

The Democratic Tradition in the Social Work Profession

NASW has proposed a “Modernization” plan for a more “vibrant and sustainable association.” Unfortunately, the proposal impedes its goals, not only limiting the democratic process in this instance, but limiting the very democratic structure of the association onwards. It will likely undermine membership investment in local chapters and ultimately, the association. This is a call to reclaim the democratic power of membership voice in the social work profession, beginning with authentic influence on the Modernization proposal.

The two pillars of a democracy are full inclusion in decision making and equal political voice (Hudson, 2010). Why should we care about democratic participatory access in our professional association?

Democratic History of the Profession of Social Work

The history of our profession reflects an ongoing campaign for and commitment to democratic enfranchisement of all persons. Addams wrote *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1905) to anchor the moral philosophy of the profession. The Settlement House movement is the example of democratic ideas brought to life, as evidenced in Addams (1910) *Twenty Years at Hull-House*. In 1912 the Children’s Bureau, led by past Hull House resident Julia Lathrop, was the first to provide assistance to the disenfranchised, expanding rights for our youngest members. The social work community center leader, Mary Follett (1918) advocated for authentic democratic structures to lead organizations in *The New State: Group Organization, the Solution of Popular Government* (1918). The National Consumers’ League led by social worker Florence Kelley, fought against child labor, low wages and poor working conditions, as well as fought for pure food and drug legislation, compulsory school attendance, and maternal and infant health (Chambers, 1963). Many social workers, such as Jane Addams and Sophonisba Breckinridge, were strong advocates for women’s suffrage finally won in 1920.

The emergency relief programs of the Great Depression developed by social worker Harry Hopkins are clear examples of democratic practice. The Rank and File Movement of the 1930s was a social work coalition who fought for a more egalitarian democracy. They promoted social workers’ activism and toward that end published the journal *Social Work Today*. The Social Security Act of 1935, written primarily by social workers such as the Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, codified certain citizenship entitlements to welfare state benefits. Eleanor Roosevelt, a former settlement worker, worked tirelessly for enfranchising rights. She was an active supporter of the NAACP, League of Women Voters, and primary author of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Charlotte Towle’s (1945) *Common Human Needs* asserted every person had a right to economic assistance. Grace Coyle’s (1947) *Group Experience and Democratic Values* and Bertha Reynolds’ many texts including *Social Work and Social Living* (1951), urge social workers to promote democracy through valuing membership and participation in practice.

Social worker and activist Dorothy Height established an *Interracial Charter*, desegregating the YWCAs (in the 1940s-1960s) and worked alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Whitney Young, Jr., social worker and leader of the National Urban League and NAACP, advised presidents Kennedy and Johnson on the War on Poverty programs, promoting democratic participation and opportunity for those disenfranchised by unjust structures and treatment. In the 1970s, social workers and social work academics (notably Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven) were integral to the formation of the National Welfare Rights Organization (Reisch & Andrews, 2002), helping to more fully integrate the disenfranchised into the citizenry.

The Current Challenge to Social Work's Democratic Goals

Unfortunately, the democratic project is incomplete. While many of these efforts had varying degrees of success in enfolded all members securely into the fabric of American democracy, there can be no doubt that the twin ideals of democracy - full inclusion in decision making and equal political voice - are central to the profession of social work. Our membership voice is not only a right, it is a responsibility to ensure the integrity of our profession. Our Code of Ethics, our intellectual tradition, and our very reform efforts and practice have continued to elevate the principles and ideals of democracy. How ironic it would be if we did not require them in our own professional organization.

To be a truly membership-directed organization, an association must be a viable way for members to have input and influence. Legislative bodies provide this as long as they have decision making power and meet frequently enough to vote on emergent and ongoing issues. The American Medical Association House of Delegates, American Psychological Association's Council of Representatives, and American Nurses Association national and state House of Delegates, all meet annually and have broad voice and power in policy and budget decision making.

NASW's Delegate Assembly (DA) has systematically been stripped of its ability to represent the voice of members (see Salinas' statement, 2016 at concernedmembersunited.com). Today, the DA meets only once every three years through a virtual meeting. Its areas of decision making have been severely curtailed, while the administrative voices of the organization have been amplified with the inclusion of Executive Directors into the DA, the move to change chapter by-laws to the less powerful charters, the shrinking of the national board, and the hand vetting of candidates to that board by the administrative staff itself. No longer can we see the principles of full inclusion and equal voice.

It is ironic, then, that the National Association of Social Workers, the one profession that maintained the importance of democratic tenets in its purpose from the Progressive Era onward, should be so undemocratic in its professional organization governance and process. Not only does the Modernization proposal lay a framework for a number of modifications to the association that are already proving problematic to chapters, the very proposal itself requires would-be permanent limits to democratic avenues for influence.

Professional Associations as Places to Learn and Live Democracy

Finally, professional associations were historically developed not just to benefit their members, but to benefit society at large. Warren (2000) states that the virtues or habits of a democracy depend on its associational life and the chance to learn, practice, and implement representative governance ...

... The virtues and viability of a democracy depend on the robustness of its associational life. [This] consensus is rooted in a renewed appreciation for the limits of states and markets as means for making collective decisions and organizing collective actions. Associations promise other ways of getting things done, from supporting public spheres and providing representation to cultivating the virtues of citizens and providing alternative forms of governance. ... associations provide the social substance of liberal-democratic procedures... (Warren, 2000)

It is worthwhile to take note of Addams' (1922) contention, "Social advance depends as much upon the process through which it is secured as on the result itself" (p. 133).

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