Making Ethical Decisions in Political Social Work

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Section 1: Overview

National Association of Social Workers (2017) Code of Ethics is central to political social work not just in terms of providing an imperative to engage in political social work, but also in terms of guiding practice. Many consider politics a "dirty business," so we outline specific principles in the Code of Ethics that inform social workers' decisions and actions in political social work. We discuss common ethical challenges that arise in political social work. For example, we discuss the appropriate use of opposition research of a personal nature, in view of the ethical mandate for respect of inherent dignity and worth of others. We then discuss three ethical decision-making frameworks and examine their applications to political social work practice. The chapter concludes with specific ethical dilemmas to foster discussion and reflection on ethical challenges that political social workers may face.

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 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior
COMPETENCY 2: Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice
COMPETENCY 5: Engage in Policy Practice

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: Code of Ethics and Political Social Work

Ethics is often not the first word that comes to mind when one thinks of working or volunteering in a political setting. We often focus on the negative, unethical things that we have seen or heard about politicians doing—lying, involvement in scandals, back-room deals, etc. Certainly, as the authors write this book, we seem to be in a political moment where there appears to be a new, major political scandal daily. It feels nearly impossible to open a newspaper, scroll through a social media feed, or to turn on the television without hearing about another political situation raising

ethical concerns. Political social workers are working or volunteering in this environment every day, trying to move their policy goals forward while remaining ethical in their practice.

Fortunately, as part of a profession with a self-regulating Code of Ethics that outlines our ethical values and standards, we have some help. Regardless of what our social work practice looks like and where we practice, the National Association of Social Workers (2017) Code of Ethics applies to the behaviors and actions of all social workers. **Ethics** are critical to professional practice because they provide us with a set of standards that guide us in determining which course of action we should take. These standards help us address the reality of social work practice, which is that we face extensive and complicated ethical challenges as we practice, across domains and fields of practice (Dodd 2007).

In social work, our Code of Ethics speaks specifically, and extensively, to our professional responsibility to engage in political action to seek policies that support clients' needs and that challenge discrimination and institutional inequalities. In its preamble, the Code reminds us that "a historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society" (NASW 2017). Here, the Code is telling us that we have an obligation to help individuals meet their basic needs, but that we *also* are obligated to strengthen society. As we learn in our social work education through the ecological and person-in-environment perspectives, our clients' lives are shaped by a variety of macro-level forces. Society is governed by policies—policies shape our societal institutions, they tell us what is and is not acceptable behavior in society, and they shape the well-being of the communities in which our clients live.

For example, we can work directly with a victim of intimate partner violence to help her prepare to leave her abuser. However, as Matthew Desmond (2016) describes in his book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, when local ordinances fine landlords for the number of police calls that come from each property, victims of intimate partner violence avoid calling the police out of fear of being evicted from their homes. Even if we are able to help this one victim leave her situation, society as a whole continues to suffer as other victims find themselves too scared of losing their homes to reach out for protection due to this local policy. Our Code compels us to participate in changing policies such as this, as it calls on us to engage in action to "ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs" (NASW 2017). In fact, social workers like Kantor and Metzger (2015), in their work in St. Louis, Missouri, have worked to address exactly this issue through municipal-level policy advocacy.

Since the Code of Ethics was first adopted in 1960, our professional obligation to strengthen society has become increasingly more explicit. When first adopted, the Code was much briefer than it is today. It specified that social workers have a responsibility to the community and broader society; however, there was no explicit mention of engaging in political action or influencing policy. A 1979 revision to the Code enumerated what these specific responsibilities to society were, including a responsibility to advocate for policy change. A substantial revision in 1996 brought us the explicit call for all social workers to participate in social and political action that exists in the Code today (National Association of Social Workers n.d.).

The Code outlines six core values and ethical principles, as well as six sections of specific ethical standards. Each of these is expected to guide practice in all arenas of social work, including political social work. It is important to note, however, that while the Code is intended to inform our practice, it is also aspirational; this means that we may not always live up to the ideals set forth in the Code. In this chapter, we examine the core values and ethical standards in detail in order to help you examine and prepare yourself for the sometimes very ethically challenging situations that you may encounter in political social work practice.

Before we do so, we feel that it is important to first share a pointed criticism of the NASW Code of Ethics and to encourage you to reflect on this criticism. Reisch and Lowe (2000) contend that "the Code assumes that the ethical issues it addresses arise primarily within the context of a clinical relationship or the administrative and supervisory environment in which that relationship occurs" (p. 24). These social work scholars argue that the Code is insufficient in speaking to the kinds of ethical challenges that arise in macro-oriented community or political settings. Hoefer (2016) similarly argues that "although social workers are called on to engage in advocacy practice…the Code is often silent on the subject of how to do so ethically" (p. 37).

FURTHER REFLECTION: The Code of Ethics and Political Social Work Practice
Re-read the NASW Code of Ethics, and reflect upon the criticism that it does not sufficiently speak to practice in macro and policy settings. Discuss this with a fellow social worker. How do you react to this criticism? Do you feel that the NASW Code of Ethics speaks to the ethical issues that may arise in political social work practice? Why or why not? What might be missing?

Core Values Expressed in the Code of Ethics

Service

It is not uncommon to hear members of the public question whether politicians have run for office for the right reasons. You may have questioned yourself whether elected officials are susceptible to changing their policy votes or stances due to financial incentives or the desire to be reelected or gain a higher office. The implication of these criticisms is that such politicians are guided perhaps by greed, but most definitely not by the value of service.

For many who work in political settings, however, a desire to work in service to the public was part of what initially brought them to this work, just as the value of service is part of what brings many students to social work as a profession. In fact, as social workers, we are explicitly obligated to "elevate service to others above self-interest" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). However, when practicing in political contexts, many challenges arise in which we may feel forced to choose between service or self-interest.

For example: Do I take a higher paying job as a lobbyist for causes I might disagree with—a job that allows me to support my family and have more financial security? Or do I take a lower-paying job where I consistently work toward policies that address the needs of vulnerable populations? As a staffer for an elected official,

am I more likely to schedule a meeting for the elected official with the lobbyist who brought lunch for our office staff every day, than with a constituent who did not bring us anything? Does my human services nonprofit remain silent regarding an issue that would benefit our clients, if the issue might negatively impact a large donor to our organization? These are the kinds of decisions that make up the overall ethical application of this principle, and are faced by political social workers daily.

Social Justice

The Code of Ethics obligates social workers to pursue **social justice** as a core value. Social workers are expected to "pursue social change…strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). This emphasis on strengthening equality, ensuring equal access to rights and services, ensuring equal access to information, and prioritizing the meaningful participation of vulnerable populations is a value our profession holds strongly. It is a value that many political social workers find to be a particular guide for their practice.

Political social workers often face ethical challenges when it comes to pursuing social justice. Governments frequently have limited resources, requiring politicians (and advocates) to choose to support or advantage one group's needs over another. For example, if the state has a limited human services budget, do we promote adding funds to better support the state child welfare system, knowing that this will result in cuts to respite services for those taking care of elderly relatives?

