (i.e., you wouldn't want to design a strategy that relies on heavy use of TV commercials for your candidate if you do not have a large enough campaign budget to afford this). Avoid spreading yourself or your organization too thinly by taking on too many tactics, leaving none of them to ultimately be effective. Also consider your own power and credibility. Are there tactics that might be perceived as controversial when you use them, even if they would not be perceived that way when used by another actor?
- *What is your organizational style?* Are there certain tactics that are strengths of your organization or campaign? Do you or your organization's leadership have certain preferences in terms of how you approach relationships with decision-makers? For example, during the fight for women's suffrage in the USA, the National American Women's Suffrage Association worked state by state through the conventional legislative process, while the National Women's Party (headed by social worker Alice Paul) instead followed its organizational style, garnering national attention and support through large, attention-grabbing events such as protests that led to arrests (National Park Service n.d.).
- *Do you need to build public sympathy, and are certain tactics worth the risk to public support?* Sometimes tactics might move us closer to persuading our target in the short-term, but might risk harming public support for our goals in the long-term. Weigh the benefits and risks as you select tactics. For example, if large numbers of teachers in a school district call in absent to testify at the state capitol, forcing school to close for the day, is the controversy this may cause among

parents forced to scramble for child care worth the potential benefits from the testimony?

- *Could the tactics you are considering put clients or constituent groups at personal risk?* As social workers, it is important that we engage and empower our constituents to be active and meaningful participants in political change efforts. At times, however, some of the tactics we might consider could have negative repercussions for our constituents. Informed consent and self-determination on the part of our constituencies are important in such situations, as is thoughtful consideration beforehand of potential risks. For example, what are the risks of publicizing a rally on the steps of the capitol featuring speakers who are undocumented at a time when the federal government is engaged in high-profile immigrant raids (de Vogue et al. 2017)? If we think civil disobedience is necessary to further our goals, have we thought through how the risk of being arrested may differentially impact our constituencies based on differences in race, socioeconomic status, immigration status, or sexual orientation?

- *Are the tactics you are considering consistent with the profession's Code of Ethics?*

    The NASW (2017) Code of Ethics clearly identifies a set of six core values of our profession: Social justice, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. As you evaluate possible tactics, consider whether they support these values. It is not uncommon, however, in selecting tactics to find that these values may be in tension with each other. These considerations are explored in depth in Chap. 13, including sample scenarios related to ethical dilemmas in tactic selection.

It is also important to recognize that tactics that might be effective in one situation might not necessarily work in another similar situation. Teles and Schmitt (2011) point out that over time, political tactics may have declining returns. For example, the tenth time an advocacy organization boycotts a retailer, it may be less effective at changing company policy than the first several times it did so.

As you assess the possible impacts from the tactics you select, keep in mind that tactic selection should be both well-thought-out *and* flexible. Political social workers need to be alert and prepared to course-correct in innovative ways as the political reality moves forward (Teles and Schmitt 2011). Politics around both advocacy and campaigns can shift rapidly, requiring different tactics, even as political social workers must remain focused on their desired goals. Take, for example, the 2016 presidential election. As Michael Barone (2016) argued immediately after that election in the conservative National Review magazine:

> *Over the 40-some years that I have been working or closely observing the political-campaign business, the rules of the game haven't changed much. Technology has changed the business somewhat, but the people who ran campaigns in the 1970s could have (and in some cases actually have) run them decades later. But suddenly this year, the rules seemed to change.*

Barone (2016) outlines six key changes that he saw during the 2016 presidential election, with potential ramifications for how both advocacy and electoral campaigns select tactics moving forward:

1. Financial expenditures seem less relevant, as the winning presidential campaign spent just more than half as much money as the losing presidential campaign, opting to rely instead on media coverage.
2. Campaign ads on television were less influential than in prior elections, with social media (e.g., tweets and videos) garnering more attention and influence.
3. Celebrity support did not seem to carry as much weight as in prior elections.
4. Voters seeking change were not dissuaded by a candidate's "outrageous statements," when such statements had been disqualifying in prior elections.
5. Campaigns with better "big data" (extensive data on individual voters) had been more successful in recent years. However, in 2016, data seemed less successful if the data were not paired with increasing attention to sensitivity in data interpretation.
6. Campaigns need to increasingly understand how the opposition is thinking, especially when the opposing campaign is choosing not to follow "the old rules."

These changes illustrate the importance of individuals and organizations strategically planning their political tactics, but also underscore two key points we have emphasized in this chapter: (1) being attuned to the changing political context, and (2) remaining flexible enough to adapt your tactics mid-campaign as needed.

> **APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Tactic Selection**
> Identify a recent advocacy campaign that you have participated in or one that you learned about through media sources—perhaps the one you used in Stages 1 and 2. What tactics did the advocacy campaign use to try to influence decision-makers? How did decision-makers, supporters, and opponents respond to these tactics?

Review of Key Terms and Concepts

Amicus curia: "friend of the court" briefs that offer information relevant to the case under consideration by a court (plural is amicus curiae).

