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**“I’ve Got to Run Again”: Experiences of Social Workers Seeking Municipal Office in  
Ontario**

by

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Bachelor of Humanities, Carleton University, 2010

Master of Arts, Carleton University, 2012

THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of Social Work

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Master of Social Work degree

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### **Abstract**

This thesis presents a qualitative study on the experiences and perceptions of Ontario social workers who were candidates for municipal elected office in the 2018 Ontario municipal elections. The author sought to understand the contributing factors these social workers perceive led to them seeking elected office, whether social justice was a motivating factor, and whether these social workers believe that their social work education prepared them for seeking elected office. I interviewed ten social workers and used thematic analysis, grounded in feminist theories and Verba et al.’s (1995) Civic Voluntarism Model to analyze transcripts. Participants discussed determining relationships, becoming a social worker, catalysts, the political landscape, skills and strategies, and deepening the political identity of social work. Discussion identified numerous factors that participants perceive as contributing to their political journeys, with emphasis on relationships and networks, and an invitation to political involvement, as well as identifying the common experience of external motivating factors that compel political action, and the transferrable skillsets gained through social work education. Findings are particularly relevant to social work professional associations and schools of social work. Recommendations emphasize strategies and research that will help better understand the extent of social workers’ participation in Canadian electoral politics, and strategies to normalize and encourage greater levels of engagement among social workers.

*Keywords:* political participation, municipal politics, elected office, social workers, qualitative research

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## Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis presents the results of a qualitative study on the experiences and perceptions of ten Ontario social workers who were candidates for municipal elected office in the 2018 Ontario municipal elections. It explores pathways through which social workers were engaged in electoral politics and activism both as individuals and as social work professionals, and the ways they view their political journeys, motivations, and the roles played by their social work education.

This study acknowledges how social workers work within power systems. Whether practicing at macro, mezzo or micro levels of social work, social workers often find themselves working with communities, groups, and individuals furthest from decision-making power. Through professional ethics, social workers are encouraged to work toward social change for the benefit of our clients and communities. These goals are clear in the Canadian Association of Social Workers’ *Code of Ethics*, which names the pursuit of social justice as a value of the profession and states that social workers “act to reduce barriers and expand choice for all persons, with special regard for those who are marginalized, disadvantaged, vulnerable, and/or have exceptional needs” (CASW, 2005, p. 5). Similarly, the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW), which registers social workers and social service workers in the province, states in its *Code of Ethics* that “A social worker or social service worker shall advocate change in the best interest of the client, and for the overall benefit of society, the environment and the global community” (OCSWSSW, 2008). Globally, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) include social justice as a principle of social work ethics alongside human

rights and human dignity (IFSW & IASSW, 2004, p. 2). Social workers thus have a professional, ethical obligation to pursue social change for the betterment of our communities, and particularly for those within our communities who are marginalized or vulnerable, which includes working to change policies and laws that further oppression and marginalization.

Social workers are regularly called upon to take political action in their communities though formal and informal paths (Bisman, 2004; Pritzker & Lane, 2017; Strier & Feldman, 2018). Participation in electoral politics allow social workers to use their professional knowledge and experience to inform and influence policy makers at the local, provincial, national, or international levels. By working as a legislator at any level of government, social workers can work to change their communities with an aim to bend towards social justice. The most direct way to make change in a community is to be a policy maker oneself (Lane & Humphreys, 2011). Those who hold positions of power have the most frequent and clearest opportunities to bring about the changes they wish to see through policies and laws. For those with social justice ideals, “Politics is social work with power” (Lane et al., 2017, article title).

Historically there has been tension within the profession between direct practice with individuals and families, and policy and politically directed practice. This is seen in the foundations of social work though the differing views of practice embodied by Charity Organization Societies and the Settlement House Movement (Abramovitz, 1998). This tension has had occasion to deepen as social work has grown in scope, and professional social workers now find themselves working as specialists rather than generalists (Humphreys et al., 1993). With specialization comes a deepening of expertise, to the detriment of some scopes of practice. The turn to neoliberalism as a foundation for social services and governance in Ontario has

deepened this divide, with social workers working to increase professionalization and establishing credibility in clinical spaces. The location of professional social workers within social services, charities and non-profit organizations dependent on waning government, private foundation, and donor dollars acts as a limit to advocacy and taking risks by social workers in many organizational contexts (Abramovitz, 1998).

Despite this tension, social workers have and continue to play prominent roles in Canadian politics. Notably, social worker Rosemary Brown was the first Black woman elected to a Canadian provincial legislature and the first Black woman to run for leadership of a Canadian federal party. Other prominent examples of Canadian social worker politicians include current federal Cabinet Minister Diane LeBouthillier, former British Columbia (BC) Premier Dave Barrett, former Ontario Cabinet Minister Ted McKeekin, and current Ontario Cabinet Minister Raymond Cho. Social workers also occupy significant and influential Canadian political advocacy positions from outside electoral politics. Contemporary examples include Dr. Cindy Blackstock, best known for her Indigenous child welfare advocacy, and Alia Hogben, Executive Director of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women.

### **Interest in Topic**

A number of professional and personal factors led to my interest in this research area. I began my MSW following nearly a decade working as a political staffer and organizer. I have worked on Parliament Hill, at Queen’s Park, and on electoral campaigns across Canada. I began my political activism as a volunteer working on a campaign calling for equitable funding for on-reserve education. I was in the House of Commons when Shannon’s Dream, a motion

committing the federal government to equitably fund schools located on-reserve, was passed unanimously. These experiences have been foundational to the ways that I approach and view policy, political practice, and social work practice.

As an MSW candidate changing careers, and without a BSW, I brought my experiences as a political organizer and caseworker to social work. My political background informs both my commitment to anti-oppressive practices as well as my belief in the inherently political nature of social work: a belief that is contentious within the field. My exploration of that tension led me to increased curiosity about how the social work profession can bridge the gap between clinical and policy practices and increase the political participation of social workers regardless of practice area. This study was developed both as a way to expand my own view of what brings individuals to the political realm, and explore how the most politically active social workers view their social work within their political journeys and their political journeys within their social work practice.

From an academic perspective, there is very little scholarship addressing Canadian social workers’ political participation within electoral political spheres. I am deeply interested in exploring this space and the ways in which Canadian social workers can and do experience, participate in, and transform political spaces. I hope this thesis contributes to the existing literature by offering social worker perspectives on seeking the most numerous elected roles in the Canadian political landscape: those of municipal councillors and school board trustees.

### **Definition of Terms**

I believe that social workers occupy an inherently political space. By virtue of working with individuals and groups within systems of power and oppression, social workers are political

actors regardless of the form their practice takes. I will rely upon Lane et al.’s (2018) definition of political social work as “practice, research, and theory which pays explicit attention to power dynamics needed to create social change, both in policy-making and political spaces” throughout this study (p. 3). Political participation may emerge in a multitude of ways, and while I will define political social work quite broadly, the scope of this thesis is nevertheless narrow, focusing on practice that pays attention to power and, specifically, the practice of seeking power by running for elected office.

For the purposes of this study I have defined as a social worker one who has an educational background that qualifies them for social work registration in Ontario: either a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree in social work, regardless of whether they are or have been registered with the OCSWSSW or other regulating body. Municipal offices in Ontario may be full-time or part-time positions, and so successfully elected social workers may leave non-political work upon election and subsequently lapse in OCSWSSW registration. Additionally, many individuals who have retired, taken work adjacent to social work practice (for example, management roles), or taken other administrative or non-front-line positions may give up or never obtain OCSWSSW membership if not required to by their employer. By defining social workers by education rather than registration, I allow for realities of incumbency, age, and scope of practice, while focusing my research around a shared educational foundation for practice. In this way, the definition of a social worker used throughout this study differs from the Ontario regulatory definition (Social Work and Social Service Work Act: Ontario Regulation 383/00, 1998).

I define municipal office as any of the offices elected on a municipal ballot in the 2018 Ontario municipal elections. This means offices across all municipal councils in Ontario, inclusive of upper-tier, lower-tier, and single tier municipal governments. This definition also includes trustee positions at the four provincially-funded Ontario school boards: English Public, English Catholic, French Public and French Catholic.

I define political activism broadly, borrowing from Domanski’s (1998) conceptual definition which describes a social worker activist as “a person who engages in organized political actions” (p. 163). While Domanski (1998) subsequently limits her operational definition to those who engage in protest for or against specific government policies, I here diverge from her definition, and hold an operational definition closer to that described by Verba et al.’s (1995) definition of voluntary political participation: understanding that political activism may include organized efforts aimed at making specific or broad change “that has the intent or effect of influencing government action — either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Verba et al., 1995, p. 38). Activists may engage in organized efforts to address specific government policy, policy direction and governance culture more generally, or may direct their efforts towards the individuals making those policies through electoral politics.

### **Thesis Outline**

The objective of this study is to investigate the experiences and perceptions of a group of political social workers at the intersection of social work and electoral politics: those who have run for municipal office in Ontario. I began by exploring my own interest in the topic and area of

study and defining terms. Next I will review existing scholarship as it pertains to social workers’ political participation, the value of social justice within the profession of social work, and political and policy content in social work education. I will next state my research questions, followed by a review of the theoretical foundations of this study. I will outline the use of thematic analysis and the qualitative methods of this research study, including participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. I will then present six themes emerging from participant interviews: Determining Relationships, On Becoming a Social Worker, Catalysts, The Political Landscape, Skills and Strategies, and finally Deepening the Political Identity of Social Work. I will discuss these resulting themes as they relate to both existing literature and my research questions. I will then conclude by reviewing the limitations of this study, recommending further research, and discussing the implications of the study on existing social work pedagogy and practice.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

In this chapter I will examine existing English-language scholarship related to social workers’ political participation. This literature is both broad and limited: there is very little Canadian literature examining the political participation of social workers, and far less examining their participation in electoral politics. The vast majority of English-language literature comes from the United States of America (USA), and speaks to an American political system, though scholarship has also emerged from studies examining social workers in Canada, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. This scholarship is both helpful to framing the study of Canadian social workers, while also being incomparable as a result of vastly different government structures, electoral systems, and political cultures. First, I shall summarize scholarship addressing social workers’ political participation, including impacts of gender and professional associations. Next, I shall examine literature as it relates to social justice. I shall define social justice for the purposes of this study, examine scholarship that addressed the micro/macro tension within the field, and address the political pursuit of social justice. Finally, I shall discuss pedagogy, and the influence that social work education has on political participation, examining the influence that education has on participation, curriculum content, and field placements.

### **Social Workers’ Political Participation**

In this section I shall review scholarship pertaining to the political activity of social workers. First, I will examine the types and rates of social worker political participation in order to determine the typical experiences of social workers entering electoral politics, and the



infrequency of such entry. Next, I will examine the impact of gender on participation in Canadian electoral politics broadly, and on social worker political participation more narrowly. Finally, I shall explore the impact that professional associations have been found to have on the political participation of social workers in literature.

### ***Types and Rates of Political Participation***

In this section I will address types and rates of participation. I will begin with the continuum of active and passive participation, and how social workers’ activity has been measured. Next, I will address political activities such as voting, case and community advocacy, legislative advocacy, and campaign participation, in order to further explore the typical political perceptions and experiences of social workers as examined and measured by scholars.

**Active versus Passive Participation.** Political activities are typically divided into active and passive modes of participation by literature. Domanski (1998) describes ten prototypes of social worker political participation ranging from the passive Communicator, who keeps informed and has political discussions with their networks, through to the active and initiative-taking Activist, who participates in organized political actions such as demonstrations or protests. Social workers and social work students are more likely to take part in passive than active modes of political participation (Domanski, 1998; Mary, 2001; Ostrander et al., 2018; Rocha et al., 2010). Running for office, the most direct, active, and initiative-requiring political activity one can take part in, is outside of the political activities the vast majority of social workers will consider or participate in (Lane et al., 2018). Indeed, Domanski (1998) fails to list running for or holding elected office as a prototype, or an activity within a prototype, of social worker political participation.

Initial scholarship on social worker political participation was conducted in the USA. American studies have shown social workers to be more politically active and aware than the general American public (Ezell, 1982; Ritter, 2006; Wolk, 1981). Subsequent survey results indicate that while social workers pay a high degree of attention to political issues, they have lower levels of involvement across active modes of political participation (Dudziak & Coates, 2004; Gray et al., 2002; Wolk, 1981). Social worker participation rates decrease when political participation activities require more initiative, engaging in conflict, or fewer opportunities for involvement (Domanski, 1998; Ostrander et al., 2018; Parker & Sherraden, 1991). Gray et al. (2002) found that while upwards of 90% of South African, New Zealander and Australian social workers attempted to stay informed on issues with professional impact, only a mean of 6.5% of those same social workers had worked for a political party during the last general election or a prior election, were currently involved with a political party, or intended to do so in future. Similarly, Dudziak and Coates (2004) found that 96% of Maritime Canadian social workers attempted to stay informed on issues of professional impact, yet only 9% had worked for a political party during the 2000 federal election, 13% intended to work for a political party in future, and 22% had worked for a political party prior to the 2000 federal election. Rome and Hoehstetter (2010) surveyed 1,274 National Association of Social Workers (NASW) members about their political activities, finding that 46.6% fell into the high range of activity and 53.4% fell into the low range, however these rates of activity remained lower overall than the activity rates of American social workers measured three decades earlier by Wolk (1981).