At other times, we are forced to make decisions about whether to compromise on a bill or ordinance, potentially securing less assistance or access than what we believe is just. We must consider critically whether to accept such a compromise when the alternative, at least in the short term, is to maintain a problematic status quo. For example, a recent effort by social workers and other activists in New York advocated to "raise the age" at which juveniles are charged as adults. Prior to this effort, 16- and 17-year-olds charged with a crime were automatically charged as adults and placed into the adult correctional system. Advocates requested a "true" raise the age change, to move *all* 16- and 17-year-olds into juvenile court. Legislators instead reached a compromise. Most 16- and 17-year-olds would be moved into juvenile court; however, specific *exceptions* were outlined. These exceptions left some 16- and 17-year-olds in adult criminal court (e.g., when a "deadly weapon" was used, a victim sustained "significant physical injury," or if criminal sexual conduct was involved) (McKinley 2017).

Another common social justice issue that political social workers encounter is determining whether it is ethical to "**carve-out**" a population from a proposed policy, if doing so is believed to increase the likelihood of other vulnerable populations gaining access to rights or services they did not previously have. We face these issues both in developing campaign platforms and in trying to pass policies.

An example from Houston, Texas, demonstrates the social justice challenges involved in a carve-out. In 2014, Mayor Annise Parker sought passage of a city-wide nondiscrimination ordinance that would go beyond the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, including race, ethnicity, religion, military status, sexual orientation,

gender identity, and pregnancy as protected characteristics. The proposed ordinance included a paragraph specifically allowing individuals to use a bathroom that fit their gender identity (Smothers 2015). Referred to as the "bathroom clause," this paragraph became the focus of substantial public controversy, threatening passage of the entire ordinance. One month after introducing the ordinance, Mayor Parker removed the bathroom clause to increase the likelihood that the ordinance's other protections would pass (Fraser 2014). This carve-out removed a protection for transgender individuals in exchange for City Council's passage of the ordinance. (Despite this carve-out and City Council's passage of the ordinance, it was ultimately struck down after a long court battle.)

The value that social work places on social justice can pose challenges for social workers working within political climates or with political constituencies that do not share this value. Most political social workers work in interdisciplinary contexts where they regularly face this type of challenge. For example, during a campaign, media, donors, advisors, and/or constituents may try to steer the focus away from policy issues that address the well-being of the communities we represent. Similarly, social work legislative interns reported facing ethical challenges as they practiced in an environment that did not prioritize meaningful public participation. They also struggled with a lack of public access to accurate information about legislative proceedings (Pritzker and Barros Lane in press).

FURTHER REFLECTION: Political Social Work and Social Justice

1. New York's "raise the age" advocacy effort resulted in a bill did not meet all of the goals of the initiative, leaving some 16- and 17-year-olds in the adult criminal justice system. The compromise bill could leave some juveniles to be treated in ways the advocates defined as socially unjust. In your opinion, should the advocates have accepted the compromise legislation? Or should the advocates have held out for a more comprehensive bill, knowing that doing so might risk no change to the status quo at least in the short term?
2. The carve-out of the "bathroom clause" helped pass Houston's Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO). It granted nondiscrimination protections to many Houstonians, but left out transgender individuals. In your opinion, was continued support of the HERO ordinance on the part of many advocates and councilmembers after this carve-out consistent with the Code of Ethics? Why or why not?

Dignity and Worth of the Person

The Code of Ethics calls on social workers to "promote clients' socially responsible self-determination…to enhance clients' capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). In political

social work practice, this raises issues about how we engage with our constituencies and how we approach our advocacy work.

For example, Ezell (2001) raises questions about our clients' **self-determination** when we work on their behalf in political settings: Is it respecting the dignity and worth of individuals to advocate, or as a politician, to vote, on behalf of a vulnerable population when they haven't had the opportunity to determine on their own if the issue is in their best interests? What are our roles and responsibilities in terms of advocating alongside client populations, as opposed to advocating on their behalf? It is important to carefully consider ways that we can support clients and communities in advocating for themselves. Arnstein's (1969) participation ladder, introduced in Chap. 4, can offer guidance into supporting clients' participation. Several of the profiles and case studies we have included throughout this book offer also insight into ways that professional political social workers support communities in developing their own political voice.

What if our constituency has expressed opposition to a piece of legislation, but our policy knowledge and analyses lead us to believe that the legislation actually will help these vulnerable families? For example, what if your knowledge of the details of a health care bill tell us that it will have positive impacts on the health and well-being of low-income families in our community, but they are asking you as an elected official to oppose it? Much has been written about people who vote or advocate in ways that might be considered "against their best interest," from working class voters who vote for candidates even though their economic policies might hurt that voter's pocketbook (Frank 2007), to the "super-rich" advocating for increases in their taxes (Buffett 2011). What is our role as political social workers to determine what is in an individual or community's best interest?

Each of these questions suggests that ethical political social work practice should involve careful attention to balancing: (1) working with our constituencies to build their capacity to understand various policy choices, (2) meaningfully consulting with them and supporting their participation, and (3) utilizing our expertise to navigate complex policy choices and budgeting processes. At the same time, a reality of political social work practice is that there are often many barriers to meaningful consultation with our constituencies.

Valuing dignity and worth of the individual also incorporates cultural awareness and sensitivity in political communications and in political relationships (Ezell 2001). In political settings, too often we observe both **microaggressions** and other overt acts of discrimination and disrespect. While this is not a universal scenario by any means, a news story out of Pasadena, Texas, illustrates a blatant example of the lack of sensitivity sometimes present in political settings. During a March 2017 meeting of the Pasadena City Council, a Latino councilmember spoke up before a vote, saying, "I haven't had an opportunity to speak yet." The White mayor responded, "Well, you better speak up, boy," in a manner widely interpreted as condescending and discriminatory (Collette 2017).

It is also not uncommon to testify before a legislative committee, while observing committee members holding side conversations, walking in and out of the room, or blatantly seeming disinterested. One of the authors remembers one particular

committee hearing, during which committee members kept stepping out mid-testimony for updates on "March Madness" college basketball tournament scores. This value underscores the importance of consciously reflecting on how we can prioritize respect and sensitivity toward the many individuals with whom we interact. This includes those with whom we have policy disagreements. In such situations, it is important to separate our personal values from our professional values. As discussed below, building relationships—even with those with whom we disagree—is critical to moving policy forward. We start by using social work skills such as engagement, empathy, and active listening to understand the context of others' positions before we react.

Importance of Human Relationships

The Code states that "social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). Further, it emphasizes that "relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). Building and supporting relationships is essential to social work practice in political settings.

A challenging aspect of relationships in politics, however, is that they are often **instrumental**; that is, they exist for the purpose of achieving some sort of goal(s) external to the relationship. Without relationships, we would be unable to secure donations for our campaign, to recruit campaign volunteers, to secure constituent votes for our reelection, to garner co-sponsors for a bill, to find an ally to help stop a bill we find detrimental, or to move a bill through the legislative process. As political social workers, an important consideration is how to move beyond instrumental relationships, to building relationships that are also meaningful. As Reisch and Lowe (2000) observe, this can be challenging in political and community work, as we often lack the capacity and time to build meaningful relationships with constituents and colleagues. Such relationships are important though, because they go beyond an immediate need for support or assistance and allow us to better understand a group or colleague's values and priorities. There are many opportunities to advance instrumental relationships in ways which feel ethically appropriate. For example, as an advocate or legislator, you may support issues that don't necessarily either harm or help your constituency in order to maintain instrumental relationships with other groups or policy-makers.

