

Politics is often a forbidden word in nursing; however, it is a process that every nurse is engaged in on a daily basis. When defined as the process of making decisions applying to members of a group, specifically to achieve and exercise positions of governance, politics involves all nurses. In addition, leadership is increasingly identified as an advanced practice nursing competency. Participation in policymaking is a core element of leadership. Leadership aptitude implicitly suggests obtaining expertise to navigate the sometimes murky and ill-defined atmosphere of politics and political negotiating. This chapter begins by suggesting stages of acquired levels of political engagement for nurses. Chapter content continues on to describe skills that nurses can achieve and use in the political process to become effective in influencing policy development and policy decisions.

5.1 Nurses' Stages of Political Engagement

Encouraging advanced practice nurses to participate in the world of policy and politics warrants clarification of terminology in reference to the health policy process. Policy usually refers to decisions resulting in a law or regulation. Politics most often refers to power relationships and to the process used to influence individuals who are making health policy decisions. Advocacy and lobbying can be seen as activities by groups such as the collective voice of APNs to influence policy decision-makers and in turn influence public policy (O'Grady and Johnson 2014).

Envisioning strategic thinking and policy development in healthcare environments is a task of unprecedented complexity for APNs, administrators, and policy-makers (Tracy and Hanson 2014). The participation of nurses in the policy process offers an option for progress, opening access to opportunity for political action. However, "healthcare practitioners have a tendency to allow policy to happen around them not through them. To truly be an effective advocate, [knowledge of] policy must become a tool used to sharpen...practice" (Stewart 2014, p. 3). It is essential that APNs strengthen their leadership skills to become policy leaders based

on an understanding of advocacy, policy, and politics. As healthcare professionals, policy for APNs may arise as professional regulatory mandates that directly impact practice and can be seen as part of everyday practice. However, the tedious nature of policymaking and/or political terminology at times serves to disengage the healthcare providers who need to understand and implement policy directives.

Knowing how the policy process works and identifying ways to participate allows APNs to engage in policymaking at numerous levels (Duffy 2015). To guide an understanding of the political process, Anderson (2011) proposes that there are five stages of policymaking: (1) the policy agenda, (2) policy formulation, (3) policy adoption, (4) policy implementation, and (5) policy evaluation. Easton's (1965) system model of the policy process is similar with the view of policymaking taking place in stages (see Fig. 5.1).

This is a simple linear approach to begin to think about policymaking. However, a critique of this view implies that policymaking takes place in stages with a clearly defined beginning and end. While this viewpoint is currently less commonly supported in the policy literature, the concepts and terminology that were originally developed continue to be used as a reference point (Birkland 2005). Refer to Chap. 3 for additional discussion of theories on social policy and factors that influence decision-making including the policy agenda and agenda setting.

The author proposes that nurses must be involved in policy development and emphasizes that without the participation of nursing in the policy process, decision-makers will formulate and enact policy that impacts the profession with limited knowledge of nursing and the advanced levels of practice. Four stages that characterize the political development of nursing are identified in Table 5.1. The proposed stages provide a reference point to consider as nurses in different countries and varied healthcare settings proceed to a level of maturity and leadership in the arena of politics and policymaking.

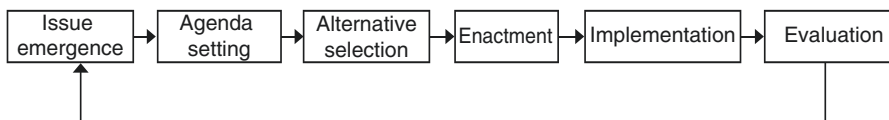


Fig. 5.1 The stage model of the policy process (Birkland 2005, p. 225)

Table 5.1 Nurses' stages of political engagement

<i>First stage: buy-in</i>
Nurses become reactive to an issue and gain an increased political sensitivity
<i>Second stage: self-interest</i>
Nurses develop a political voice characterized by organized political action, lobbying, and special interest groups
<i>Third stage: political sophistication</i>
Nurses become recognized as policymakers and leaders who have a valuable perspective and expertise in health policy
<i>Fourth stage: leadership</i>
Nursing leadership shapes and establishes policy agendas