**Voting.** Studies have consistently shown that social workers and social work students have high levels of participation in voting, particularly at federal levels (Felderhoff et al., 2015;

Gray et al., 2002; Mary, 2001; Pritzker & Burwell, 2014; Wolk, 1981). Dudziak and Coates (2004) found Maritime Canadian social workers had voting participation rates of 94%, 92%, and 75% in the most recent federal, provincial, and municipal elections respectively, and 97% intended to vote in the next election. Pritzker and Burwell (2014) found that 94.3% of American social work students surveyed had voted in the 2012 presidential election, and 94.6% were registered to vote: rates considerably higher than the general American population. Ostrander et al. (2018) found that 76% of first year MSW students in the USA report that they always or often vote. Through a survey of Ontario and Alberta social workers, Douglas (2008) identified voting at federal, provincial, or municipal levels as the most common political activities undertaken by a wide margin in both provinces. Domanski (1995) identifies voting as a prototypical political activity of social workers in which 95% of social workers participate, and the third most common of her identified prototypes of social work political participation. This is consistent with proven beliefs about voting among social workers, that voting is an activity in which social workers ought to be engaged (Felderhoff et al., 2015). Indeed, the educational campaign “Voting is Social Work” was launched in 2018 across American social work schools, encouraging both educators and students to register themselves, and also to encourage and facilitate registration and voting among their direct-practice clients or students (Abramovitz et al., 2019). Notably, voting at the federal level is the most common across international surveys, while voting at local or municipal levels is consistently higher than general population participation, but less likely than federal, provincial, or state participation (Dudziak & Coates, 2004; Gray et al., 2002; Felderhoff et al., 2015).

**Case and Community Advocacy.** Domanski (1998) identified the Advocate as a prototype of social work political participation conceptually defined as a “Person who engages in micro or macro advocacy on behalf of clients,” and is a prototype in which 97% of social workers engage (p. 163). Hardina’s (1995) survey of southern Ontario social workers found that they were engaged in a wide range of advocacy types in their work and communities. Case advocacy, self-help advocacy, and class advocacy are types of advocacy that social workers might engage in, with policy changes, client empowerment, coalition building, and skills development identified as motivating potential results from that advocacy work (Hardina, 1995; Rocha et al., 2010). Case advocacy is an integral part of successful clinical therapy when societal or policy issues are the cause of a client’s chief concern (Humphreys et al., 1993). Hardina (1995) concluded that “Case, self-help, and class advocacy appear to be situational responses to unmet client needs rather than a frequent social work activity” (p. 117). That is to say, these forms of advocacy are generally taken up as they arise within a social worker’s direct practice role, rather than as a part of a macro framework for practice or larger initiative.

Within these types of advocacy, social workers participate in social advocacy to a lesser degree than case advocacy (Weiss-Gal, 2017). Dudziak and Coates (2004) found 94% of survey respondents had advocated for a client to a government agency, but only 55%, 53%, and 36% had contacted local, provincial, or federal governments respectively about a government issue of personal concern, demonstrating an increased use of case, rather than social or cause, advocacy among these social workers. Meanwhile, Gray et al. (2002) found that over one-quarter of social workers in South Africa and Australia, and over 39% of social workers in New Zealand, reported participation in a social action group in a personal capacity. These rates of participation are

consistent with overall participation findings that as initiative increases, social workers’ participation will decrease: advocacy that arises as a part of one’s paid work requires less initiative than social advocacy in a personal capacity.

Canadian Indigenous social workers have demonstrated the power of case and community advocacy at scale. Community advocacy, public outreach and judicial advocacy have been used as paths toward government change and action. Notably, Blackstock (2015/2016) describes the effective use of a nested approach for advocacy, combining activist and outreach campaign pressure with judicial pressure to move the Government of Canada on child rights issues. Blackstock does not advocate to legislators directly, but uses the combined pressure of Canada’s legal system and public pressure to press for equity. Meanwhile, Graveline (2012) describes the use of social media and public pressure, including the use of hunger striking, as actions taken in order to secure meetings with colonial government leaders. Indeed, Aboriginal social work is committed at micro, mezzo and macro levels of practice “to continue the task of redressing the effects of colonization and neocolonialism,” a task which engages in dismantling historical and modern state oppression in its very definition (Sinclair, 2004, p. 58).

**Legislative Advocacy.** Social workers are able to advocate for legislative change from inside or outside elected bodies. Gal and Weiss-Gal (2015) identify that in United Kingdom (UK) and Commonwealth governments, which includes Canada, “structured consultation processes at various junctures of the policy formulation process offer professionals, advocacy organizations and interest groups an opportunity to have input in the process”; social workers might fall into any one of these categories (p. 1091). In a separate study of legislative advocacy, Weiss-Gal (2013) identifies five main ways that social workers contributed to committee deliberation in

Israel’s Knesset: by placing matters on the agenda, providing information, providing explanations, expressing opinions and making suggestions, and commenting on the manner of the discussion. Though social workers across multiple surveys have self-reported that they are fairly likely to have contacted an elected official, fewer than one-fifth of Canadian social workers surveyed have reported testifying at a public commission or hearing at any level of government (Douglas, 2008; Dudziak & Coates, 2004). This is likely due to the more common practice of case advocacy involving contact with an elected official. Douglas (2008) found 64.3% of Alberta respondents and 52.4% of Ontario respondents had contacted a government official in a work capacity, but did not differentiate between contact made for case versus legislative advocacy. When asked about testimony before public committees, 17.6% of Alberta respondents and 19.9% of Ontario respondents reported testifying before at least one level of government (Douglas, 2008). This low participation in public hearings and committees in Canada is consistent across American studies, where testimony before a legislative body or committee has also been found to be very low (Domanski, 1998; Ritter, 2006; Rome & Hoechsteitter, 2010). Mathews’ (1982) survey of Michigan legislators found that while legislators perceived that social workers were active in contacting their offices, they did not perceive social workers as being politically influential, suggesting either a gap between activities undertaken by social workers and the desired outcomes of those activities, or further evidence of the extent to which case rather than legislative activity is undertaken.

**Elected Office and Campaign Participation.** Very little literature examines elected social workers exclusively or as a part of a larger survey; Weiss-Gal (2017) found only six such studies across English-language literature, and I have identified one published since 2017

(McLaughlin et al., 2019). Domanski (1998) did not list social workers running for office or holding office as a prototype or subtype of social worker political participation, and so subsequent studies using these prototypes as a metric also do not measure rates of candidacy for office (Dudziak and Coates, 2004; Gray et al., 2002).

Two Canadian qualitative studies have spoken to elected social workers about their experiences as elected politicians at federal and provincial levels (McLaughlin et al., 2019; Strandberg & Marshall, 1988), and one Canadian quantitative study has asked about rates of candidacy and election at any level of government (Douglas, 2008). Both qualitative studies are geographically specific: Strandberg and Marshall (1988) interviewed five prominent BC social workers who had been elected about their views of political participation as an extension of their social work practice. Three decades later, McLaughlin et al. (2019) interviewed eight social worker Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in Alberta about the experiences that led them to seek election and barriers encountered. Both of these studies found that social work practice can be valuable for preparing people to participate in electoral politics (McLaughlin et al., 2019; Strandberg & Marshall, 1988).

In a quantitative study, Douglas (2008) found that 2% of Alberta and Ontario social worker respondents had been a candidate for office at any level of government and that 0.7% had been elected. Douglas (2008) further found that 1.5% of Ontario Association of Social Work (OASW) member respondents had sought election at the local level, and that 1.1% of those members had been elected. This is the only Canadian study that examines election at the municipal level, yet its results indicate that the majority of social workers seeking elected office are doing so at the municipal level.

An additional four studies addressing social workers as elected officials are American (Haynes & Mickelson, 2009; Lane & Humphreys, 2011, Mary, 2001; Mary et al., 1993). Mary et al. (1993) and Mary (2001) surveyed American MSW educators, both in-classroom educators and field placement supervisors, about their political activities, and found low rates of election and candidacy for public office. In 1989, 2% of respondents had ran for office and 2% had been elected; in 1999, 5% had been candidates and 3% had been elected (Mary, 2001). Lane and Humphreys (2011) identified 467 American social workers who had run for office and surveyed them (response rate = 66%) to examine their resources, recruitment and expertise, and how these factors contributed to their public involvement. Over half of respondents ran for local office, and 39% had succeeded in being elected (Lane & Humphreys, 2011). Respondents were most likely to have been elected when running for school board (87% elected) and judge (86% elected), and were least likely to have been elected when running in federal (Senate, Congress) and gubernatorial races, where there were no successful respondents (Lane & Humphreys, 2011). Due to ongoing public health restrictions, this author has been unable to acquire Haynes and Mickelson (2009), which examines American social workers running for or holding office at national, state, and local levels.

Participation in campaign activity, such as volunteering for a candidate or political party, is overwhelmingly not differentiated between national, provincial/state, and municipal levels in scholarship (Felderhoff et al., 2015; Gray et al., 2002; Lane & Humphreys, 2011; Ostrander et al., 2018; Ritter, 2006; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010), or it is measured at national or provincial/state levels only (Dudziak & Coates, 2004; Pritzker & Burwell, 2014). Douglas (2008) differentiated between government levels and found 18.5% of respondents reported frequently



volunteering for a candidate at the local government level, 20.7% reported the same at the provincial level, and 15.1% at the federal level. These differences in participation may be a result of government jurisdictional divisions in Canada, which place policy areas such as healthcare, education, and social services — where many social workers are employed — at the provincial level.

In some studies, campaign activity is the least frequent political activity undertaken by social workers (Gray et al., 2002; Hardina, 1995). Yet Ritter (2006) found that social workers are more likely to volunteer for a candidate or party than the general American public, and Douglas (2008) found that 28.1% of respondents had worked or campaigned for a candidate for at least one level of government. Mary et al. (1993) and Mary (2001) found that 49% of respondents in 1989, and 59% in 1999 had contributed time to a political campaign, demonstrating a much higher level of engagement among social work educators than among the general population of social workers. This is consistent with Pritzker and Burwell’s (2014) findings that PhD students were more politically active than BSW or MSW students, as social work educators are more likely to have attained or be working towards higher levels of education. Meanwhile, Ostrander et al. (2018) found that only 8.4% of first year MSW students actively campaign, a significantly lower rate of participation than those found through surveys examining the general population of social workers.

### ***Gender***

Elected officials in Canada are more likely to identify as men than women; women make up only 28.9% of Members of Parliament (MPs) elected in 2019, 39.5% of Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) elected to Queen’s Park in 2018, and only one-fifth of Canadian

mayors (Raman-Wilms, 2019; Rushowy, 2018; Sullivan, 2019). In 2016, a Rural Ontario Institute study found that men made up 75% of Ontario councillors and mayors, and that men held 83% of head of council seats (Deska, 2016). Multiple studies have found that gender similarly affects a social worker’s likelihood to engage in advocacy and political participation (Hardina, 1995; Lane & Humphreys, 2011; Lane & Humphreys, 2015). When eight social workers were elected to Alberta’s Legislative Assembly in 2015, 50% identified as female and 50% as male, while an earlier survey sample suggested that upwards of 80% of Alberta social workers identify as female (Douglas, 2008; McLaughlin et al., 2019). This demonstrates an overrepresentation of male-identified social workers elected to the Alberta Legislature compared to the general demographics of Alberta social workers. Hardina (1995) found that respondents who identified as female were less likely to participate in case, self-help, and class advocacy than their male counterparts. Lane and Humphreys (2015) found that male social workers who had run for elected office were, on average, recruited by more sources than their female counterparts, but did not find significant differences in rates of participation, candidate concerns about running for office, or ages of children during their first run for office. However, in another article reporting on the same survey, Lane and Humphreys (2011) identified that their sample of social worker candidates for office was less likely to be female-identified than the general population of social workers, demonstrating an overrepresentation of male-identified social workers among candidates, similar to that seen in Alberta. In contrast, Ritter (2006) found that gender was not a significant predictor of political participation among those sampled; however, gender or sex data pertaining to individual markers of participation was not provided.

***Professional Association Facilitation of Political Action***

Verba et al.’s (1995) Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) posits that membership in recruitment networks, such as professional networks, acts as a contributing factor to a person’s political engagement. CVM is widely used as a theoretical foundation for the study of social workers’ political activities (Lane & Humphreys, 2011; Lane & Humphreys, 2015; Ostrander et al., 2018). Ritter (2008) tested the applicability of CVM to social worker participation, and found membership in recruitment networks to be a significant factor in social worker involvement. Ritter (2006) found that “being an NASW member (along with interest in politics) proved to have the strongest influence” on a social worker’s political participation (p. 111). Indeed, 8% of Lane and Humphreys’ (2015) respondents reported being recruited to electoral candidacy by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW): 9% of female-identified candidates and 7% of male-identified candidates.