Social workers also need to consider the directionality of political relationships. Particularly for social work politicians and political staffers, can our constituencies count on us, as much as we rely on them? This is an essential component to **constituent services**. Constituents count on politicians' offices to hear their concerns and to be responsive to both their concerns and their needs. A recent theme in national US politics has been extensive constituent concerns over whether their Congressional representatives are willing to engage with them. This has been particularly common around health care policy. In early 2017, for example, constituents expressed public frustration at Republican members of Congress who tried to

avoid engaging with angry constituents over the potential repeal of the Affordable Care Act by limiting town-hall meetings in their districts (Williams and Murphy 2017). A similar dynamic occurred in 2009 and 2010, when Democratic members of Congress canceled town hall meetings so as to not bear the brunt of frustrated Tea Party activists opposed to passage of the Affordable Care Act.

Another issue to consider in terms of relationships in political social work is **credibility**. As a staff member or campaign worker for a politician, political social workers often build on their own networks and relationships in order to mobilize support, votes, volunteers, or campaign donations. In that process, if one misrepresents the candidate or her positions, or promises things that don't materialize, your own credibility may be compromised. This connects with the next core value.

Integrity

Acting with **integrity** is a core social work value, with social workers called on to "act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). In political environments, social workers may face many "opportunities" to act with less than full integrity. As some student legislative interns describe, working in a political setting can sometimes feel like one is in the middle of a "political game" (Pritzker and Barros Lane in press). Politicians who are known to hold one stance may vote differently due to a variety of influences (e.g., party affiliation, donor or constituent pressure, deals). Other elected officials and staffers may feel uncomfortable speaking their minds honestly for similar reasons (Pritzker and Barros Lane in press). A prominent example of this occurred during the 2016 election, as Republican leaders who indicated opposition to President Donald Trump's candidacy in off-the-record settings did not express these views publicly. In an opinion piece written during the 2016 Republican primary, Weisberg (2016) argued that these politicians opted not to express their opinions publicly because they risked losing campaign funds and votes and being publicly attacked by other Republicans if they did so.

The value of integrity also can pose challenges in electoral campaigns. If we have "dirt" on our opponent that will help us win—and therefore, our ability to pursue socially just policies—do we use it? What if this "dirt" is of a personal nature that could hurt the well-being of our opponent or his/her family? If we have access to documents related to our opponent that were illegally stolen by hackers, do we use these materials against our opponent? This exact scenario has been faced by campaigns at various levels of government. For example, in 2016, Russian hackers hacked documents from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee related to a set of Democratic House candidates. While the hacked material was incorporated into campaign ads in most of these candidates' Congressional races, at least one candidate, Representative Ryan Costello (R-PA) opted against using the materials against his opponent, stating, "We believed it was neither necessary nor appropriate to use information from a possible foreign source to influence the election" (Lipton and Shane 2016).

Hoefer (2016) raises another critical question of integrity that political social workers must grapple with. He asks, "Is honesty always the best policy? Is it permissible to lie if it better accomplishes social work's primary mission" (p. 28)? In practice, we are likely to come face-to-face with this question in multiple ways. For example, as social workers seeking policies that promote social justice, is it acceptable to overstate the scope or consequences of a problem if it will gain the problem more attention? Ezell (2001) makes it clear that such misrepresentation is contrary to the value of integrity. It is also evident why this might be tempting for social workers who have long struggled to get lawmakers to pay attention to their problem.

Competence

The final core social work value calls for social workers to practice with **competence**, focusing on the areas in which they are able to practice effectively and to "continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice…" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). The ethical demands of competence require that social workers be honest with potential employers, voters, or other constituencies about what we will be able to do, without overstating those capabilities. Ezell (2001), for example, specifically calls on social workers to only perform advocacy tasks that they are competent to do. Where necessary, he suggests partnering with others who have a skill set more appropriate to the policy goals, targets, and tactics at hand.

It can be tempting for social workers to use the call to practice competently as a justification not to spread their work into areas where they face a steep learning curve or might experience discomfort. Social workers should have a strong sense of self-awareness and a realistic understanding of their own skills. It is also important to reflect whether we are underestimating our own competence. As research on gender and candidate emergence suggests, women consistently view themselves as less qualified for running for office than do men, regardless of their objective level of qualification (Lawless 2015).

In areas that feel beyond our comfort zones, it is important to understand our strengths, their application, and areas in which we need to build strength. We can then use this knowledge to seek out situations to find meaningful opportunities to apply our skills in new ways.

Local and state level campaigns, local political offices, and small advocacy nonprofits tend to rely on limited staff, the willingness of volunteers to contribute at significant levels, and small budgets. In these situations, many on staff may be asked to be a "jack of all trades," regardless of background and prior preparation. For example, in some states, a state legislative office—even during the legislative session—may have just one staffer. This staffer might be expected to carry the representatives' bills, track and recommend votes on legislation, and handle all interactions with constituents, advocates, and lobbyists. A campaign for a local elected office or for an unlikely challenger to a popular incumbent might have just one paid staffer, or may even be completely staffed by volunteers. Such situations

can pose challenges to a social worker's ability to practice according to the value of competence, especially at the beginning of a political social work career.

It is important to remember, however, that most of the people in these positions are entry-level. In many situations, social workers may be better prepared for the demands of these jobs than other candidates. Preparing carefully for these jobs, seeking out mentors and supportive networks, using supervision when available, and being willingness to ask questions and seek out assistance when needed can help social workers accomplish them with competence.

Ethical Standards in the Code of Ethics

In addition to core values, the Code of Ethics spells out ethical standards in six areas. In the sections below, we highlight some of these ethical standards and how they inform situations you are likely to encounter as a political social worker. We want to be transparent, however—neither the Code of Ethics nor this section will always tell you what to do when you face an ethical challenge. In fact, at times, this section's discussion may raise more questions than it provides answers. Ethics, unfortunately, are often complex and messy. Otherwise, we would not face so many ethical challenges in practice. Our primary goal here is to provoke your thoughts about where the Code offers guidance and where it may still leave you unsure as to how to proceed. We encourage you to reflect upon and discuss questions that arise as you read this section with fellow social workers, instructors, mentors, and other trusted members of your network. Then, in Section 3 of this chapter, we discuss some ethical decision-making tools to help you navigate these and other political social work challenges.

Ethical Responsibilities to Clients

The first set of ethical standards speaks specifically to social workers' responsibilities toward clients. In political social work, sometimes we work on behalf of individual clients, but often, we work on behalf of much larger constituencies, to whom we also have ethical responsibilities. One of the most challenging aspects of this section for political social work is the question of *who is our client?* The word "client" generally has clear meaning in direct social work practice. When we are working as an advocate, a lobbyist, an elected official, or a staffer, however, our understanding of who our client is and to whom we have professional obligations may be more complex. As an elected official, for example, our "client" might be all the constituents in our district, but these constituents might have distinct and competing interests and needs. As a staffer, our "client" is similar to that of the elected official, but at times, the elected official for whom we work may also be our "client." In fact, staffers of elected officials often talk about the priority they place on "protecting" their employer, in order to preserve their member's ability to legislate effectively.

With this in mind, we highlight several ethical standards that offer us some guidance in our work with these various clients and constituencies. Earlier in this

chapter, we talked about *Sec. 1.02: Self Determination*. This standard has direct relevance to political social work practice, emphasizing the importance of respecting and incorporating the voices of each of our constituencies in our policy work.