Cohen et al. (1996), Mason et al. (2006)

The knowledge and experience that are specific to ANP and APNs place them in a unique position to influence policymaking. As a researcher, they can provide data and evidence. As a member of a special interest group, they can be instrumental in organizing members to focus on specific policy issues and lobby to influence policymakers. As an advocate supportive of an issue, APNs can collaborate with policymakers to gather support and influence policy development. Their expertise reinforces relevance to the policy issues (Porche 2012).

However, the ability of APNs to engage in political activities and policymaking is influenced by their resources and motivation to be involved in the process. The motivation to become involved is linked to political interest, view of personal effectiveness, and strong views on an issue. The opportunity to participate in the policy process can stimulate a nurse to consider political engagement. Resources that influence participation include nonwork-related time, available financial resources, and acquired skills (Porche 2012). The next section identifies the skills APNs should acquire to facilitate engagement in policymaking.

5.2 Acquiring the Necessary Skills

Advanced practice nurses provide first-rate healthcare to patients, families, and communities. In advocating for optimal healthcare options for their patient populations, they may not always see the link between advocating for health policy. Acquiring leadership competencies that influence policy in turn can influence quality provision of healthcare services. The practice experiences that APNs bring to policy discussions have the potential to personalize for decision-makers the impact of policies they create and develop (Duffy 2015).

5.2.1 Leadership Competencies

Progressing from clinical experts to leadership in health policy is not necessarily an obvious progression in skills. Not only do APNs need to obtain leadership skills, but they must also have the resources to stay informed and respond to changes in policies that will affect their clinical practice and the provision of healthcare services. Leadership has become a core competency for the APN; however, the concept includes some unique characteristics within the ANP context. These defining qualities according to Tracy and Hanson (2014) are mentoring, innovation, and activism. With this in mind, APNs as leaders are called upon to recognize the need for policy change as well as identify and implement strategies to achieve it.

The following APN competencies are identified as directly related to leadership in health policy (AACN 2006; Duffy 2015; NONPF 2012):

- Assumes complex and advanced leadership roles to initiate and guide change
- Provides leadership to facilitate alliances with multiple stakeholders to advance quality healthcare

- Advocates/lobbies for accessible healthcare services as well as quality and cost-effective care
- Participates in professional organizations and committees that influence APN practice and health outcomes of a population

In addition, nursing scholars suggest that nursing and politics actually complement each other (Leavitt et al. 2002). The nursing process includes assessment, planning, intervention, and evaluation. Theoretically, policymaking progresses from an identified problem to implementation of a solution, requiring the separation of one problem from another. Although the process may not always be straightforward, the APN must understand that various solutions exist, has to prioritize the options to interact and communicate with other interests, and be ready to respond to change. After acquiring more in-depth understanding of governance and legislative processes, the APN has the opportunity to apply that understanding to influence multiple levels of policy decision-making. When an informed APN requests a change in policy accompanied by evidence and data, this approach provides a stronger argument in support of change and/or policy (Duffy 2015).

Not all APNs are comfortable and confident in capacities of leadership, but Tracy and Hanson (2014) suggest that leadership is not an optional activity. Leadership competency can be viewed in four domains: clinical practice, professional organizations, healthcare systems, and the context of health policymaking. There is overlap in knowledge and skills across these domains. For example, the skills developed in clinical leadership can facilitate progress toward effectiveness in the policymaking context. The domain of health policy leadership is increasingly important as laws and regulation are enacted that have implications for APN practice.

5.2.1.1 Communication and Collaboration: A Beneficiary Policy Approach

There is an expectation, or at least a hope, that APNs will collaborate with other healthcare professionals in an effort to provide patient-centered care. Interprofessional models of care emphasize collaboration and an increased comprehension of the expertise each profession offers (Duffy 2015). It is equally important that the intersection of expertise between healthcare professionals works in partnership to communicate with key stakeholders and decision-makers to influence policy. As a component of the APN leadership competency, Tracy and Hanson 2014 recommend that refinement of communication skills, risk taking, interactions with leaders in positions of authority, and mentoring for active roles in policymaking should begin to take place during advanced graduate education.