Professional associations of social workers take differing approaches to engaging with electoral politics. The American NASW calls upon members to consider running for elected office, and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), whose Public and Political Affairs Officer is based full-time at Westminster, facilitates social workers meeting with MPs, other policy makers, and an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Work (NASW, 2020; BASW, 2020). McLaughlin et al. (2019) note the importance that participants placed on having been asked and recruited to run by party leadership due to their roles in partisan volunteering, unions, and professional association roles. The CASW and OASW call members to social justice advocacy through the *Code of Ethics*, yet neither appear to encourage members to seek elected office in public-facing documents (CASW, 2005). Despite this, Douglas (2008) found that 56%

of Ontario social workers believe that the *Code of Ethics* “supports and promotes political involvement by social workers,” while 97.5% of Ontario respondents agreed that social work associations should be politically active and 61.5% agreed that they were more likely to participate in political action if their professional association is politically engaged (p. 331). In contrast, only 12.8% of Ontario respondents agreed that professionalization of social work limits its political involvement (Douglas, 2008). This shows a desire among OASW members to support political action from their association, and a willingness to respond to calls for political action from their association.

## **Social Justice**

In this section I shall explore social justice as a motivating concept for social workers’ political perceptions and as a potential motivator for their political experiences. First, I shall define social justice within the practice of social work for the purposes of this study. Next, I will explore the ways that social workers move between micro and macro practice in their work, and the ways that direct practice can motivate social workers to political action. Finally, I shall explore the political pursuit of social justice as a feature of social work, and barriers that have been identified at the intersection of social work and political action.

### ***Definitions of Social Justice***

Social justice is entwined with morality; it is what separates the profession of social work from other professionals doing therapeutic or case management work, but is not easily definable (Bisman, 2004). Despite being oft-cited in social work ethics documents, social justice is a

broad, living, and dynamic concept that lacks an agreed-upon, clear definition within the social work field (Hudson, 2017). Craig (2002) describes social justice as

*a framework of political objectives, pursued through social, economic, environmental, and political policies, based on an acceptance of difference and diversity, and informed by values concerned with:*

- *achieving fairness, and equality of outcomes and treatment;*
- *recognising the dignity and equal worth and encouraging the self-esteem of all;*
- *the meeting of basic needs;*
- *maximizing the reduction of inequalities in wealth, income and life chances; and*
- *the participation of all, including the most disadvantaged* (pp. 671-672).

In Hudson’s (2017) survey of 168 social work PhD students on their definition of social justice, no single term was used by more than half of respondents; however, Hudson did find a common framing of definitions that included both “aims of” and “actions toward” social justice for social work (p. 1967). When Canadian social workers are called to the “Pursuit of Social Justice”, there is a spectrum of understanding on how an individual social worker should implement that pursuit (CASW, 2005). Nevertheless, understanding the ways in which “social workers can and do participate in the politics of welfare policy is integral to advancing the profession’s philosophy and goals” (Domanski 1998, p. 156).

### ***Moving From Micro to Macro Practice***

Many social workers are motivated to political involvement as a result of their direct practice experiences; the capacity to link an individual case to an overarching cause is an essential and distinctive skill within social work practice (Elmaliach-Mankita et al., 2019; Hardina, 1995; Humphreys et al., 1993). Weiss-Gal (2008) describes the social work approach of person-in-environment, linking an individual’s concerns and circumstances to the environment within which they live, as being “manifested in the dual aspirations of the profession to provide

personal care and further social justice,” an organizing principle that links practitioners of clinical social work through to policy and social development workers (p. 65). This framework can be present at all levels of practice: Humphreys et al. (1993) use the example of a social worker naming sexism and patriarchy explicitly when providing therapy for women survivors of domestic violence, or risking siding with these oppressive structures by allowing them to remain hidden. However, ability to identify these links does not necessitate a social worker taking action to address them systemically.

In examining social worker participation in Knesset committee meetings, Weiss-Gal (2013) found that social workers regularly placed matters on the agenda by raising ways that policies impacted individuals and groups they work directly with, providing further information about a population or experiences of a population under discussion. Their input comes from direct practice and experience in the field. In terms of expressing opinions and making suggestions, Israeli social workers regularly praised effective actions and critiqued deficiencies in policies or their implementation, and made recommendations for dealing with a specific problem, demonstrating their abilities to link cases to policies, and policies back to case outcomes (Weiss-Gal, 2013).

McLaughlin et al. (2019) found that social worker MLAs explicitly raised social justice as a motivation for their political engagement: some reported this perspective came from their parents and life experiences, while others gained their advocacy perspectives through their social work education and practice. Meanwhile, Lane and Humphreys (2001) found that social workers who ran for office were most likely to report having been motivated by, and most knowledgeable about, education issues, health and mental health issues; this reflects the reality of where a great

many social workers work, and is a demonstration of those individuals’ likely movement from direct work in the field to work on systemic issues within the field.

### ***Political Pursuit of Social Justice***

Former British Columbia Premier and social worker Dave Barrett argued that, “No social worker can call themselves a social worker if they don’t see they have a moral, professional and ethical responsibility to be involved in the small ‘p’ and large ‘P’ political world around them” (Strandberg & Marshall, 1988, p. 115). Barrett, an elected social worker, saw social work as intrinsically linked to political decisions and thus saw social work, by definition, as a political profession. Social workers who reject this framing, for Barrett, are not meeting their obligations to the profession. Social workers are able to engage in multiple frameworks and have multiple entry-points for making policy change; social justice can be enacted through inside or outside pressure, by those in public office, public service, activism, academia, or through various advocacy methods (Almog-Bar et al., 2015; Hardina, 1995; Strier et al., 2018). As this advocacy influences policy makers, engaged social workers may see changes beneficial to their areas of work.

The adversarial nature of electoral politics has been cited as a barrier to social worker participation, particularly by women and visible minorities (McLaughlin et al., 2019; Pritzker & Lane, 2017). Concerns around operating within political culture and feelings of not belonging in legislative spaces were also raised by MSW students placed within Texas’ State Legislature (Pritzker & Lane, 2018). Despite these barriers, 77% of OASW members think social workers should be politically involved (Douglas, 2008). Additionally, public policy research tells us that diversifying the backgrounds of those making public policy changes the resulting public policy:

electing more social workers “has the potential to change the agenda of policy-making groups and the resulting policy” (Lane et al., 2017, p. 12). Such an influx in social worker perspectives could increase potential and capacity for policy change based in social justice-oriented perspectives.

### **Social Work Education**

In this section I will discuss scholarship that has examined the impact of social work education for political practice, and the integration of political education into social work programs. This will provide an overview of how social work education might affect social workers’ experiences and perceptions of politics and of their own abilities to engage in political action. First I will review literature that has examined the ways that educational attainment impacts political participation. Next, I shall examine scholarship that has addressed political content, or lack thereof, within social work programs. Finally, I shall examine political field placements, addressing both the frequency and accessibility of political field placements, and the potential impact of such placements on social work students.

#### ***Education and Participation Levels***

Studies examining the link between content or levels of education and levels of political participation show mixed results. Some studies have shown that education level is not associated with significant differences in political involvement, but have found social workers with macro-level practice backgrounds are more politically involved than those in micro-level practice (Mary, 2001; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010). Similarly, Douglas (2008) found that neither highest level of social work education, highest level of non-social work education, nor combined



education level was a significant indicator of political activity. Conversely, Pritzker and Burwell (2014) found that PhD student respondents were more politically active than BSW or MSW students, demonstrating higher levels of active engagement by those with higher levels of completed education. In a survey of American social workers who were candidates for office, 89% reported holding an MSW, 23% held both a BSW and MSW, and 7% held an MSW and PhD (Lane, 2011). While social workers seeking office tend to have higher levels of education, scholarship does not agree that higher levels of education will lead to greater participation.

Surveys have also shown disagreement on whether social workers believe that the content of their social work education prepared them for political activity. Douglas (2008) found that 64.9% of Ontario social workers believe that their social work education made them more politically aware. However, social workers have often been found to be politically aware but passively involved; education that fosters awareness does not necessarily foster political activity (Domanski, 1998; Wolk, 1981). Douglas (2008) also found that a lower percentage of Ontario social workers, 53.6%, agreed that their education provided them the skills necessary to participate in political activities. Rome and Hoechstetter (2010) found an even lower perception of political skills gained through social work education: a plurality of respondents (34.7%) disagreed that their education prepared them to integrate political action within their social work practice, and Ritter (2006) found that only 14% of respondents felt that their social work program did prepare them for engaging with the political system. In contrast, Lane (2011) found that 63% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their social work educational program prepared them for holding office. It is notable that Lane’s (2011) study surveyed social workers who ran for office rather than the general population of social workers; social workers inclined to

political activity may emphasize or better remember these aspects of their education in light of their contemporary political experiences. Indeed, 76% of Lane’s (2011) respondents remember their social work education emphasizing macro-level practice over micro-level practice or emphasizing both equally. Inconsistent findings between the general population of social workers and social worker candidates for office may well show that external factors make social work education more impactful for some students’ political participation over others. As an MSW student with a political organizing background, my anecdotal experiences discussing political issues in the classroom support the above speculation; I have often found myself among a small minority of peers, or sometimes alone, linking systemic issues in classroom discussion to contemporary political movements or legislative choices which can be changed or pressured toward change.

### ***Curriculum***

**Learning objectives.** Social work education programs in Canada, through both BSW and MSW levels, are required to incorporate policy education (CASWE-ACFTS, 2014). This is generally framed through the learning objective, “Participate in policy analysis and development,” which outlines the need for students to be able to connect social welfare policy to the wellbeing of individuals, groups, and communities; the ability to identify inequitable policies and their potential outcomes; and the ability and skills to contribute to the development of new and equitable policies (CASWE-ACFTS, 2014, p. 21). This learning objective is primarily focused on a student’s ability to identify and analyze how social welfare policies impact individuals, groups, and populations. Policy and politics are different, and there is no explicit

standard to ensure social work graduates know how to navigate Canadian government or political systems.

**Personal efficacy.** Social work curriculum holds the potential to play an important role in a social worker’s political participation because it has the ability to increase personal efficacy, that is, a person’s belief in their own abilities to impact the political process (Elmaliach-Mankita, 2019; Lane, 2011; Ritter, 2008; Verba et al., 1995). Some studies have found social workers and social work students with a macro-level focus are more likely to participate in political activities overall (Mary, 2001; Lane et al., 2018). A macro framework for practice was also identified by social worker MLAs as skills they bring from their social work practice to their role as elected officials (McLaughlin et al., 2019). Social work courses, or social work professional development courses, focused on political engagement have been found to increase participants’ perceived skills and likelihood of engaging in future political activities (Elmaliach-Mankita, 2019; Lane et al., 2018). For example, Graveline (2012) shared the effective on-campus activism taken up by a class focused on #IdleNoMore and the transformation of a single story-sharing class into an Idle No More Teach-In week on campus; she notes that “taking action as a class is an excellent teaching tool” (p. 297). This furthers Ritter’s (2008) finding that personal efficacy, as an aspect of CVM, is a significant factor for social workers’ engagement in political action.

However, graduate students have identified that many MSW policy courses fail to engage those primarily interested in clinical work by establishing very weak, or no, links between micro-level practice areas and social welfare policies; this can contribute to many social workers failing to bridge the gap between micro-level practice and macro-level policy issues that affect their work, such as licensing (Humphreys et al., 1993). This perspective is echoed by Curry-Stevens et

al. (2020) who describe the integration of anti-oppressive and critical social work direct practice traditions into curriculum for an upstream policy practice concentration because,

*Many students were drawn to upstream macro practice yet were similarly drawn to organizations where these roles were blended with micro interventions. To neglect preparing students for micro practice would invalidate their micro interests, as well as render numerous community practice settings ineligible for our macro students (p. 68).*

Those who find connection between their areas of practice and political action are more likely to take it on, while those who do not find those connections miss opportunities for engagement and change-making.

**Skills.** Elected social workers and social worker candidates for office have identified numerous skills developed through their education that support them in their political work. Ostrander et al. (2018) are clear about the benefits of political experience to all social work students, writing that,

*All students should have a basic understanding of how government functions, the different levels of government, their representatives in local, state, and national bodies, and how they can have a voice in this process. Without this general awareness and education, social work students, and micro-oriented students in particular, cannot adequately advocate for themselves or assist their clients in addressing and maneuvering through governmental policies that impact them every day (p. 53).*

American social worker candidates reported that communication skills and active listening skills were helpful to them both on campaign and in holding office, both skills that are taught across social work programs (Lane, 2011). These skills are typically understood as clinical or micro-level skills, but are used by candidates and elected officials to build relationships with constituents and other stakeholders. Social workers elected as MLAs in Alberta’s 2015-2019 NDP government identified broader themes of their education — a macro framework for practice, a transferrable social work skillset, and the value of social justice — as elements of

their social work education that contributed to their ability to effectively represent constituents as MLAs, rather than identifying particular skills (McLaughlin et al., 2019). Skills that are typically understood as both macro-level and micro-level skills as useful to social workers who have pursued elected roles.

### ***Field Placement***

There is a large gap in Canadian scholarship in regards to the number of field placements offered in policy and politically oriented settings, or the likelihood of students encountering policy or political placements throughout their social work education. Fewer than 10% of Ontario and Alberta social workers report having taken a practicum placement in a political setting, but data for other provinces, or from schools of social work themselves, is lacking (Douglas, 2008). Establishing new placement opportunities within political settings for social work students at constituency offices, legislative offices, activist organizations or unions is one of four recommendations made by McLaughlin et al. (2019) following interviews with social worker MLAs in Alberta.