Bicameral legislature: a law-making body consisting of two chambers. In the USA, this form is used by Congress (the two chambers are the House of Representatives and the Senate) and 49 state legislatures.

Block grant: a set of aid monies awarded to states. States are granted substantial flexibility to implement broadly defined functions such as social welfare programs or health services, while facing fewer requirements than with other types of federal funding.

Budget: document which lays out proposed spending and revenue for a government.

Coalition: a collection of organizations that converge for a common goal. These are commonly used as part of political change efforts, with many advantages for social change.

Economic climate: the perceived atmosphere of an economy, reflecting the status of major markets, the availability of jobs, credit, and other economic issues apparent to the public.

Executive branch: the branch of government responsible for executing laws. On the federal level in the USA, this refers to the president, vice president, cabinet members, and numerous executive branch agencies. At the state level, this generally consists of the governor, statewide elected officials, and other state-level agencies.

Executive order: an order issued by the president, holding the force of law, to another executive branch member or agency, through which the president manages operations of the executive branch of government.

Fall-back position: an alternative goal employed when achieving an original goal no longer seems possible.

Federal government: the level of government responsible for providing policy governance and oversight of the entire USA.

Federalist system: a form of government, used in the USA, in which power between state governments and a central government is shared in one political system.

Fundamental change: change that modifies a system or a policy at its roots.

Incremental change: change executed in small steps to gradually reach an outcome.

Intermediate goals: goals that serve as building blocks toward long-term goals.

Judicial branch: the branch of government that evaluates laws to clarify their meaning, decides how laws apply in specific cases, and (at the federal and state level) determines whether laws meet the requirements of the Constitution.

Long-term goals: goals that focus on the specific desired policy outcomes an advocate seeks to achieve as a result of a change effort.

Municipal governments: governmental bodies responsible for managing policy issues at the local level. May refer to a town, village, city, parish, or county government.

Political climate: a population's perception of the atmosphere of the political realm in a society.

Regulations: rules made and maintained by an executive branch authority, with the force of policy. These often specify implementation details for policies adopted by the legislature.

Regulatory process: a process through which the executive branch agency puts forth, or "promulgates" regulations.

Short-term goals: goals that are typically achievable within an immediate timeframe.

Social climate: the perceived social and psychological context in a given community or group.

State government: the level of government that makes and enforces laws for a state or equivalent subdivision within a country.

Strategy: the art of planning actions directed toward fulfilling the achievement of a goal(s).

SWOT analysis: a strategic review process that entails looking internally at an organization's strengths and weaknesses, and externally at the opportunities and threats in its environment.

Tactics: specific, short-term activity steps which help move change efforts forward toward goal achievement.

Target: the individual(s) with the decision-making power to bring a policy goal into fruition; typically the focus of advocacy efforts.

Unicameral legislature: a law-making body composed of one chamber, such as Nebraska.

Wave election: an election where one political party is expected to make substantial gains in the number of seats it holds, shifting the political status quo.

Whip: a leadership position encompassing the responsibility for counting votes, meaning this person should know how many people are planning to vote for their party's proposals.

Resources

Assessment

University of Kansas Community Tool Box, "SWOT Analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats:" http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/swot-analysis/main

Books

Cooper, P. J. (2014). *By order of the President: The use and abuse of executive direct action.* Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas

Lott, T., Daschle, T., & Sternfeld, J. (2016). *Crisis point: Why we must and how we can overcome our broken politics in Washington and across America*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Federal Register

In-depth discussion of the regulatory/rulemaking process: https://www.federalregister.gov/uploads/2011/01/the_rulemaking_process.pdf

Main page: https://www.federalregister.gov/

Spreadsheet of executive orders: https://www.federalregister.gov/executive-orders

Coalitions

African American Health Coalition: http://www.flhsa.org/issues/african-american-coalition or go to http://www.flhsa.org and in the menu under the "Issues" tab click "Health Disparities", then scroll down to click "African American Health Coaltion" on the right of the page.
Coalition Against Childhood Cancer: www.cac2.org
Midwest Coalition for Human Rights: http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/MCHR.html
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice: http://rcrc.org/

Websites

Assessing online sources: http://libguides.adelphi.edu/fake_news
The Atlantic on lead poisoning in New Orleans: "The Poisoned Generation": https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/the-poisoned-generation/527229/
Crisis Point interview: https://dianerehm.org/shows/2016-01-19/former-senators-trent-lott-and-tom-daschle-crisis-point.
Example of state regulatory process: http://leg.wa.gov/CodeReviser/Documents/registerflowchart.pdf
Federal Rulemaking Process: An Overview: https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL32240.pdf
Marbury v. Madison (1803): http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=19 or go to https://www.ourdocuments.gov/ and in the menu on the right hand side of the home page click "100 milestone documents", then scroll down to click on "Marbury v. Madison (1803)".
National Conference of State Legislators' list of state leaders: http://www.ncsl.org/legislators-staff/legislators/legislative-leaders/2017-state-legislative-leaders.aspx#tableRegulations related to health care reform: https://www.federalregister.gov/health-care-reform
Vote Smart to learn about your elected officials: http://votesmart.org/

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