Sec. 1.03: Informed Consent raises a related and critical issue for political social workers. This ethical standard calls on us to work with our clients "only in the context of a professional relationship based, when appropriate, on informed consent" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). This standard reminds us to be transparent about when we are acting in an official capacity, a campaign capacity, or as a private citizen. While the Code does not specify what informed consent means in a macro context, it suggests the importance of using clear language to help clients understand the purpose, risks, and limits of our work on their behalf and providing them with the opportunity to ask questions about our efforts. While political social workers may not always provide direct services, we regularly work on legislation that impacts services, as well as the rights, opportunities, and access that vulnerable populations may experience. We advocate or push for legislation and funding that we perceive as beneficial for our constituencies and oppose or stop legislation that we perceive as problematic. We take public stances on a wide range of policy issues and social problems. In doing these things, we need to be aware that we sometimes bring attention to communities affected by these issues in ways with which they might not be comfortable. See, for example, the experience of DREAMers described in the case study in Chap. 3. These young activists discovered that their messaging in order to gain rights for undocumented children was perceived as blaming parents for choosing to come to the USA.

In practical terms, seeking informed consent for our political work often may not be feasible (Ezell 2001). As *Sec. 1.14: Clients Who Lack Decision-Making Capacity* outlines, as social workers, we may find ourselves working on policy platforms or legislation that impact constituencies who are unable to provide informed consent. In these cases, the Code calls on us to take "reasonable steps to safeguard the interests and rights of those clients" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). Therefore, even when informed consent appears not to be feasible in a political context, our Code calls on us to seriously examine whether we can reach out to our clients and constituencies to make sure they are aware of the benefits and risks of our political work or of the possible policy solutions that may emerge (Ezell 2001). When we cannot do so, we should take steps to ensure that we are respecting their interests.

Sec 1.06: Conflicts of Interest is particularly relevant to practice in political settings when many competing interests are at play. Social workers clearly should not "exploit others to further their personal, religious, political, or business interests" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). While this part of the standard offers clear guidance to political social workers, other aspects of this standard raise more questions. For example, this standard also calls on social workers to "take reasonable steps to … make the clients' interests primary and protect clients' interests to the greatest extent possible" and to "take appropriate action to minimize any conflict of interest" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). Given the complexity of what "client" may mean in political social work, who takes priority when

the needs of various constituencies within our district conflict? Which community members' interests do we seek to protect when multiple vulnerable populations are pitted against each other in budget decision-making? What about when community members' interests conflict with the interests of the elected official to whom we have professional obligations?

Ethical Responsibilities to Colleagues

The second set of ethical standards address our responsibilities toward our colleagues. Because of the competitive—and increasingly polarized—nature of politics, you may find some of the standards outlined in Section 2 to be particularly challenging at times. For example, *Sec 2.01: Respect* asks us to "treat colleagues with respect and … represent accurately and fairly the qualifications, views, and obligations of colleagues…[and] avoid unwarranted negative criticism of colleagues in communications with clients or other professionals" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). This language is very clear, emphasizing the dignity and worth of those with whom we work in a political setting.

Our colleagues in a political setting may not be limited to the people who work in our office; colleagues may include the other advocates, lobbyists, staffers, and elected officials with whom we regularly engage in our work. Our colleagues include people with whom we may strongly disagree, often to the point of seeking to defeat their legislation or even to defeat them at the ballot box. This obligation to treat our colleagues with respect underscores the importance of seriously and respectfully engaging with people across political differences. Our Code suggests that we need to start where they are, seek to understand and fairly represent their stances, and to seek to promote respectful dialogue across ideological difference. At the same time, the Code indicates that if we refuse to criticize those who are hateful or promoting unjust policies because they are our colleagues, we are not serving our constituencies. When others in political settings are demeaning, derogatory, or hurtful, criticism is certainly warranted.

It is useful to understand the process by which the Code of Ethics recommends intervening with colleagues who are impaired, practicing outside of their areas of competence, or practicing unethically. We may see each of this in our political social work practice. Ethical standards in Section 2 offer specific guidance on this: for example, to respect the confidentiality of information shared with us by colleagues (*Sec 2.02: Confidentiality*), to seek to support impaired colleagues (*Sec 2.08: Impairment of Colleagues*), to help colleagues perform more competently (*Sec. 2.09: Incompetence of Colleagues*), and to avoid engaging in sexual harassment (*Sec. 2.07: Sexual Harassment*). The Code recommends that, whenever possible, a social worker engage directly with the colleague in question, and only then move through a process of sharing those concerns with others.

Sec 2.05: Consultation also raises a critical point for political social work practice, emphasizing the importance of reaching out to colleagues for "advice and counsel…when it is in the best interests of clients" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). This recalls the discussion earlier in this chapter (under "Competence") about social workers who may be expected to practice outside their

competence in offices with limited staff. The explicit inclusion of consultation—or seeking out mentorship—as an ethical standard underscores its importance as a tool for political social workers asked to take on unfamiliar roles.

Ethical Responsibilities in Practice Settings

The third set of ethical standards provides guidance for engaging with the settings in which we work. Care should be taken to make sure that we act appropriately and set appropriate boundaries in supervisory roles (*Sec 3.01: Supervision and Consultation*), evaluate our employees fairly (*Sec 3.03: Performance Evaluation*), and create work assignments that encourage compliance with the Code (*Sec 3.07: Administration*).

This section has important implications for how political social workers engage with policy choices both within and outside of our organizations. *Sec. 3.07: Administration* calls on us to "advocate for resource allocation procedures that are open and fair" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). We talked previously in this chapter about the challenging—and sometimes, heart-wrenching—choices that political social workers face in influencing or determining budget and resource allocations. Here, the Code specifically guides us to be transparent and fair in that process. When we are unable to meet all of the needs of our constituencies, it expects us to develop processes to guide allocations that are "nondiscriminatory and based on appropriate and consistently applied principles" (National Association of Social Workers 2017).

Another part of this section that is especially important to highlight is part d of *Sec 3.09: Commitments to Employers*: "Social workers should not allow an employing organization's policies, procedures, regulations, or administrative orders to interfere with their ethical practice of social work." This is an important guidepost for political social workers who may at some point in their careers be asked by supervisors to act in a way that conflicts with the Code of Ethics. For example, how do we proceed when the elected official for whom we work asks us to behave in a way that is contrary to the value of integrity? Do we answer this question differently if the elected official asks us to do so as a means to furthering a social justice goal?

Ethical Responsibilities as Professionals

The fourth set of ethical standards focuses on social workers' responsibilities in professional contexts, reinforcing the core values of integrity and competence. It underscores political social workers' responsibilities to "not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical disability" (*Sec 4.02: Discrimination*) (National Association of Social Workers 2017). While this standard is so elemental to political social work, it is also an example of an aspirational standard within the Code that many of us may struggle with even with the best intentions. Take a minute to think about ways that this standard might pose a challenge in your own political social work practice.

This section also extensively discusses the importance of social workers engaging in honest, unimpaired, and transparent practices. *Sec. 4.04: Dishonesty, Fraud, and Deception,* requiring that social workers "not participate in, condone, or be associated with fraud, or deception" (National Association of Social Workers 2017) is an important reminder for political social workers as we enter into practice settings in which back-door deals, trade-offs, and instrumental relationships are part of the environment, and often can be perceived as critical to achieving policy outcomes.