Advanced practice nurses that are effective leaders are viewed as having identifiable attributes (see Table 5.2). The author emphasizes that not only are these wide-ranging qualities but valuable assets in the interdisciplinary contexts of healthcare systems and politics. Nursing leaders no longer have the luxury of utilizing leadership skills in only nursing environments but are called upon to demonstrate leadership beyond the jurisdictions of nursing education and practice.

Table 5.2 Attributes of advanced practice nurse leaders

Expert communication skills
Articulate in speaking and in writing
Able to communicate an important point
Outstanding listening skills
A desire to listen and try to understand alternative viewpoints
Maintains connections to other people and their expertise
Commitment – development of personal style
Engages in self-reflection
Thinks ahead, facilitates change
Participates and remains involved
Sets priorities
Proficient in use of technology
Risk taking
Leadership involvement at any level
Expresses self-confidence
Uses creative and strategic thinking
Willingness to make a mistake and begin again
Copes with change
Willingness to collaborate
Respects diverse perspectives
Desire to collaborate and develop alliances
Shares aspects of personal influence and networks
Willingness to mentor others

Adapted from Tracy and Hanson (2014) p. 281

Table 5.3 Strategies to develop political confidence and skill

Ability to provide policymakers substantive information in a simple but comprehensive format.
Statistics and data are helpful
Be brief and focused in your discussions
Be specific in describing your intent and request
Consider compromise and know your limitations for negotiation
Establish who you represent and who your topic/issue will impact
Record notes of the conversation and follow up with information as the situation requires

Adapted from Porche (2012), p.177

Leadership strategies used by APNs in various political contexts include developing connections and influence with policymakers, motivating colleagues to stay informed of the status of current issues, and promoting links to other leaders who have access to additional and relevant resources.

Political confidence and good judgment are competencies that increase an individual's ability to influence others (Porche 2012). The knowledge, skill, intuitive thinking, and perception related to the politics of a given situation can be learned and developed with experience. Table 5.3 identifies strategies to develop political confidence and skill.

The proposed strategies build on learning and understanding the policymaking process and the significance of utilizing political strategies. In the process of developing these skills, it is important to identify key individuals and persons aligned with

the issue(s) for which you are seeking policy change or refinement. Use networks to obtain information and for communication. Political influence is cultivated over time; thus, persistence and perseverance are components in developing these skills.

Conclusion

The rationale for advanced practice nurses to participate in political activity is presented in this chapter by identifying stages for the political engagement of nurses. Encouragement of participation in politics and policymaking implies increasing levels of leadership and acquiring the skills needed to become an effective leader. This chapter proposes attributes of skilled nurse leaders and identifies advanced practice leadership competencies that relate specifically to policymaking.

Achieving diplomatic skills to navigate political environments is recognized as essential for the advanced practice nurse leader. Sensitivity and diplomacy are attributes that promote effective communication, especially during processes of negotiation when attempting to be persuasive in the political context of policymaking. Leadership skills of diplomacy have the potential to lead to improved relationships with others, more successful outcomes, and less stressful communications. The author suggests nurses are well positioned to integrate these traits based on their education and practice experiences and therefore are able to transfer this knowledge to politics.

Frameworks described in Chap. 2 and policy theory discussed in Chap. 3 highlight factors that are likely to influence policymaking and policy formulation. Content for this chapter builds on these prior discussions and continues to emphasize that features of policymaking do not occur in isolation. It is the combination of numerous elements that results in setting strategies for policy formulation and subsequent implementation. When advanced practice nurses understand the multiple and varied configurations of policymaking, they will be well prepared to be leaders actively engaged in politics. In addition, they will have acquired the skills applicable to strategic thinking and planning.

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