American scholarship has found that less than half of MSW programs and only 20% of BSW programs offer policy placements: of these, the majority exist within government relations or policy administration spaces; very few programs offer placements within legislative spaces (Wolk et al., 1996). More recently Pritzker and Lane (2014) found that 11% of BSW, 8% of foundational MSW, and 16% of advanced MSW students were in macro-oriented placements, including, but not limited to, those with policy and political content. We can therefore understand that even fewer were in politically-oriented placements. Most commonly, students in macro-oriented placements interact with policy advocates and participate in policy research and

analysis; the least common activity is working in electoral politics (Pritzker & Lane, 2014). Of American social workers who ran for elected office only 10% reported a political practicum placement; however, 19% reported testifying at a public hearing and 29% participated in a lobby day where they spoke with legislators about an issue relevant to social work as a part of a practicum placement (Lane, 2011). An evaluation of a Political Social Work program at the University of Houston found varying satisfaction with field placements over 7 years, and authors hypothesize the de-politicized nature of field placements may be the reason: even in a specifically political concentration, only 68% of students had a second-year placement in a political setting (Fisher et al., 2001). This finding is consistent with Lane’s (2011) observation that the “breadth of the [social work] field creates a difficulty in providing students with the depth of content that is required in each subject area for them to become proficient in their method and area of practice” (p. 67). A lack of placements in policy and politically-oriented spaces limits students’ ability to gain experience in these areas.

American schools of social work have reported difficulty in recruiting practicum placements in political settings (Pritzker & Lane, 2014; Wolk et al., 1996). Like McLaughlin et al. (2019) in Alberta, Pritzker and Lane (2017) advocate for schools of social work to identify social workers who are in political specialist positions, and ensure that they are incorporated into programs’ field networks to expand the number and type of political placement experiences available to students. Ostrander et al. (2018) offer ways to incorporate political engagement into placements across the spectrum, citing assignments embedded into all placements for students of the Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work at the University of Connecticut, where students develop an engagement plan to help clients engage in a civic act, such as a voter

registration drive. This type of assignment encourages students in micro-focused placements to think in politically empowering ways, and emphasizes the value of macro-oriented field seminar instructors also identified by Curry-Stevens et al. (2020) at Portland State University.

Students who have experienced placements within policy spaces identify learning a wide variety of skills, including how governance systems work, how to navigate them, effective means of making change, and strengthen their personal and interpersonal skills (Pritzker & Lane, 2018). These skills are directly used for later macro work, but are also transferrable to micro settings. Students also report facing challenges in political practicum positions, notably navigating internal and external feelings that social workers do not belong in legislative spaces, the immersive culture of the legislative session, and difficulty working in multidisciplinary environments where many colleagues come from very different ethical or philosophical backgrounds (Pritzker & Lane, 2018). Overall, it is clear that practicum can offer an important space for developing political, policy, and advocacy skills, but further work is needed to address challenges in growing the number of placement opportunities in policy and political spaces, as well as developing best practices to support students in these macro placement types.

Scholarship examining social workers’ experiences, motivations, and educational preparedness for political activity covers broad themes, yet remains a largely American-dominated field of study. Social workers are found to engage in wide varieties of political activity, with higher levels of engagement in activities that lead to personal education and lower levels of engagement in activities that involve initiative or conflict. Social workers can be motivated to political activity by issues of social welfare generally, as well as by their own experiences in the field. While there is not consensus regarding whether education level impacts

political activity, there is evidence that a macro framework for practice is a predictor of political activity among social workers. Nevertheless, programs and field placements that focus specifically at the macro level are the minority, and political field placements are rarer still. Interestingly, social workers who are explicitly political appear to find more political value in their social work education and skillset than social workers who do not see themselves as political, suggesting the value of personal efficacy and self-perception to this group.



### **Chapter Three: Paradigm and Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter I will outline the paradigm and theoretical framework within which this study was developed. I will begin by presenting the paradigmatic lens and decision to undertake qualitative research. Next, critical feminist theories and Verba et al.’s (1995) Civic Voluntarism Model, the theoretical foundations of this work, will be explored in relation to the research topic. I will then outline the purpose and type of study before presenting the research questions guiding this project.

#### **Paradigmatic Lens**

This study has been approached from within a constructivist epistemology. I am focusing my research on the experiences, perceptions, and motivations of my participants, and acknowledge that knowledge is subjective and thus that knowledge may differ across participants. A constructivist paradigm is an approach which centres the voices and experiences of participants so as to respect and represent both their ways of knowing and their knowledge itself. This is in line with a common epistemological understanding within feminist thought that “women can be knowers, and their experience is a legitimate source of knowledge” (Wuest, 1995, p. 128). Though my research is not exclusive to women, social workers are primarily women, and all social workers, regardless of gender identity, work or study within a caring field that is gendered feminine by society.

As this is a study exploring participants’ experiences and motivations to become politically active at the municipal level of government, I have used a qualitative methodology consisting of semi-structured interviews. As an exploratory study, with very little research in the

Canadian context, this is an appropriate methodology to approach these experiences. It is also the methodology undertaken by the most comparable study of Canadian social workers (McLaughlin et al., 2019). O’Shaughnessy and Krogman (2012) outline that qualitative research has traditionally been the method of choice for feminist researchers because of “[t]he feminist principles of respecting women’s (and other oppressed groups’) unique ways of knowing, destabilizing power relations in the research process, and confronting socially constructed gendered inequalities” (p. 495). This means giving research participants power through their own voices and ability to share their realities. By using a qualitative methodology, I am able to explore participants’ experiences in-depth and prioritize their experiential knowledge of the intersection of social work and political action.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

This section will describe the two theoretical perspectives that have informed this study. This first, critical feminist theory, looks at ways that gender and power interact in society, particularly within institutions and positions that wield decision-making power. Within this broad critical theory I will describe liberal feminist theory, intersectional feminist theory, and feminist ethics of care. The second, Civic Voluntarism Model, theorizes the conditions that allow people to participate in the civic life of their communities, and particularly in politics. Both of these perspectives provide frameworks to analyze and place in context the experiences of social workers, a feminized profession, who seek elected office.

***Critical Feminist Approaches to Political Action***

Social workers seeking election can both be viewed, and may view their work, through a feminist lens. Feminism is not a monolith: within this critical framework exist multiple interpretations, expressions, and practices. Social workers too are not a monolith, and many may not consider themselves explicitly feminist or view their work through this lens, while others do. Nevertheless, one or multiple critical feminist theories may contribute to the understanding of how social workers, typically understood as a caring profession, interact with and seek power. One does not need to identify as a feminist for feminist theory to be applicable to their experiences.

**Liberal feminism.** The Westminster system of government in Canada was developed by British men to consider the priorities of white, landowning men. Thus, much of early white feminist organizing in Canada centred around achieving suffrage and winning the rights for white women to be recognized as equal persons before the law, to vote, and to be able to make laws. Liberal feminists encourage women seeking elected office: changing the people in power changes the experiences and perspectives of those that set agendas, rise in debate, draft laws and pass amendments (Bashevkin, 2009). From these changed laws and policies may come different outcomes. When women are elected, they bring their perspectives and life experiences with them to those spaces of power.

This perspective can be applied to social workers; when social workers are elected to positions of power, they bring their educations and experiences as social workers to spaces of power. This, in theory, gives greater voice and space to those perspectives, and results in greater prioritization of their perspectives and goals. Electing more social workers “has the potential to

change the agenda of policy-making groups and the resulting policy” (Lane et al., 2017, p. 12). Increased numbers of women holding office within governments and legislatures has led to changes in culture, agendas, and outcomes from those bodies (Bashevkin, 2009; Ng & Muntaner, 2018; Park, 2017). Typically, the critical mass point at which it is believed that women’s participation changes the culture of a legislative body is 30% (UN Women, 2011). This perspective examines power and power-wielding through a gender lens and seeks as a project to increase the number of women-identified people holding positions of power, most often within existing power structures.

**Intersectional feminism.** Intersectional feminist perspectives complicate the gender-based analysis presented by liberal feminism. Intersectionality as a theory was introduced through Black legal scholarship, in particular through the work of Crenshaw (1988, 1989), through which she highlighted the failings of anti-discrimination laws. I understand intersectional feminist thought through the explanation provided by DeFilippis (2014):

*Intersectionality posits that identities such as gender, race, class, and others must all be examined simultaneously in order to understand women’s experiences. Intersectionality addresses identity and social location. It focuses on structural barriers that are based on multiple forms of oppression, as well as on privileges based on simultaneous membership in other identity groups. (p. 38).*

Intersectional feminism questions the notion of women’s experiences as universal and acknowledges that liberal feminism often reduces varied experiences of womanhood to the experiences of middle-class, white women. It examines gender and power through multiple, simultaneous positionalities in order to understand the multiple identities, and multiple positions of power or oppression, a given individual or group may hold. The ways in which women walk

through and experience the world are different and dependent upon how their gender intersects with race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, and other factors.

Feminism cannot exempt itself from critical perspectives, and “[c]ritical social workers therefore include an analysis of power and understand social relationships as both personal and political: [they] become familiar with the phrase ‘the personal is political’” (Campbell & Baikie, 2012, pp. 70-71). Intersectional feminism in the context of this study looks not merely at the experiences and perspectives of social workers who seek and achieve decision making power but which social workers, in which proportions, in which positions, with what motivations. Intersectional feminism is useful in examining the ways that intersectional identities access and wield power within the political arena, not limited to gender but including the multiplicity of identities that may intersect with being gendered a woman in politics.

I take the critique intersectional feminist thought brings to feminist theory seriously: as a cis-gender, able-bodied, middle class, white woman it is imperative that I challenge my own narratives and biases as a researcher and bring an intersectional lens to my work, acknowledging that my experience walking through the world is neither universal nor common. My own privilege as a researcher and organizer has meant that I have had to, and continue to, deconstruct many of my own assumptions and experiences. It is my own responsibility to learn, acknowledge, and reflect upon how my privilege has impacted my being in the world, my being in social work, and particularly my experiences in political and organizing spaces. In researching social workers running for elected office, it is incumbent upon me to look at the experiences of those participating in this form of political engagement, but also to ask how their positionality

contributes to their participating, who is not participating, and to question that structures that prevent full participation.

**Feminist Ethics of Care.** A feminist ethics of care can be used to examine the factors that may lead feminist social workers to seek leadership positions, such as elected office, and motivate their goals. A feminist ethics of care is a theory of ethical practice which “locates the source of moral value in the practices, relationships and responsibilities of care on which the public sphere depends” (Hutchings, 2010, p. 64). Feminist ethics of care offers an alternative to ethical worldviews which value and promote so-called neutrality and objectiveness as public goods; rather, it positions care as central to everyone in a society and returns value to the work of caring for others, work that is traditionally viewed as women’s work and devalued in Western culture (Parton, 2003). When used as a framework for analysis in government, feminist ethics of care brings a perspective that celebrates caring work and strong social systems: an apparent good match to the CASW’s description of social justice work in practice (CASW, 2005). An ethics of care lens frames social work practice, policy practice, and policy making within a values system that centres relationships, interdependency, and responsibility to one other. A feminist ethics of care can be integral to development of social policy, while it simultaneously works to disrupt neoliberalism in policymaking (Langford et al., 2017). As many social workers come from workplaces that centre care, this is a perspective that many may bring to policy making and political responsibility. Furthermore, as many social workers enter the profession to be helpers, this framework offers the opportunity to assess how those values are centred or de-centred in their efforts to become elected leaders.

Social work is a highly gendered field: it is made up of primarily women practitioners, and it is preoccupied with the caring work that has traditionally been viewed as women’s role within patriarchal Western capitalism. When social workers enter male-dominated fields concerned with power, they then bump up against gendered and patriarchal norms. Care work, with which social work is preoccupied, is traditionally devalued in our political systems as private, as emotional, and as opposed to neutrality or impartiality (Parton, 2003). These critiques, once made about women participating in political systems, are now made about the place of certain values, conceptually detached from individuals, within those systems. This conceptual detachment accomplishes the same goal: it removes certain kinds of people and certain kinds of experiences from the so-called qualifications or so-called qualities of a good political leader. In practice, this results in the centrality of those who appear impartial within decision-making bodies. By confronting values systems that believe ethics can be universalized and impartiality can exist, feminist ethics of care offers a theory from which to explore and value caring and carers within public life and public policy.

### ***Civic Voluntarism Model.***

Verba et al.’s (1995) Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) theorizes that civic participation is possible for people with motivation and capacity to participate. This model posits that there are three factors influencing a person’s ability to participate in the political arena: resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks, and has been employed by many of the studies examining social workers’ political engagement (Lane & Humphreys, 2011; McLaughlin et al., 2019; Ostrander et al., 2018; Verba et al., 1995). Resources refers to factors such as time and money available to the individual. Psychological engagement refers to individual qualities

such as personal efficacy, political interest, and political information. Recruitment networks refers to membership in social, professional, or other networks that encourage and invite political participation. Ritter’s (2008) national survey of American social workers found that two of CVM’s three factors, psychological engagement and recruitment networks, were significant predictors of social worker participation. This is partially contrasted by Lane and Humphreys’ (2011) study which found that American social workers who ran for office had more resources than the average American social worker, supporting CVM’s application to social workers as a group. Personal efficacy in particular has been identified as a major factor in the political participation of marginalized peoples and the social workers who work with them (Douglas, 2008; Lane et al., 2018; Rocha et al., 2010). CVM helps to both predict who may be able to successfully participate and theorizes how social workers might increase engagement. This framework offers a lens with which to examine the individual interests and resources, as well as the community, educational and professional connections that have facilitated participants’ participation in electoral politics.