Sec 4.05: Impairment emphasizes not allowing our own personal challenges to interfere with our professional judgment and performance, nor with ensuring the best interests of our colleagues or constituencies. Political environments can be highly demanding and stressful at certain times, e.g., the final weeks of a political campaign, before and after a campaign kick-off or a major political debate, when challenging opposition research is made public, near a statutory budget deadline, or the last couple of months of the legislative session in a part-time legislature. When work must be completed in such situations, political social workers can find themselves struggling to balance their personal well-being and self-care with their professional responsibilities.

Ethical Responsibilities to the Profession

The Code of Ethics emphasizes our responsibilities to the social work profession as a whole in its fifth set of standards. In *Sec 5.01: Integrity of the Profession*, we are called upon to "uphold and advance the values, ethics, knowledge, and mission of the profession" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). This includes protecting and strengthening how others view the profession. Political social workers work extensively in interdisciplinary environments where social workers may be less common than other professions (though when each reader of this book enters into this work, that will certainly change this dynamic!) and where our colleagues may be unfamiliar with the profession's many strengths.

Pritzker and Barros Lane (in press) found that social work students interning in a state legislature felt like they had to justify their presence as social workers in the legislative arena, sometimes encountering questions like, "What are you doing here at the Capitol?" While working in the U.S. Senate, one of this book's authors was regularly asked—sometimes even by other social workers—why she chose to leave the social work profession. 5.01 reminds us that actively engaging others in discussions about the values, ethics, and mission of social work is, in fact, a professional obligation.

FURTHER REFLECTION: Integrity of the Profession

Some social workers in political settings choose not to identify as social workers or to use their professional credentials (BSW, MSW, LMSW, etc.). Why do you think this might be? What are your thoughts about this choice?

Another standard of particular relevance to political social workers is *Sec 5.02: Evaluation and Research.* This standard underscores our responsibility to make sure that our policy work reflects emerging research knowledge and also to inform our policy work with accurate and honest data collection. It also emphasizes our responsibility to not only ensure that strong candidates are elected to office and socially just policies are passed, but to ensure that policies and their implementation are being monitored and evaluated.

Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society

The final section of the Code of Ethics encapsulates much of what we have already discussed in framing both this book as a whole and this chapter in particular. It focuses on our ethical responsibilities to the broader society; that is, what we as social workers are ethically obligated to do in support of our core value of social justice. This standard most clearly delineates our roles as political social workers, including to "engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully" (National Association of Social Workers 2017).

Sec 6.01: Social welfare reminds us specifically of our ethical obligation to advocate for social justice and to promote the welfare of society. This call for promoting social justice is a critical underpinning of political social work. However, as political social workers who must engage across different political ideologies to be effective in our work, it is also important than we seriously reflect upon questions such as: Whose understanding of social justice? For example, in his article, "Social justice: A conservative perspective," Bruce Thyer (2010) critiques many of his more liberal social work colleagues, arguing that "conservative social workers believe that adhering to their [conservative] principles results in a *more* socially just world via the creation of more socially just programs and policies, than the practices espoused by their more liberal colleagues" (p. 272).

In emphasizing our obligation to meet people's basic needs of people and to promote equal access to the resources people need to meet these basic needs, both *Sec 6.01* and *Sec 6.04: Social and Political Action* also raise questions about how political social workers make decisions in political and economic environments where budgetary resources are highly limited. Where limited resources are available, do we hold out for equal access to all basic needs being met, and refuse to compromise for anything less until full resources are available? Do we instead try to manage competing claims from different groups who are all seeking to have their basic needs met?

This final section of the Code of Ethics also refocuses us on our obligation to prevent discrimination against vulnerable and marginalized groups on the basis of "race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical disability" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). It underscores the importance of self-determination in the policy process, expressly stating in *Sec 6.02: Public Participation* that we are expected to "facilitate informed

participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). Not only must we engage in political action ourselves, an essential part of our political social work practice must involve helping vulnerable and marginalized groups contribute to policy-making.

EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Ethical Challenges in *Your* Experiences as a Political Social Worker

Identify one or two ethical challenges you have encountered in a political context, whether in your personal life, your professional or volunteer experiences, or as part of your social work education. If you haven't yet had experience in a political context, identify at least one ethical challenge(s) identified in this book. Share and discuss these ethical challenges with a fellow student, colleague, or mentor. What core value(s) or ethical standard(s) might guide you in thinking about how to approach each challenge? How might it guide you?

POLITICAL SOCIAL WORKER PROFILE: Sheryl Grossman, MSW

Founder/Facilitator, Blooms Connect (Fig. 14.1).

Fig. 14.1 Sheryl Grossman, MSW

Sheryl Grossman was born in the 1970s, in "the year that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act went into play." As Sheryl grew up, her "family had to fight for me to be included" in any activities. Her experiences from an early age made her interested in becoming a social worker. "MSW was the three letter word in the disability community…. It was typically the social worker who would take the child and put them in an institution if they had a disability… it was typically the social worker who would place a child in foster care if their parents had a disability." Sheryl herself experienced this when, at a couple months old, she was taken from her family and institutionalized in a hospital for "failure to thrive." Sheryl says, "After another few weeks it was clear that I wasn't changing, and there was something actually going on—which started the years-long process of actually getting diagnosed" with Blooms Syndrome. This trauma stayed with Sheryl's family, as is the

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experiences with many families who have dealt with disability, creating a view of the social worker as enemy.

Sheryl pursued her social work degree "to know the lingo and language of those who would be sitting across the table from me my entire life as I tried to navigate it." Early on in her social work schooling, Sheryl found her disabilities community and was able to join them in community organizing around human rights and civil rights for the disability community. As a student, "there was no [statement in the] Code of Ethics [regarding] people with disabilities." When soon after Sheryl graduated, the NASW added a statement about working with people of color, "it made me angry to no end that it could be done for one minority group, but not others. And I still saw people with disabilities as the object of pity and the need for services in social work." This led Sheryl to more closely follow the actions of NASW and advocate to have language included for people like her.

Sheryl has worked to change the way that people with disabilities are treated by the social work profession and by society as a whole. As she describes, "I saw groups of people making decisions, and I wanted to be a part of that change." She leads by example in her clinical work with people with disabilities, "helping them use their power and their voice, in whatever way, shape, or form that means." Sheryl works to empower people with disabilities to advocate for themselves, and to realize the range that this may take: from writing a letter to a representative to protesting in Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's office. Sheryl reflects back on her experiences as a political social worker: "It is a 'slow as molasses' process to get people to realize that people with disabilities aren't looking for pity, or a hand out, but that they should be treated like everybody else."

Sheryl offers some advice for future political social workers. For social work students without disabilities, she advises: "Remember that you are not the disabled person" and strive to be an ally by giving the voices of those with disabilities the space to be heard. For social work students with disabilities, she suggests that "you do not have to be the lone voice" advocating for your rights; instead, finding your community and adequate outlets for support is vital to this work. She emphasizes. "We need your voice… Stick with it," but underscores, "Macro level social work and community organizing can be the channel for the rage that you're living through everyday… you can channel it into productive action. But you have to have the community and support of other disabled folks" to avoid burnout over the long term.

Section 3: Ethical Decision-Making in Political Social Work

As a political social worker, you will inevitably face ethical challenges in your practice. While substantial criticism argues that the Code of Ethics may be clearer in terms of its application to clinical or supervisory contexts than to macro contexts

(Reisch and Lowe 2000; Hoefer 2016), the ethical issues we face in political social work practice are certainly not any less relevant, pressing, or challenging.