### **Purpose and Type of Study**

The aim of this study is to contribute to the small body of literature examining social worker participation in electoral politics in Canada. By seeking out the voices of social workers who sought municipal office, and finding themes among their political experiences and perspectives, I hope to identify patterns that come from the context of participants’ lived experiences that may provide insights for those social workers and social work educators who aim to increase political engagement among their social work peers. In particular, I hope to find



themes among participants’ entry into political action, their relationship to social justice as a motivator, and their educational experiences that may provide implications for social work practice and social work pedagogy. To address current gaps in literature, this study seeks to raise the voices of social workers who seek election at the municipal level, a level of government that offers the most positions to be filled and the least prior scholarship. As such, individuals who sought election on a municipal ballot were included as participants, regardless of electoral success. You can’t be what you can’t see, and I intend my research to ideally increase the visibility of social workers acting in the electoral political arena, and contribute to increasing political efficacy of those in the field who may wish to be involved in the future. This is important because direct engagement in electoral politics offers all people the most direct opportunity to change laws and policy to reflect their perspectives: electoral political participation thus offers social workers a direct and powerful opportunity to enact their ethics and values in their communities.

### **Research Questions**

The aim of this research is to partially address the knowledge gap in Canadian political social work literature and build on other scholars’ work by engaging in depth with one group of the most politically active social workers: those who ran for public office at the municipal level in the 2018 Ontario municipal elections. This research aims to examine the experiences and perceptions of those social workers by investigating the following research questions:

- 1) What do these social workers believe were the contributing factors that led to their seeking elected office?

- 2) Was social justice a motivating factor for social workers who sought elected office or did other factors compel them to become politically involved?
- 3) Do social workers who sought elected office believe their social work education prepared them for seeking office?

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

In this chapter I shall outline the methodology of this study. First, I will discuss my decision to undertake qualitative research using thematic analysis. I will next outline the research methods including participant recruitment, data collection, sample demographics, and data analysis. Finally I will discuss ethical considerations and my own role as a researcher.

### **Research Methods**

#### ***Thematic Analysis***

I chose to undertake a qualitative study so as to best address the three research questions I am posing across the larger study. As I am exploring experiences and perceptions in politics, in social work practice, and in social work education, I aimed to gain rich, subjective responses from participants, data which is not conducive to survey responses. For this reason I chose to undertake a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a rigorous approach alongside qualitative methodologies such as ethnography, phenomenology, or grounded theory, as well as being a method for analysis used across methodologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). This provides a highly flexible approach which can allow for a detailed, rich, and complex view of data. Thematic analysis is a useful approach for this study as I set out to answer three distinct research questions and rely on multiple theoretical lenses for analysis.

#### ***Recruitment***

A purposive sample of participants was necessary for this study. Participants were recruited based on factors that placed them within the scope of the research questions.

Participants needed to meet both of the following criteria to be invited to participate:

1. Participants have attained a social work educational qualification recognized in Ontario (BSW and/or MSW).
2. Participants ran for an elected municipal office during the 2018 Ontario municipal elections.

I did not confine this study to those who were elected. Not all candidates will be successful, and lack of electoral success does not mean that the candidate was not prepared, motivated, or qualified for holding office. In many Ontario communities, it is common knowledge among political organizers and activists that incumbency is an enormous barrier at the municipal level, and so many municipal councils have very little changeover outside of retirements. For example, in the 2018 municipal elections in Waterloo Region, where the Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social Work is located, only a single newly elected councillor won a race against an incumbent across 10 council seats and a mayoral seat in the city of Kitchener; only a single newly elected councillor won a race against an incumbent across 7 council seats and a mayoral seat in the city of Waterloo; and no newly elected council members won seats, however a newly elected mayor defeated an incumbent mayor, in the city of Cambridge (City of Kitchener, 2018; City of Waterloo, 2018; City of Cambridge, 2018). For the purposes of this study, the decision an individual made to run for office indicates a dedication to political action that is worth exploration, regardless of the results of their candidacy.

Recruitment for this project involved a multi-pronged strategy: I conducted an online search using the Association of Municipalities of Ontario’s (AMO) database of 490 municipalities’ 2018 election results; I sent email requests to women’s campaign schools and political recruitment networks across Ontario with requests for poster distribution; finally, I relied on a snowball sampling method (AMO, 2018). Thirteen identified social worker

candidates for office were invited to participate by email. Ten of those who were invited agreed to participate and were interviewed, one declined to participate, and two did not respond.

Of the ten participants included in this study, four were identified through online search and six were identified through snowball sampling. This was contrary to my expectations: I had expected to recruit participants through women’s campaign schools and networks across Ontario due to the prevalence of recruitment networks in literature and was surprised not to receive a single response to my request for poster distribution from those networks (Lane & Humphreys, 2011; Ritter, 2008; Verba et al., 1995). I now assume that the contact email addresses for those organizations are not checked outside of active municipal election years.

Individuals identified through online search were invited to participate via email (see Appendix A). When a participant identified a new potential participant, I requested that they email the project poster (included in every recruitment email) to the new prospective participant. In cases where I did not hear from the new prospective participant, I conducted an online search to confirm whether they met the scope of the project and, if confirmed through publicly available sources, I sent that individual a recruitment email. If I was not able to confirm a suggested participant’s fit with this study’s criteria through publicly available documents, I did not contact them.

### ***Sample***

Each participant had run for office in the 2018 Ontario municipal elections, either for the first time or for re-election. Participants were recruited from across four different school boards and five different municipal governments. Two participants ran to be elected to the same governing body. No two participants served together at the same governing body. Eight

participants were elected to the position they sought in 2018, and two were not elected to the position they sought. Three participants had never run for office before 2018, and two participants had previously run for office, but never for the position sought in 2018. Five participants were incumbents to the position they sought in 2018. No participants were recruited from the geographic region of Northern Ontario, nor were any participants recruited from either francophone school board, nor from a Catholic school board.

Figure 1 profiles the ten participants’ demographics, their highest completed social work qualification, and their annual household income at the time of their candidacy in 2018.

Figure 1

<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age in Oct. 2018</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Highest Social Work Qualification</b>	<b>Annual household income at time the time of 2018 candidacy</b>
Christine	Female	63	White	MSW	\$100-150,000
Ellen	Female	51	White	MSW	\$20-39,999
Emma	Female	35	White	MSW	\$100-150,000
Frances	Female	35	White	MSW	\$100-150,000
Grayson	Male	37	White	MSW	\$100-150,000
Jean	Female	56	White	MSW	\$150,000 or greater
Leanne	Female	52	White	BSW	\$100-150,000
Mary	Female	30	White	MSW	\$80-99,999
Michelle	Female	65	White	MSW	\$100-150,000
Sara	Female	52	South Asian	MSW	\$100-150,000

The interviewed participants are, on the whole, demographically homogenous. Nine participants identify as female, one as male. Nine participants identify as white, one as South Asian. Nine have attained a Master’s degree in Social Work, one has a Bachelor’s degree in Social Work. Only two participants reported an annual household income lower than \$100,000 in

2018. There is more diversity in age: participants ranged in age from 30 to 65 at the time of their candidacy in 2018. The homogeneity among participants speaks to both the demographics of Ontario social workers, as well as the structural barriers, particularly racism and classism, that allow some people, and deny others, access to political spaces. As a person with a professional background in political organizing, it is consistent with my experience to find the vast majority of candidates for office experience the privileges of whiteness and of financial security. Where these demographics differ from my experience is in the gender ratio of participants; it is uncommon in municipal races to see a majority of candidates who are women. As a researcher, I am aware that the experiences of this group are impacted, overwhelmingly, by the privileges of whiteness and wealth, and thus offer a very specific view of what it means to be a political social worker. While Aydarova (2019) reflects on the importance of studying the elite and privileged so as to hold power to account, I also intend to expand this study through future doctoral work, at which point I hope to undertake more expansive scholarship into what it means to be a social worker within electoral politics. As a result of the homogeneity of this study’s participants, themes should be interpreted with caution and should not be generalized.

Figure 2 shows information about participants’ electoral campaigns in 2018. It highlights the position they sought, a broad description of the type of constituency in which they ran for office, their incumbency status entering the 2018 campaign, and whether or not they were elected to the position they sought.

Figure 2

Participant Pseudonym	Position Sought in 2018	Constituency Description	Incumbency in 2018	2018 Election Result
Christine	School Board Trustee	Urban/Rural	Incumbent	Elected
Ellen	School Board Trustee	Suburban	Incumbent	Elected
Emma	School Board Trustee	Rural	Incumbent	Elected
Frances	Councillor	Urban	Not an incumbent	Elected
Grayson	Councillor	Urban/Rural	Not an incumbent	Elected
Jean	Councillor	Urban	Incumbent	Elected
Leanne	Councillor	Urban	Not an incumbent	Elected
Mary	Councillor	Urban	Not an incumbent	Not elected
Michelle	School Board Trustee	Rural	Incumbent	Elected
Sara	Councillor	Urban	Not an incumbent	Not elected

Five participants ran for office in constituencies they described as urban, two ran for office in constituencies they described as rural, two ran for office in consistencies they described as mixed urban/rural, and one ran in a constituency described as suburban. While all those who sought municipal council seats are labelled as “Councillor” to preserve anonymity, the six participants who sought council seats ran for positions at upper-tier, lower-tier, and single tier councils. All four participants who are labelled as “Trustee” sought and were elected to positions at an English Public school board.

**Data Collection**

Ten individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted between September, 2019 and February, 2020. Questions were open ended and prompts were prepared to encourage participants to go into further depth, following the interview guide in Appendix B. Six interviews were conducted in person, and four were conducted by phone. As noted by Aydarova (2019), one



of the challenges of researching the powerful is access. While only one potential participant declined to be interviewed and only two did not answer a direct interview request, many participants’ schedules did not allow for lengthy interviews. As a result, I did not have the time available to probe deeper into some participants’ responses, without risking that an interview would not be completed before the participant’s next appointment. Interviews ranged in length from 34:56 to 1:24:34, and the average interview length was 54:14. Each participant was asked to choose their own pseudonym to maintain anonymity; two participants asked me to select a pseudonym for them.

I was conscious of power dynamics at play within and in the arrangement of interviews. Often I arranged interviews partially or entirely through assistants, emphasizing the power difference between myself and the elected officials with whom I hoped to meet. In three cases I met with participants in their work spaces which required me to go through some level of security; I am conscious that as a cis-gender, white woman who has worked in electoral political spaces I am more comfortable and I appear to belong in these spaces more than many others without my privileges. An additional emphasis of the power differences between my participants and myself, as identified above, was the limited time I was able to schedule with many participants. Though email invitations requested 90 minutes (see Appendix A), I was rarely scheduled for more than one hour, and in one instance could only be scheduled for 30 minutes. Nevertheless, I am aware that as the researcher I held and continue to hold a great deal of power in these relationships: I defined the scope of this study and selected participants; I chose questions and led interviews; I have been trusted with anecdotes or details that participants asked me not to include in this study; I know each of their identities; I am wholly responsible for

analysis; and I have the ability to choose what is or is not central to their journeys. In many respects, I have been trusted with power over the political journey and social work journey stories of the participants who agreed to participate in my research.

During each interview, I kept field notes in a personal journal. These notes include important points raised by the participant being interviewed, gestures or other indicators of importance that would not be captured by the audio recording, as well as my impressions. At times, these notes also capture reflections I made in the moment, when a participant provided a response that I was able to link with another participant’s experience, or connect with the literature. This research journal was also a space within which to work through ideas outside of interviews and document phases of the study, including my impressions, difficulties, or choices, as recommended by Watt (2007). These notes were reviewed after every interview, and were relied upon as I produced memos to organize my thought processes.

In-person interviews were audio recorded on both a password protected iPhone and on a digital voice recorder. Phone interviews were recorded only on a digital voice recorder. Audio files from both sources were uploaded to my personal, password protected laptop within 24 hours of the interview, and were saved onto an encrypted, password protected USB key. Once uploads was complete, audio files were deleted from both recording devices. Files were named with the participant’s pseudonym of choice, or the one assigned to them, and the date of the interview.

Following each interview, I sent the participant an email thanking them for their participation and encouraging them to reach out if they had further thoughts or questions. One participant followed up by email with further thoughts on a question, and an additional blog post

relevant to the project. A second participant followed up with two potential participants they knew of, one of whom I subsequently interviewed, the other of whom did not meet the scope of this study. I also encouraged participants to share the project poster, received in their initial recruitment email, with any other potential participants they know.

### ***Data Analysis***

I transcribed nine interviews, and a research assistant transcribed the tenth. Transcripts were printed and read in full as they were completed. Initial thoughts about potential codes and themes, or links with theory and literature, were noted in my journal. Next interviews were coded, in hard copy, and codes were recorded both on the hard copy transcripts themselves and in a digital spreadsheet, to avoid doubly naming the same experience, as coding took place over many weeks and began before interviews were completed. Potentially relevant codes were sorted and collated, and potential theme names brainstormed (Nowell et al., 2017). Memo writing took place throughout this phase to work through ideas, capturing changes in understanding, or representing administrative work on the project. These memos and journal entries also make up a traceable audit of the work being completed on this project.

Initial codes were grouped within initial working themes. With guidance from my advisor, some themes were combined, some initial themes were dissolved and those codes combined into other themes. By organizing codes to better fit a narrative arc that matched the typical events and experiences in a participant’s journey through social work and politics, I reframed the eleven initial themes into the six themes presented in the subsequent chapter.

Activities tangential to data analysis were undertaken to assist in furthering my understanding of this topic and my capacity to analyze the data. I received support from my

advisor to attend the two-day Campaign School for Social Workers at the University of Connecticut in February 2020. This professional development experience allowed me to immerse myself in a learning space with social workers interested in seeking elected office, primarily across the northeastern USA, and with those interested in political social work. It also offered me the opportunity to meet and speak with several American scholars whose research informed this study. This experience was invaluable as it offered a less formal venue for me to hear other social workers’ political journeys and perceptions outside of a power dynamic where I was a researcher. By participating as a professional development peer rather than as a researcher conducting an interview, I believe that I was able to gain emotional insight into the decision-making process and considerations that social workers may undertake before running for office, particularly for Black social workers, who were prominently featured as panelists and experts. This experience, undertaken parallel to this study, assisted me in identifying and refining themes.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a researcher, I am the sole investigator of this project. As such, I hold a great deal of power in terms of which stories are told, and how they are told. I chose participants, designed questions, probed when I felt necessary, and I completed analysis of the interviews. I come to this study with pre-formed ideas about political action, campaigning, and transformative change within systems gained through my own experiences as a political organizer. As a feminist researcher, it is my responsibility to centre the voices of my participants in my work, and to practice ongoing reflexivity to ensure that my own experiences were both acknowledged and de-centred throughout the data collection, analysis and writing processes (O’Shaughnessy &

Krogman, 2012). I cannot eliminate my past experiences, but I can and have attempted to continually practice reflexivity as I have listened to the stories, perspectives, and reflections of my participants.

As a researcher of people who hold power and attempt to hold power, it is also my duty to “juggle the responsibility to treat [my] participants with respect and care at the same time as [I] contemplate how such treatment makes [me] complicit in maintaining systems of injustice and oppression” (Aydarova, 2019, p. 35). I have questioned my own aims in furthering the study of social workers in power and seeking power, and questioned whether increasing numbers of social workers in power would make a substantive difference within oppressive, colonial systems of government. Knowing the harm that social workers have caused throughout Canada’s history, alongside the harm caused by Canadian governments at all levels, I have questioned the validity of this project as critical inquiry. Yet I am simultaneously encouraged by Pritzker and Lane’s (2016) reminder that “To facilitate social change, the social work profession needs social workers who can lead political efforts and a social work population capable of engaging with politics and empowering clients to leverage their political voices” (p. 81). I hope that my struggles to reconcile the goals of understanding and transforming existing systems with the risks of perpetuating oppressive systems have led me to a space of greater accountability and reflexivity as a social work researcher.

I must also acknowledge that this thesis was written under the additional strain of a global pandemic. As such, I was without many of the resources and privileges I had assumed I would have access to during this phase of my study: access to libraries, in-person consultation with my advisor, daycare for my child, or the ability to spend large blocks of time focusing on

this work. This experience, for me, has confirmed the absolute necessity of factors such as time and the luxury of “a room of one’s own” in order to achieve one’s goals, be they political, professional, or academic (Woolf, 1928/2004, p. 3). My analysis is likely more sensitive to the experiences of participating in civic life while constrained by the care of others than it might have been had I written this thesis without the interruption of a public health crisis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This project was reviewed and approved by Wilfrid Laurier University’s Research Ethics Board (REB) prior to participants being invited to interviews or any data being collected. Two updates were requested and approved from WLU’s REB: one to add a research assistant to the study to assist with transcription, and one to extend the end date of this study. There were ethical considerations taken into account throughout recruitment and within each interview.

The most prominent consideration was confidentiality. This study relied on multiple forms of recruitment, including a snowball sampling method. There was a risk that some political social workers, for example those in areas of work such as child welfare, may have deliberately avoided making their profession known during their municipal campaign. Thus, I may have been made aware through a snowball sampling method of social workers who ran for office who had taken pains to ensure that their profession would not be public knowledge. To address this, I asked those who know of another potential participant to send the project poster to the person they suggested directly, and searched for publicly available documents confirming their fit within the scope of this study before reaching out directly, so that I was never reaching out directly to someone whose social work education was not publicly available information.

Participants were made aware that specific aspects about their experiences, such as names and places, would be redacted from transcripts for additional anonymity. In more than one instance, a participant shared a story or affiliation with me to illustrate a point that they immediately or later identified as too specific, and potentially revealing of their identity; those stories or affiliations have not been included in the results of this study.

I engaged in member checking to ensure validity of my initial analysis. All participants were sent the quotations, and context in which their quotations were used, from their interview that I intended to use in this study for approval and to ensure their experiences and knowledge had not been taken out of context.

While participants in this study are not a vulnerable group, campaigns can be physically, emotionally, and spiritually damaging for candidates, campaign workers and volunteers. There is extensive anecdotal evidence of sexual harassment and aggressive sexist and racist experiences on the municipal campaign trail, particularly for women of colour (CBC News, 2014a; CBC News, 2014b; Wong-Tam, 2019). There was a risk of participants reliving feelings of rejection or failure, experiences of discrimination, emotional and physical exhaustion, and other negative experiences in the course of these interviews. This risk was mitigated by making it clear to participants that questions could be skipped and the interview could be stopped at any time. Participants were given the option to participate in the study and decline to be quoted directly. I prepared information about crisis supports in their region as well as province-wide before each interview, and monitored participants for distress or signs of discomfort throughout interviews.

Throughout the design of this study, I have endeavoured to centre the voices and stories of participants while maintaining their confidentiality. I have chosen to use thematic analysis as a

way to analyze interviews and answer three research questions using multiple theoretical frameworks. Through a three-pronged recruitment strategy, I identified thirteen potential participants, and conducted semi-structured interviews with ten. Throughout work on this project, I was conscious of power and ethical considerations, such as confidentiality. Data analysis took place over the course of several months, during which time I attended a professional development school aimed at political social workers. Thematic analysis has led to the development of six main themes, and twenty codes within those themes, which will be presented in detail in the next chapter.



## Chapter Five: Results

In this chapter I will explore the themes that emerged from participant interviews. Within each theme I will explore evidence given through quotations, anecdotes, and perspectives that participants shared with me. First, the theme “Determining Relationships” will explore the people and foundational networks that led participants to being politically aware and engaged. Following this, the theme “On Becoming a Social Worker” will explore their experiences and perceptions through social work education. The theme “Catalysts” will describe specific experiences and realizations that participants describe as moving them to political action. Fourth, I will explore “The Political Landscape” within which participants ran for office. Next, the theme “Skills and Strategies” will explore the social work specific attitudes, frameworks for practice, and skillsets that participants identified as being useful in their transition from social work practice to candidate for office and elected official. Finally, the theme “Deepening the Political Identity of Social Work” will speak to the self-perceived motivations and calls to action that participants expressed.

Figure 3, found on the following page, lists each of the six above themes, and their corresponding codes and sub-codes.

Figure 3

Theme	Code	Sub-Code
<b>Determining Relationships</b>	Family Perspective	
	Network Involvement	Labour Movement
		Youth Political Bodies
		Partisan Networks
	Mentorship	
	Testing the Waters	
	The Invitation to Run	
<b>On Becoming a Social Worker</b>	Motivations	Leadership
		Personal Experience
	Making Connections, Gaining Language	
	Field Placement Experiences	
<b>Catalysts</b>	Responding to the Political Climate	
	Professional Influence	
	Responding to Bad Representation	
<b>The Political Landscape</b>	Growth and Change	
	Poverty and Wealth	
	Privilege and Positionality	
<b>Skills and Strategies</b>	Conscious and Unconscious Skills	
	Compromise and Push-Back	
	Filling the Gaps	
<b>Deepening the Political Identity of Social Work</b>	Political Identity	
	Emotional Responses to Activism	
	The Call to Action	

**Theme One: Determining Relationships**

This theme emerged from the variety of ways participants described their political journeys, and in particular the centrality of relationships to those journeys. Many participants recalled the political involvement of their families as being influential for their own activity. Next, the way that politics became a part of their identity shaped the actions they have taken. Network involvement played a significant role and introduced many participants to political action. Mentors were also identified by many as key relationships that fostered their political involvement. Testing the waters explores the ways in which participants consulted with community to receive feedback on a potential run for office. Finally, the invitation to run is a significant step in the journey to candidacy for nearly every participant, one that hinges upon relations with others.

***Family Perspective***

Many participants described the roles that their families have played both in fostering their political interest and actively supporting their political efforts. Childhood experiences, and particularly the perspectives and actions of parents, were described by participants as being foundational to their own development as eventual candidates and elected officials. While participants were not asked about their families specifically (see Appendix B), familial perspectives on political action were raised by nearly every participant when asked to describe their own political journeys. Several participants described growing up in active political families. Two participants shared that their parents were elected officials, and two others described roles that their parents took in electoral campaigns when they were children.

Conversely, one participant had an outlier experience, growing up in an explicitly apolitical household that discouraged her participation.

Sara, who grew up outside of Canada, shared her experiences as the child of an elected official at multiple levels of government:

*My dad ran for, um, like, you know, various public offices and oftentimes he succeeded in them. My mom was his right hand and I participated in many election campaigns, like door knocking and stuff like that. So my dad ran for municipal elections first and he became first the councillor and the mayor of [a large city] at that time, so that was like, quite big [...] and then he ran for provincial, became a provincial Member of Parliament, [then] federal. He retired from politics of, like his last thing was he was a Federal Minister for a short period of time.*

For Sara, campaigning and active participation in electoral politics was a normal part of her family’s experience as her father’s roles increased in prominence and she worked on his campaigns at various levels. Campaigning for office, holding office, and making a career out of elected roles were activities that she observed and understood through watching her father’s experiences, giving her a view both of what those roles entailed and the people who were elected to them.

Emma also described her experience as the child of an elected official at the school board level. She said:

*My parents were both very engaged, so I had role models who were very engaged in the community. My mother, who is also a social worker, and is also an elected school board trustee and Chair of her Board. [...] So she ran for municipal office when I was a kid. Um, it was either provincial or federal, I can’t remember. But, then she was also, she has been an elected school board trustee since I was in elementary school. [...] she was also very involved with the labour community. And, as was my father, my father was chief steward for his union. He was also president of the area Labour Council.*

Emma draws parallels between her mother’s professional and elected experiences and her own.

Both have worked as social workers, both have been elected trustees, both have served as Chairs

of their boards. These identities were modelled for Emma from childhood, when she remembers her mother running for office at multiple levels, while her father was a leader in his union and at the Labour Council in their area. She credits both her parents for leading political and justice-based conversations with Emma and her siblings throughout childhood, and for ensuring she had experiences of participating in political action that gave her a sense of accomplishment and the value of her voice.

Another participant also grew up with parents who were heavily involved in their community; this involvement gave them direct access to meet with elected leaders. Their father was president of their local Chamber of Commerce and an active Liberal Party member: when their MP was visiting their part of a geographically large riding, he stayed with their family. Similarly, Jean also described memories of her parents volunteering on electoral campaigns, though she does not describe those experiences as leading her to see herself as a politician.

In contrast to other participants who saw parental political involvement in childhood, Frances describes being actively discouraged from being political. She shared that, “My family really discouraged being political. And I don't really know totally why that is. Um, I mean, it could be just survival.” Frances’s father immigrated to Canada from a communist nation, and she suspects that her parents saw staying outside of politics, “lay[ing] low,” as a matter of maintaining safety for their family. She returned to this theme several times over the interview, reiterating that, “I come from a family who would have said, like, ‘We’re not political.’ Whereas everything of course is political.” Though Frances identified that she remembers engaging in activities that she would now describe as political “go[ing] back very far to like grade six,” she would not have described these experiences as being political until quite recently. As a result of

her family’s stated apolitical nature, political activity or advocacy was not something she considered herself doing or considered as an option for herself until she was into adulthood.

Several participants describe growing up with electoral politics as normal parts of their lives, and some grew up with parents in positions of power, both elected and in positions of community leadership. These experiences are described as having normalized formal political participation in many cases, and for Frances, as alienating political participation. Growing up with close access to power and leadership is a position of privilege that several participants identified as impactful parts of their childhoods. These foundational perspectives on political action and political involvement contributed to their own understanding of their political journeys as adults.

### *Network Involvement*

Participants often described their entries into electoral politics as happening with the support, encouragement, and permission of others in their lives. These others occupied roles as family members, colleagues, peers, friends, partners, and even strangers. While network members played different roles for different participants, no one described entering electoral politics without a community of people around them.

**Labour Movement.** Some participants described their entry point to political activism and awareness as being through the networks and experiences they encountered as union members and labour activists. Christine and Michelle both described their memories of the Ontario Federation of Labour’s (OFL) Twelve Days of Action, protests against the Mike Harris government’s social policies in the 1990s, which they engaged in because of their organized labour connections (Turk, 1997).