Ethical issues in practice often emerge in the form of **ethical dilemmas**. In these dilemmas, we find ourselves having to choose between multiple alternatives that are "equally satisfactory or unsatisfactory" (Reisch and Lowe 2000). In some cases, dilemmas emerge when we lack sufficient time to reflect seriously on our choices between these alternatives (Reisch and Lowe 2000). In other cases, dilemmas occur when we feel forced to choose between our Code of Ethics and our employer's conflicting policies, or when we are faced with two different ethical standards or values that conflict in a given situation. When faced with these dilemmas, we must make difficult decisions about whether and how to move forward with one course of action or another.

Difficult ethical decisions are often subjective and dependent on the specific context in which the dilemma arises. Rarely are dilemmas in advocacy or other aspects of political social work clearly ethical or clearly unethical (Ezell 2001). As Gray and Gibbons (2007) note, "there are no right answers, only choices, and we are responsible for, and have to be able to live with, the decisions or choices we make" (p. 225).

The Code of Ethics is designed to serve as a resource for social workers in navigating ethical dilemmas. However, social work students and professionals alike may be hesitant to refer to the Code as they encounter these dilemmas (Dodd 2007). We encourage you to discuss and reflect upon the ethical dilemmas you encounter in practice with your colleagues, supervisors, or mentors, and to adopt a conscious process of ethical decision-making to help guide you. Through this chapter, we hope to provide you with tools that will help you use the Code more effectively in navigating practice challenges in political social work.

Approaches to Ethical Decision-Making

An **ethical decision-making framework** is a tool that takes us through a step-by-step problem-solving process to think through how we might address an ethical dilemma. To date, no ethical decision-making framework has been proposed specifically for political social work practice. However, social work literature offers several frameworks that can guide us in this work. We outline three frameworks below, and encourage you to practice using each one, with the goal of identifying a framework that can help guide your own practice as you move forward in your social work career.

Reamer's Ethical Decision-Making Process

Frederic Reamer (2002) has long been a leader in studying professional ethics in social work, and many readers of this book may already be familiar with his seven-step process of ethical decision-making. This process was intended to be applied to both micro- and macro-decision-making in social work, and can be a helpful tool

for navigating the kinds of ethical dilemmas raised in this chapter. These seven steps are as follows (Reproduced in full from Reamer 2002):

1. Identify the ethical issues, including the social work values and ethics that conflict.
2. Identify the individuals, groups, and organizations that are likely to be affected by the ethical decision.
3. Tentatively identify all possible courses of action and the participants involved in each, along with possible benefits and risks for each.
4. Thoroughly examine the reasons in favor of and opposed to each possible course of action, considering relevant
   (a) Ethical theories, principles, and guidelines
   (b) Codes of ethics and legal principles
   (c) Social work practice theory and principles
   (d) Personal values (including religious, cultural, and ethnic values and political ideology)
5. Consult with colleagues and appropriate experts (such as agency staff, supervisors, agency administrators, attorneys, ethics scholars, and ethics committees).
6. Make the decision and document the decision-making process.
7. Monitor, evaluate, and document the decision.

This process begins by asking us to identify the range of ethical issues in the specific situation, and then to explore the various parties that might be affected by any decision we might make. As we deal with issues associated with complex policy decisions, we may find that the list of entities affected by our decision is extensive. Based on this analysis, we are then asked to identify the range of actions that may be available to us to take in response to the ethical issue.

A strength of this process is the thorough critical analysis of all possible courses of action it takes us through, including reasons to support or oppose each course of action. Consistent with our earlier discussion in this chapter of the importance of consultation, this process encourages us to consult with experts prior to making a decision. It is important to realize that in political settings, individuals who hold the roles that Reamer suggests we consult with (supervisors, staff, etc.) may, in fact, have contributed to the ethical dilemma we face. This is not to say that they are necessarily behaving in a manner that society would deem as unethical, but rather that they may not share the same core values as the social work profession. This again presents an opportunity for you to seek out mentorship from other political social workers. Finally, even after you have made your decision about how to handle the ethical dilemma, Reamer (2002) indicates that the process is not complete. You must document, monitor, and evaluate what happens after your decision has been made.

Reisch and Lowe's "Ethics Work-Up"

Suggesting that there may be specific considerations when analyzing ethical dilemmas in community organizing, Reisch and Lowe (2000) developed a six-step process specifically for use in community practice, called "The Ethics Work-Up."

Community organizing and political social work share many commonalities as forms of macro social work that engage heavily with issues of power, politics, and policy; accordingly, this framework may be relevant to the kinds of dilemmas faced in political social work practice. Its six steps are as follows (Reproduced in full from Reisch and Lowe 2000):

1. Identify and articulate the facts of the ethical dilemma and their likely consequences as best as possible.
2. Identify all related value factors (personal, professional, social, or human) present for all persons involved in the case.
3. Identify and delineate the major value conflicts.
4. Set priorities for the values that have been found to be in conflict in Step 3. State the reasons that would support this priority setting.
5. Identify and set out arguments that would support the reasons advanced in Step 4 by answering the following questions:
   (a) What underlying ethical norms support this view?
   (b) Why should these norms be accepted as guides for conduct in this case?
   (c) What do these norms imply for how values should be arranged in priority order? (Revise the priority order established in Step 4 if required to do so at this point.)
   (d) What are the implications for community practice and policy development [author's note: or political social work practice] if this decision were generalized?
6. Critique the arguments given in Steps 4 and 5.

When applying this decision-making framework, your initial steps focus on clarifying the facts of the dilemma and then identifying the value conflicts at stake among all impacted constituencies. In Steps 4 and 5, you assess which are the most important values in this situation, justify this assessment, and then critically reflect even further on this assessment. This critical reflection focuses your thought process on exactly which standards matter most in this dilemma, why they matter, as well as the positive and negative implications of prioritizing these standards.

In the final step, Step 6, you engage in even more critical reflection, critiquing your own arguments. We encourage you to take into account alternative viewpoints and to evaluate your decision through a variety of other lenses in order to make sure that you can defend your stance.

Loewenbeg and Dolgoff's Ethical Rules Screen and Ethical Principles Screen

The two-part "Ethical Rules Screen" and "Ethical Principles Screen" developed by Loewenberg and Dolgoff (1996) has been previously used as a model for guiding ethical macro practice (Hardina 2004). While the "Ethics Work-Up" asks social workers to prioritize values on their own (Reisch and Lowe 2000), the Ethical Principles Screen takes a different approach, proposing a specific order to guide prioritization of ethical principles.

This process starts with the Ethical Rules Screen, which enables you to assess whether the Code sufficiently addresses your ethical dilemma. The Ethical Rules Screen involves the following three steps (slightly adapted from Dolgoff et al. 2012):

1. Are any of the rules within the Code of Ethics applicable to this dilemma? Note that these rules are expected to supersede one's personal values.
2. If one or more rules within the Code of Ethics apply, follow the rules provided in the Code.
3. If the specific dilemma is not addressed by the Code of Ethics, or conflicting guidance is provided by the Code, use the Ethical Principles Screen below.