Christine describes the protests as her union and others going out to do,

*a walk, and protest, and all sorts of things. Protest the cuts that Mike Harris was making, okay, on, um. On everyone. Mostly the poor, we felt, and the workers, and so I was involved in those in that I attended a lot of the marches.*

However, before she attended many of the Twelve Days of Action marches, the first protest she attended was also organized by the OFL in downtown Toronto, and she was far less enthused about her participation. Christine shared that

*I think I was attending a conference for the Ontario Federation of Labour in Toronto and, and they organized this big march in downtown Toronto. I marched with my sign in front of my face. I didn't want anybody to see me, because I wasn't, I wasn't sure! Like, I don't know. I didn't know. I was kind of there because I was there, and to not go on the march would have not looked good.*

While her first march may have been the result of peer pressure, she continued to be active in her union and grew more comfortable in an activist role. Christine began her union involvement while working at a local university in a staff role, where she was employed when her union went on strike. In addition to the broader political awareness and activism she gained through the Twelve Days of Action, Christine gained specific experience as an activist and organizer while on strike. She shared that, “The strike was probably way more fun than my real job.” For Christine, belonging and action initiated by her union lay a foundation for both political interest and a joy in activism.

Michelle’s husband was heavily involved in his union and in the Twelve Days of Action, which introduced her to those labour networks. While she was very aware of the Twelve Days of Action and was somewhat involved, Michelle identified her role as a mother and within her household as holding her back from full participation. She shared:

*My husband was involved in the Days of Action. But I, so, I couldn't actually be! And the reason being somebody had to be home with three little children. You know, I think there's a part there, and I think the labour movement really recognizes that a lot more, is that in the labour movement, is that it can, you know, that there's many people who are helping, but they're maybe not as visible.*

Michelle saw herself providing less visible support, as her role in caring for her children allowed her husband the space to participate. But this less visible support nevertheless led to later deepening connections with organized labour: Michelle later completed her MSW placement at a large union's regional office, and was initially approached to run for office by friends in organized labour.

**Youth Political Bodies.** For several participants, early experiences with political organizing and activism had lasting effects. Participation in student politics and student activism sparked interest and continued involvement in issue campaigns, electoral campaigns, and eventually in running for office. Those that encouraged and celebrated political involvement gave participants opportunities to further their political interests.

Grayson described his early experiences in student politics and the seriousness with which he approached those roles. He shared, “I was on student council all throughout my high school. I was like the youngest member of student council and then I became one of the presidents of student council. And I took it really seriously.” Grayson spoke of the pride he felt in organizing a delegation of students to city hall, and lobbying successfully for a public bus route to his school. These experiences of political success stayed with him and influenced his continued political interest and involvement, which included joining a debate team at university, where he met a number of MPs. He shared that while he sees those university experiences from a different light now,



*at the time it was pretty neat because I was a kid who grew up on welfare, grew up in the system, and I was able to meet these, you know, important people and, um, get to know them a little.*

Grayson described a pattern of political interest that began while he was a teenager and grew to include various political activities as he reached adulthood. Those activities gave him access to various political actors who became members of his network, and even eventual mentors.

Mary also participated in political groups in high school as a founding member of her school’s Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). She shared how she was inspired to activism by her friendships, saying,

*I had several friends who I knew were in the closet and I knew that the high school wasn't exactly the safest, I mean high school isn't the safest place for teenagers. Oh my goodness. You know. But I remember, I remember starting that up and thinking, and like it was a really big deal. We had to like have a meeting with the principal and like there was some resistance to having a Gay Straight Alliance.*

Knowing that her friends were unsafe to be themselves at school led Mary to work with others to begin a space where they could be safe, and where a network of support could be built up among students. Mary was inspired to action by her friends, and her solution was to create a wider network of support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students at her school.

Emma also describes participation in youth-specific political endeavours as foundational to her increasing leadership. She became involved in a political party’s youth wing while at university, as a provincial clubs coordinator, which meant that she was coordinating the party’s youth clubs across Ontario universities. This gave her the platform from which to seek additional roles within the party’s provincial leadership at a convention, which she describes as her first campaign. She said,

*I'm very, I'm naturally very social. So I made friends and those friends all voted. It was awesome. For me. But um, it was from that that I got the encouragement that, you know, and getting involved on the campaigns, that led to the encouragement to run for office.*

Emma directly ties her experiences in youth politics, and campaign for a leadership position within the party, to her developing leadership and eventual run for school board. It was within youth political spaces that she first encountered the allies and friends who would support her through her runs for party executive positions, and later for elected office.

**Partisan Networks.** Though no municipal candidates in Ontario run under party banners, many candidates and elected officials are partisan, and indeed many participants in this study began their political activism as volunteers, organizers and activists for other candidates and campaigns. Some participants were approached and some ran at other levels of government under party banners before running at the municipal level or during their tenure as a municipal politician. Partisanship offered a direct line to training, campaign experience, and connections with other politically involved people.

One participant continues to rely on their connections within the Liberal Party when they run for re-election. These connections continue to support their political activity. They rely on these networks to support their campaigns, “to hand out my pamphlets to go door to door with, and to the mail boxes. And I rely on my Liberal Party friends to give me the finances.” Their partisan network is one they can return to for volunteer support and financial support for re-election campaigns. Their long-standing membership as a Liberal has helped them to deepen and foster those relationships.

When Emma moved to her community, she quickly became involved in partisan circles. She recollected that, “I ended up meeting a group of [party activists in my city] and got involved

in my own riding association, and became clubs coordinator for the province of Ontario for [the party’s] youth.” It was through this participation that Emma met other party members who eventually encouraged her to run for office. Emma’s involvement with her local riding association led to her seeking increasing leadership roles within the party, and then to seeking a non-partisan trustee position in her community.

Grayson ran as an NDP candidate before seeking a municipal seat. He shared that when chairing an anti-poverty meeting in his community, he had to speak to a participant after a meeting because, “he was being too much of a bulldog during the roundtable meeting, and he said, ‘You should come to an NDP meeting.’ After I was basically giving him crap. He said, ‘You’d be really good.’” Grayson did attend that meeting, and joined the association. Shortly thereafter, he became the NDP candidate for his community with the support of that association. Through professional connections and joining a partisan group, Grayson became a candidate for the first time.

While municipal candidates are officially non-partisan, many have partisan affiliations and experiences. These partisan networks provide support and encouragement, and can be an entry-point to electoral campaign participation. Involvement in partisan politics led some to their growing leadership roles and networks that continue to support their political efforts

### ***Mentorship***

The value of mentorship within political spaces was identified by several participants as being integral to their involvement, both as political activists and as candidates. For some, this mentorship supported and continues to support them through activism and elected roles. For others, seeking out mentorship was an important step to their becoming a candidate for office.

Grayson described the strong mentorship he received from a former NDP candidate who invited him to his first riding association meeting. When Grayson put his name forward as a candidate, “He stuck with me. A lot of times when new candidates come, old candidates kind of disappear.” In this case, however, the former candidate remained heavily involved in Grayson’s campaign: “He was there for my announcement, to managing one of my campaigns, taking time off work to be there, mentoring me, having like a drop-in every time.” This mentorship was very important for Grayson throughout his campaigns. As a councillor, that mentorship relationship continues to exist for Grayson, who now sees his mentor as a valued peer.

Emma also discussed the importance of mentorship. She had received ongoing support and mentorship from her former MP as a trustee and later as Chair of the Board. She shared that,

*the past few weeks have been particularly challenging in the position of Chair and, so I guess my MP, even after the election, so my former MP I guess now, has continued to stay in touch and he’s, him and his wife are key mentors and ‘femtors’ of mine.*

Though her former MP was no longer in office, he remained available to Emma through a difficult time at the board as a support and listening ear.

Mentorship does not always result in positive outcomes. Sara discusses the importance of mentorship in her political journey, and though she does not identify her first run for office as a negative one, she does highlight the ways that the important relationship with her mentor changed the thrust of her first run for office. She said,

*there were a couple of reasons that I didn’t run for [the position I sought in 2018], but I think the biggest reason was one of my colleagues and mentor... He was running for [that position]. And I didn’t want to run against him. Like he was the one who had, one of the people who had encouraged me for a very long time to run and I just didn’t want to run against him.*

Sara changed her initial plans for her first run for office in order to support her mentor, rather than being his competition, though her primary interest lay in the position he was seeking. This is an illustration of the value that Sara placed in that relationship. She knew she wanted to run for office, but chose to run for a seat she was less interested in holding so as to avoid competition with her mentor.

Mentorship, and the relationship participants had with their mentors, are described as very important. Mentors played supportive roles encouraging participants to run, supporting them as candidates, and providing support to them in their roles as elected officials. Mentorship relationships are highly valued, indeed identified by Sara as being more highly valued than seeking a desired elected position. For these participants, the mentor relationship is one that continues across campaigns, elected roles, and activism.

### ***Testing the Waters***

A common thread in participants’ decisions to run for office was a period of consultation with peers and community members, a testing of the waters before their decision to run had been finalized. Beyond mentorship, many identify having the support of a range of community members as important when deciding to enter a municipal race as a candidate for office.

Frances had not been asked to run for municipal office in 2018. For her, testing the waters was also a consultation process with elected politicians, women in particular, to ensure that the role would be a good fit for her. She shared that,

*I started talking to people who were in politics and they were very generous with their time like, I mean, [the local MPP] met with me. [The local MP] met with me. [A 2018 provincial candidate] was a longtime friend. I talked to her about it. I think those — did anyone else? — who else did I meet with? I met with [a current councillor], I met with [a past councillor]. So like, all these other women. And I said, “I think maybe I’ll do*

*this.” Because I was feeling like I wanted to do something in the community. And then I looked into it. [...] And these women were like, “Yeah, that’s a great idea. You should definitely do that.” And then so I did it.*

Frances sought validation of her desire to run, and she received encouragement from the elected and previously elected women she approached. In addition to seeking out the perspectives of these elected women leaders, she also shared that she attended a campaign school for prospective municipal candidates. Unlike those who were explicitly asked to run, Frances was self-motivated to seek a council seat, and she sought to have similar questions answered — is this a role she should seek? — that many would have answered by being asked to run at the outset.

After being asked to seek a council seat, Leanne explored the role further by meeting with councillors. Those meetings acted as information interviews, giving her a fuller picture of what the role entailed and how policy worked at city hall. Leanne shared that

*the more I got involved in it, the more interested I got to think, wait a second. This is kind of, this would be an awesome role for someone with a social work background to literally be in and bring a whole different perspective and a whole different voice than what I am hearing is usually happening in municipal level politics.*

Leanne’s meetings with current and former councillors opened her eyes to ways that her voice could be useful at the council table. One of the more impactful meetings she sought was with a then-councillor in her community. In that meeting, she recalled expressing to the councillor that,

*“I’ve spent the last few months really pondering whether to consider throwing my hat in the ring. And what I need for you to do is talk me out of it, I need you to tell me all of the less than ideal things that I don’t know about the role and about trying to make policy in this way. Talk me out of it, make, you know, let me know all the horrible things.” And at the end of that meeting, I was convinced that this is something that I really wanted to try and do.*

As Leanne sought more information about the role and spoke with more insiders about her potential run, she became more convinced that it was a role she wanted to take on and could succeed within.

Grayson had run at another level of government before running for council, and so when he was exploring a municipal run it was important to him that he was not embarking on a campaign that wasn’t desired by the community. He said, “I explored, I asked people in my community. And there seemed to be this desire to see change in the community.” It was important to Grayson, especially following loss, that there be a desire for change, if he were to put his name forward again.

Before making a final decision to run for office at the municipal levels, several participants tested the waters of their candidacies by approaching others. That process of consultation was helpful to allay fears about running for office, to gain further insight into the role of an elected official, or to ensure there was community interest in the participant’s potential run. Testing the waters helped these participants make their decision that a run for office would be a worthy pursuit.

### ***The Invitation to Run***

The majority of participants shared that they were asked to run for office by friends or acquaintances; for some, this invitation to run was when they began to take a municipal run seriously, while for others it was the first time they had considered electoral politics for themselves. Whether already involved in electoral politics or not, most candidates did not consider themselves as potential candidates until being asked by others.

Christine describes the process of being asked to run very matter-of-factly: “Well, there really wasn't much to it. Some people asked me, and I said yes.” She shared that she was asked to run by colleagues in social work, as well as by friends who were already involved at the school board. “I got involved in politics, like as a candidate, because some friends were involved,” she shared. Having friends involved led her to support their campaigns as a volunteer, and later to saying yes when they asked her to put her name forward to run as a trustee.

One participant described their efforts to convince someone else to run for a vacated seat on their local school board, and having the question turned around:

*Well when I started calling people to say, “Will you run for the appointment, we need somebody to replace [the previous trustee]?” the answer I got back was, “Well I don't understand why you're not running, like, you're there, like, why would I? You're the one who knows everything.”*

As a frequent volunteer at their child’s elementary and middle schools, their presence as a fundraising volunteer had led them to being seen as someone whose organic next step was to participate at the board level. When they sought a candidate to get behind, their community responded by encouraging them to seek the appointment.

Leanne was first asked to run by an acquaintance at an organization where she volunteered. She shared that she had been

*doing a lot of work with [a local organization], talking about seniors issues, and one of the gentlemen in that volunteer committee I was on, said, “Hey, you know the election, we're looking at another municipal election a year from now. You should run.” And my first response was, “Haha, that's funny. That's not something, that never crossed my mind.” So that was kind of the start. And then I let it go. And then when I was at the meeting a month later, he's like, “Did you do some thinking about that?”*

Leanne had to be asked repeatedly over a number of months before she seriously considered running for council. Despite her community advocacy work, she did not see herself as a political



person until repeatedly asked to consider herself in that role. Eventually, her volunteer colleague’s persistence convinced her to consider a run for office seriously.