If the Code addresses your dilemma, this screen suggests that the Code alone should guide your actions. Where the Code does not sufficiently address your dilemma, however, you would then move to the second step and apply the seven-step Ethical Principles Screen (slightly adapted from Dolgoff et al. 2012):

1. Principle: Protection of life
2. Principle: Social justice
3. Principle: Self-determination, autonomy, and freedom
4. Principle: Least harm
5. Principle: Quality of life
6. Principle: Privacy and confidentiality
7. Principle: Truthfulness and full disclosure

While each of the seven principles is important to social workers and reflected within our Code, Dolgoff et al. (2012) suggest prioritizing the more highly ranked principles over the lower-ranked principles in ethical decision-making. That is, when faced with a choice between social justice (principle 2) and truthfulness (principle 7), this screen suggests that social justice should carry more weight in your decision-making process.

As Dolgoff et al. (2012) clearly specify, however, the order of principles laid out by the Ethical Principles Screen may not always be appropriate in all contexts; instead, you may need to engage in critical reflection in order to determine whether this priority order makes sense within your practice context. Therefore, while this screen can help guide your ethical decision-making, it may serve just as a starting point, giving you a basis from which to create your own rank order of ethical principles, as applies to the specific political context in which you practice. You may also choose to add additional ethical principles that reflect your values and values that are important to the constituencies with whom you work (Hardina 2004).

Knowing Your Own Ethical Decision-Making Style

You likely already bring a preconceived orientation to ethical decision-making. The decision-maker (you!) in an ethical dilemma is a critical component of the ethical decision-making process. Our cultural background, our biases, aspects of our socialization, as well as our role in the organization and the broader context in which we practice influence how each of us approaches ethical dilemmas. Mattison (2000) terms this "**value patterning**," indicating that each of us has a specific set of priorities that we consistently apply to our own ethical decision-making processes.

Mattison (2000) and Hardina (2004) both highlight a distinction between **deontological** and **teleological** styles of ethical decision-making. A deontological style involves an absolutist approach to problem solving. For a person who adopts this style, actions are often considered "right" or "wrong," regardless of the consequences that result. For example, a political social worker who tends to subscribe to a deontological style might refuse to engage in a back-room deal to move forward a piece of legislation regardless of the legislation's substantive merits. She might argue that a back-room deal violates the core social work value of integrity and should not be entered into, regardless of any benefit that could emerge from the deal.

A teleological style, on the other hand, involves moral relativism. In this approach, the "right"-ness of an action is dependent on the consequences that are likely to result from the action. When faced with the prospect of a back-room deal to pass a piece of legislation, a political social worker who tends toward a teleological style will weigh the various consequences that could emerge from this deal. She may determine that the positive social justice impact that is likely to emerge from the bill may outweigh any concerns about the integrity of the deal. Political social workers with a teleological style are more likely to engage in political compromise to achieve what they see as the best possible outcome, even if it is not all that they hope for.

Continuous reflection on, and understanding of, your own value patterning and your ethical decision-making style can help you to make more effective decisions as you move forward as a political social work practitioner (Mattison 2000). By increasing your self-awareness of the factors that you bring personally and individually to the process of navigating challenging ethical dilemmas, you will be better equipped to adapt your approach as needed and to limit the extent to which your personal values or stylistic biases impact your decisions.

Section 4: Ethical Dilemmas in Political Social Work Practice

Many of the challenges you are likely to face in political social work—and, in fact, in all arenas of social work practice—do not have easy answers. As the Code advises us, "reasonable differences of opinion exist among social workers" (National Association of Social Workers 2017), meaning that there often is more than one appropriate way to handle a challenging ethical dilemma. What is most important,

then, is that we approach these dilemmas cautiously and thoughtfully, using critical thinking to weigh alternatives.

This section provides you with an opportunity to practice and develop your own approach to ethical decision-making in political social work practice. Below we provide brief examples that illustrate common ethical dilemmas that political social workers may face in their work. Building on our discussions throughout this chapter, these examples involve challenging ethical decisions such as:

- Balancing policy "ends" versus the "means" by which you get there, particularly where the means may involve setting aside other core social work values in pursuit of moving social justice outcomes forward.
- Competing claims by different groups over limited resources.
- Ensuring self-determination and meaningful participation from constituencies.
- Achieving policy outcomes in the short-term versus the long-term sustainability of your ability to do so.

Many of the examples below illustrate complex situations that place social work values in conflict with each other. In some cases, you may find that you and fellow social workers agree on a solution. In other cases, you may find that engaging in processes of ethical decision-making lead you and your colleagues to different ways of navigating these challenges.

EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Ethical Decision-Making

With fellow students or a colleague, apply at least one of the ethical decision-making frameworks discussed in this chapter to each of the scenarios outlined below. For each scenario, consider how our Code of Ethics might guide you in navigating the situation. Together, discuss and reflect upon alternative approaches to each scenario.

Optional follow-up activity: After you have completed this activity with a specific scenario, take on the role of another person who might be involved in the dilemma. Go through your ethical decision-making framework again. Do you end up in a similar place—why or why not?

Scenario 1: As *governor of your state*, you have proposed a substantial increase in the state's minimum wage. You and your allies have been arguing that a $15 minimum wage is an essential living wage for workers across the state. However, your proposal has faced substantial opposition on the part of the farming industry that threatens to derail this proposal. In response to this opposition, your advisors have suggested that you consider a carve-out (or exclusion) of farm workers from the minimum wage increase. The argument is that you will be more likely to be able to pass the minimum wage increase for all other workers in the state if the wages of farm workers are excluded from the proposal. Do you propose the carve-out? (Note: This scenario is directly adapted from a real-world situation in New York in 2016; McKinley 2016).

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Scenario 2: You have worked as a civil servant in a state-level executive branch agency for several years, and are the *state-wide director of a program that administers support to homeless veterans in your state*. The last gubernatorial election resulted in a change of the political party leading your state. The new governor and her political administration have come into office and have requested that each agency conduct a thorough review of every state program under their purview, with recommendations for change. There are extensive rumors—and some evidence from campaign rhetoric, as well as what is already happening in other state agencies—that this review is likely to lead to substantial cuts to state programs.

You are tasked with writing the review of the program you oversee. Your extensive experience with this program has made you aware both of its strengths and its weaknesses. You know that if you were to provide a fully honest analysis of your program and your recommendations for improvement, the administration would focus solely on the program's deficiencies and not on your recommendations for improvement. Each recommendation you make is likely to call attention to the program weaknesses you would like to improve. How do you approach your report: Do you write a fully honest report identifying the program's true strengths and weaknesses? Do you understate its weaknesses in an effort to try to protect the program? Or is there an alternative approach you would take?

Scenario 3: You are the *campaign manager for a candidate in a very tight mayoral campaign*, with the election just weeks away. Your candidate's opponent has a history of consistently opposing policies that you and the campaign believe are essential to promoting social justice in your community, and many marginalized groups in your community are concerned about the possibility of your opponent being elected.

Through opposition research, you recently discovered that two decades ago, as a college student, your campaign opponent spent several days as a patient in an inpatient mental health facility. A major issue in this campaign has been who would bring a steady hand to governance. Given the prevalence of mental health stigma in your community, releasing this information is likely to turn voters away from your opponent. Do you share this information off-the-record with a local reporter?

Scenario 4: You are the *executive director of a local nonprofit organization that provides assistance to the homeless*. Homelessness has increased in your city over the last couple of years due to broader economic factors in the state and country. As a result of these economic factors, your city government is facing major budget cuts and plans a permanent 25% cut to homelessness services directly provided by the city. As a way around this, the mayor has called you and directly asked you to support an ordinance that would revamp the city's homelessness services. The ordinance would call for the city to

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provide fewer direct services, while relying on organizations like yours to increase their service provision role.

Rather than the 25% cut, the ordinance would fund a group of local nonprofits to provide these direct services at the same rate as the city currently does for the next 3 years, meaning there would not be an immediate cut to homeless services over the next 3 years. After this 3-year period, however, city funding would end, and the nonprofits would be expected to find grant funding and other means of financial support. The mayor says without support from someone who works with the homeless community, the ordinance will not pass. What do you do?

Scenario 5: As *legislative director in the office of a state legislator*, you are responsible for pushing a bill your legislator sponsored, and a corresponding appropriations request, that would provide a much-needed expansion of pre-K programs to low-income students across your state. Many advocacy groups with whom your office works closely have been working for many years on this issue, and they have counted on your legislator to be a legislative champion for this effort. You have been very heartened to discover that there seems to be more legislative support for expanding pre-K programs this year than you and the advocates have seen in prior legislative sessions.

As the state's appropriations process moves forward, however, it becomes clear that the state's revenue projections are down. While the committee chairwoman is in support of this pre-K expansion, funds for education programs are being capped below the prior budget year, and any increase in funding for one program will require substantial cuts to other programs. The chairwoman proposes that in order to expand pre-K across the state, the budget can reallocate funds that currently fund school-based programs for youth with special needs. Upon learning this information, how do you move forward with your budget proposal?

Scenario 6: You are a *policy staff member of an executive branch agency*. Your agency's budget for early intervention services for children from birth to three has been cut by the legislature. The agency has developed a proposal to redesign these early intervention services within the allocated budget. You are very uncomfortable with the direction that this work has been taking. You fear that this proposal—which substantially tightens eligibility criteria and adds cost-sharing (a system which requires families to pay for some portion of the services)—will result in the loss of services for children in the state who are most in need of services. You are asked to advocate to agency leaders that they pass the new proposal.

While you are concerned about the harm that could come from this proposal, pushing back on the proposal might derail the work that has been done so far, potentially resulting in an even more harmful policy alternative. Do you speak up about your concerns, or stay quiet?

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Scenario 7: You are a *candidate in your very first election*, and are running for an at-large seat on your local City Council. You have an extremely limited budget and have a lot of work to do to build name recognition in the city. As this is your first run for office, you are relying heavily on the advice of a campaign strategist who has advised several campaigns in your city. In prior elections, no more than 10% of the city's electorate has voted in City Council elections. Your strategist advises you to not waste very limited campaign resources on efforts to register new voters. The strategist instead advises you to limit your Get Out The Vote (GOTV) efforts to homes where residents have voted in past city elections.

As a social worker, however, you have felt strongly about expanding meaningful participation in policy on the part of vulnerable populations. In fact, that's part of what spurred your run for office. You know that people of color are less likely to be represented in policy decisions in your city, and in fact, the neighborhoods that your strategist encourages you to skip have a higher percentage of people of color than the neighborhoods that typically vote in this election. How do you proceed with your campaign?

Scenario 8: You are an *elected member of the U.S. House of Representatives*, representing a district that is struggling with the opioid crisis. Substance abuse and, in particular, opioid addiction, are tearing apart families and creating what feels in some ways like a "lost generation" in your community. You have substantial concerns about the health and well-being of your constituents and are committed to improving conditions in the communities that you represent. Based on your extensive experience with your community, review of the research that advocates and lobbyists have brought to you, and your own reading of a new health care reform bill that has been proposed in Congress, you are convinced that your constituents would greatly benefit from this bill. You are particularly pleased by the bill's specific policy and budget provisions for targeting opioid addiction in communities like yours.

However, upon learning of this bill, members of your community are concerned that it will increase their health care costs. They have been repeatedly calling your office and showing up at your town-hall meetings in opposition to this bill. Polling of your community, as well as the volume of calls in opposition, make it clear that your constituents are overwhelmingly opposed to this bill. You serve on the House Energy and Commerce Committee which has a scheduled vote on this bill in 2 weeks. What do you do?

Scenario 9: You are the *director of government affairs for a nonprofit organization*, located about 5 hours away from your state capitol. One of the top priorities of your state legislative agenda this session is the process of reshaping how mental health services are provided in schools in your state. Based on your advocacy, a bill to do exactly this has been filed, and a House committee hearing on this bill is scheduled for the end of this week.

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You and your fellow mental health advocates have worked in advocacy for over a decade each, have strong relationships with legislators, and are skilled at influencing policy. In preparing for your testimony later this week, a social work intern in your office points out that neither you nor your fellow advocates have reached out to affected populations to ask them how they feel about this bill, and whether they think it would be helpful to them. She is right. It had not occurred to you to do this, because you are confident that this bill will help vulnerable children in your state in need of mental health services. How do you respond to her criticism?

Scenario 10: You are *executive director of a local nonprofit agency* focused on community health and well-being. Your agency regularly engages in advocacy on policy issues related to health and human services, and has worked extensively on issues related to obesity. Recently, you have been asked to participate in a coalition to advocate for a local ban on sugary drinks, which you think is consistent with your agency's mission and would be beneficial for your agency's client base.

Before agreeing to participate in this coalition, you discuss it with your executive team. Your development director points out that a large portion of your agency's donors run restaurants and movie theaters that benefit from the sale of sugary drinks. Some have expressed concerns in the past about the impact of such a ban on their businesses. How does this impact your decision about whether to participate in the coalition?

Scenario 11: The governor of your state tends to surround himself with a homogenous set of policy advisors, and has been publicly criticized for doing so. The governor asks you, *a person of color, to be a member of a substantive policy advisory board*. It is clear that your invitation to this board is a "token" move, made in an overt effort to address these critiques and to make the governor look more inclusive. At the same time, accepting this invitation gets you a seat at the table to address policy decisions affecting the well-being of the state's residents. Do you accept the invitation?

Review of Key Terms and Concepts

Carve-out: to remove a population or a protection for a population from a proposed policy.

Competence:a social work value of practicing in areas in which one has appropriate abilities.

Constituent services: services offered to residents of a district by politicians in response to reported needs and concerns.

Credibility: being considered worthy of trust.

Deontological decision-making: an absolutist approach to problem solving, in which the decision-maker considers actions to be right or wrong regardless of the resulting consequences of those actions.

Ethical decision-making framework: a tool that takes us through a step-by-step problem-solving process to think through how we might address an ethical dilemma.

Ethical dilemmas: situations that arise in which we find ourselves having to choose between multiple alternatives that are equally satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

Ethics: a set of moral standards that guide us in determining which course of action we should take.

Instrumental relationship: an association that exists for the purpose of achieving some sort of external goal(s).

Integrity: the quality of acting honestly and responsibly, of having strong moral principles and promoting ethical practices.

Microaggressions: everyday slights (whether intentional or not) that communicate negative messages to marginalized groups.

Self-determination: the ability of an individual to determine the course of one's own life.

Social justice: fair access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

Teleological decision-making: a morally relativistic approach to problem solving, in which the decision-maker perceives the rightness of an action as being dependent upon the consequences of that action.

Value patterning: the consistent application of an individual's own specific set of priorities to the ethical decision-making processes.

Resources

Book

Frederic Reamer's *Social Work Values & Ethics* (the section on "indirect practice" may be particularly useful in these contexts): https://www.amazon.com/Social-Values-Ethics-Foundations-Knowledge/dp/0231137893/ref=dp_ob_title_bk

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