Emma describes being asked to run as an extension of her partisan work. She became involved with a political party as a student, as identified above, and

*had taken on a more formal role within the party and then served in that capacity for two years, and then while filling that I met fellow school board trustees that were also affiliated with the party, and they encouraged me to run.*

Through her partisan political work, Emma’s leadership skills were identified by others, who saw her potential as a trustee. She was invited to run in her community by others who held that same role in their respective communities.

Michelle also entered electoral politics after being encouraged by friends from organized labour who were also partisan volunteers. She said,

*I had friends who were involved in the local NDP riding association. And were also involved in labour and they approached me. They said — their quotes were, ‘You might say that you, you know, you vote Liberal or you’re a Liberal, but you talk like a New Democrat.’ And I think that was just, you know, just not having a lot of, you can say, big P political awareness.*

Michelle shared that her friends convinced her to seek the NDP nomination for her first campaign. Interestingly, she shared that she was not asked to run when she first ran to become a school board trustee.

Jean also identified being approached by partisan riding association members before independently deciding to seek municipal office. She shared that,

*I started getting approached by political parties. And I think it was because my, my professional work gave me a certain profile in the community that they thought would be helpful for me if I were to run representing those parties. There were actually two. And I kept getting, getting approached to run provincially and run federally.*

Jean explained that she continued to decline the two parties that had approached her, telling them that if she ever ran it would be at the municipal level, where jurisdiction for her areas of primary interest lay. While she declined these offers to run under a partisan banner, it was being approached by partisan representatives that led Jean to undertake her campaign to be a regional councillor. She shared that after being asked over a number of provincial and federal election cycles she told herself,

*I’ve got to stop using [municipal office] as an excuse and actually do it. So it wasn’t really something that I had planned out for a long time. It was just sort of, I, I hate to say it was a whim, but it kind of felt like that. I just sort of came home one day and announced I decided to do it.*

Though she had not been asked to run for municipal office, it was her experience of being regularly asked to seek elected office that spurred Jean to consider the possibility of holding municipal office, and eventually led her to launch her campaign.

Grayson ran as an NDP candidate before running at the municipal level. After the disappointment of loss, he had been hesitant about ever running again before community members began approaching him to run municipally. He placed particular importance on being asked to run by the mothers of his children’s peers in his neighbourhood, who approached him at the park or the playground. But it was “when I started getting people who were at one point quote-end-quote ‘political enemies’ encouraging me to run, including staffers for other parties too, I thought there’s something here.” Grayson found encouragement in former rivals encouraging him to run, and seeing their support as a sign that he should continue to pursue a political role.

Sara had also run previously at the municipal level, for a different position than the one sought in 2018. She shared that the name recognition she had build in her previous run led to a greater number of people in her cultural community seeing her as their representative and prospective candidate even before she had decided to run in 2018. She said,

*I think especially in 2018, there was a broader range of people who were asking me to run. [...] So, so a number of women predominantly, but a lot of men as well from the Muslim community asking me to run and they were saying that, ‘You’re the only one who has the, you know, who has an opportunity to have some diverse representation.’ And there were people from various cultural groups, so not just the South Asian groups but others as well, really asking me to run and many of them thought that if there is someone who can win, to make the scene a little bit diverse, I would have the best, I was best placed, to have that chance.*

Sara felt that her community and other cultural communities had nominated her and were encouraging her to run both as an individual leader, and as a community representative at a council table that had no non-white members. She described being approached by many people, both those she knew well and less well, who encouraged her to put her name forward for a second time.

For many participants, being asked to run for office is central to their political journey. Very few decided to seek municipal office without being encouraged or invited to run by others. Interestingly, the invitation to run is also experienced and valued by those who had run previously at similar or other levels of government. Being asked to run is a valued and central experience within participants’ journeys to electoral candidacy.

Every participant in this study placed importance on the relationships that fostered, encouraged, and invited them along their political journeys. For many, early experiences with elected leaders and activists normalized political activity as something they could participate in.

Network involvement, inclusive of organized labour, political parties, and student politics also developed relationships with others that furthered political action among participants. For several participants, the continued support of a mentor has been valuable throughout their political journey. As they moved toward deciding to run for office, many tested the waters so as to gain confidence and gain endorsement for their run from valued members of their communities. Finally, the invitation to run is a central part of the political journey narrative for the majority of participants; only one participant ran for office having never been asked to run at any level. These participants centre their politics in relationships with others, and centre their political experiences as those that exist within family, professional, cultural, and political communities.

### **Theme Two: On Becoming A Social Worker**

This theme explores the ways that participants came to social work and experienced their social work education. For many, their experiences within social work education helped to shape their perceptions of policy, government, systems, and political action. For others, social work education paralleled political education and motivations they had sparked elsewhere. For all participants, their identity as a social worker came into being before their election to office. First, I will explore participants’ motivations for entering social work education. Next, I will discuss the ways that participants described their education putting words to experiences and feelings they already held about the world. Finally, I will describe the ways that participants felt that their experiences as social work students helped prepare, or failed to prepare, them and their peers for political engagement.

### ***Motivations***

Several participants outlined their motivations for beginning their social work education, which for most participants in this study was a graduate degree. Motivations were varied: for some, professional status motivated a return to school or continuing education, while for others social work education was motivated by personal experiences with social systems that had failed or caused harm.

**Leadership.** For many participants, the motivations to pursue or further their social work education did not speak to political desires, but did share common threads of seeking leadership opportunities and professional credentials.

Christine identified a desire to take on a workplace role with more leadership potential, and to be considered a professional in her workplace. She shared that

*actually it was a pretty callous reason why I took the Master of Social Work program. Not callous, it was practical. I was a single parent... And I needed to make that leap from admin to professional. And the best way to do that was to get my Master of Social Work degree because I already had my BA.*

She additionally shared that beginning her MSW was,

*probably the only conscious career move I’ve ever made. Usually, when I was married, I had the job and my ex had the career. I had the job with the benefits and all that stuff. That was the deal we’d made. And then when I became a single parent, I needed to do better.*

Christine was motivated to enter the field in order to become a professional and attain financial security for her family after becoming a single parent. Her stated motivations did not include social or political ideals, though she identified the disadvantage that gendered power dynamics within her marriage as the catalyst that resulted in her applying to enter her MSW program. For

Christine, earning an MSW would allow her to become a professional and further her career for the benefit of her family.

Frances also shared that her motivations were related to employment prospects. Justifying her decision to do an MSW, she shared that she told her family, “Well, social workers get jobs. So I guess I’ll do that.” Frances’ motivation to enter her MSW centred around obtaining the credentials to attain a secure job while continuing to work directly with people, after attaining an undergraduate degree that had not inspired her.

Jean was also motivated to attain a post-graduate degree to further her career. Jean’s MSW programme was designed “for practising social work professionals. So you had to have worked for five years in the social work field to get into the programme.” She noted that the program,

*assumed policy and administration. And I think that was because this is [rural] Ontario. And this is, you know, back in the late 90s. And there weren't a lot of MSWs around. So I think there was an assumption that if you had an MSW you were not going to be doing frontline work. You were going to be doing administrative work or policy work.*

The assumption of the program was that graduates would work in management and administration, rather than on the front lines as counsellors or other service delivery workers. This program assumptions matched Jean’s goals for attaining her MSW, which was to take on leadership roles.

Aspirations to have a recognized credential or professionalism as a precursor for leadership at work is a common motivation for entering the social work field among participants. No one interviewed identified political or public leadership as a motivation for beginning their highest social work degree, but many identified a desire or assumption that their degree would

lead to a desired professional achievement: secure work, management roles, or professional standing within their field. They demonstrated an understanding of professional credentials as a way to enter desired fields with authority, and a willingness to participate in institutions of power in order to further their goals.

**Personal Experience.** Other participants identified personal experiences that had led them to macro-level social work. These micro-level situations experienced as individuals or within families had demonstrated for them the many ways in which the personal is political — the ways that systems navigation and political or bureaucratic decisions impact people as individuals.

Emma shared that her younger sister died in an accident while Emma was in high school. A subsequent coroner’s inquest found that her sister’s death had been the result of the design of a commercial product which had caused other children’s deaths. The coroner shared with Emma that it often took a far larger number of deaths or injuries to remove a product from the market. Emma shared that,

*Seeing that kind of injustice really is, because it was so personal, that has always driven me and just in terms of, you know, our laws should be about protecting people, first and foremost. Our systems should be about serving people. When they don't serve our interests, that's when we need to correct that.*

Her sister’s death was incredibly impactful for Emma when she was also very young. The results of the coroner’s inquiry, that the accident could have been prevented, shaped how she came to frame her own social work education and practice, which has continued to be advocacy-driven.

Mary also shared the ways in which her path to social work education was shaped by system failure. As a high school student, Mary’s classmate died by gun violence. This was incredibly impactful for her and inspired the direction of her future study. She said,

*As a high school student kind of grappling with all of that, and trying to make sense of it, it led me to want to study what, you know, what are the socio-economic conditions that make, you know, some students’ path to graduating high school so difficult... And so I ended up studying international development and looking at like more of those global structures? And after doing that, and working in human rights work for many years, actually, I decided I wanted to do my Masters in Social Work because I wanted to bring that perspective back to the local and back to my neighbourhood.*

Mary’s experiences in high school motivated her to seek out programs of study that would help her understand those experiences at the macro level. After exploring issues of development at the international level, she undertook an MSW to better bring those issues to the local level.

Another participant also shared the impact that their own experience with violence and within systems had on their understanding of those same systems, and how those experiences influenced their choice to enter the field of social work. They said,

*I battle addiction. And I went to treatment and in treatment I was abused, and it was horrific; I needed to get more treatment for the treatment. I ended up at [a second treatment centre with] more of a feminist approach, the first treatment centre I went to was [...] a very medical model. And I’m also a sexual abuse survivor so the medical model doesn’t work. I don’t know if you know about [my university’s] Social Work, but it’s a structural approach so it looks at — it’s not the person that’s the problem, it’s the structures in which we live, so violence, poverty, sexism, homophobia.*

This participant’s experience of violence within an addictions treatment centre led them to prioritize attending a school that emphasized a structural approach and critical practice. They were clear in their motivations: “What prompted me to get into social work was how I was treated by social workers in the medical model. And nurses and doctors.” When they began their MSW and entered social work practice, they prioritized looking at oppressive systems while they



practiced micro-level advocacy. The lived experiences they brought with them both prompted their social work education and framed how they would develop their own practice to contrast the abuse they had experienced.

Michelle shared ways that her personal experience of job loss led to her view of structural social work and oppressive systems. She shared that before getting her MSW she had lost her job in the mid-1990s and,

*I couldn't get another job. I blamed myself, thinking that I myself was at fault, that I wasn't good enough, or I, I didn't have, you know, the right experience. And so that kind of parallel experience myself of, you know, that self blame and not recognizing it was very much induced by the politics of that, that period. [...] And so, you know, all those experiences or life chances or experiences all start to crystallize for me about that idea about the personal is political and political is personal. And so I got into, I got accepted into social work. Um, and, you know, went to [school] to do my Masters in social policy, and really was leaning to more of what we call anti-oppressive practice approach.*

Michelle went back to school when her life and work had been directly impacted by the politics of the time, but it took that social work education for her to see that her experience had structural, rather than individual, causes. This experience led to her enduring interest in anti-oppressive policy as a social worker.

For several participants, personal experiences of failed systems led them to pursue social work as a career. Each of these participants came to see not only ways in which the personal is political, but the ways in which the political is personal, how policies and structures at the macro-level can have direct negative impacts on individuals and their families. For these participants, their motivation to enter social work was based in their experiences of loss and harm, and a desire to transform those systems.

Varying motivations led participants to the same educational program. Whether motivated by leadership potential, professionalism, or experience with failing systems, all found themselves pursuing a professional degree with a *Code of Ethics* that calls for social justice in practice (CASW, 2005). How that educational space impacted participants’ understanding of the political work around them will be explored in the following section.

### ***Making Connections, Gaining Language***

Through social work education, many participants identified that they were able to make connections and gain language around the injustices or oppressions they had witnessed in their professional or personal lives. Those connections helped them to develop macro-level frameworks for approaching their own social work which they were able to bring into their political activity.

Mary shared the ways that her social work education paralleled her anti-poverty activism, and shaped her ability to speak about interconnecting social justice issues. She said,

*I was involved in, in tenant organizing, in the campaign to raise the minimum wage to \$15, or back when it was \$14. Essentially, to various degrees, any kind of anti-poverty movement. And then while I was in university I was involved in different environmental events as well. While I was in university I was studying this kind of stuff at a more academic level, you know, we talked about intersectionality all the time in social work and it's become like, you know, a lens that we should, it's become a much more popular lens. So in university I was thinking the same thing, as though a lot of my political action kind stemmed from that, like that perspective.*

Learning about intersectionality through her social work education allowed Mary to apply that lens to her activism work, and use it as an intentional framework for the community work in which she was already participating. In this way, Mary’s education helped her express ideas about her activism and her views of social justice.

Frances described ways in which the language and understanding gained through her social work education has allowed her to be more intentional in her advocacy. She shared that,

*I would say most of the time, I wasn't deliberate about it [advocacy work]. And it wasn't until I had the language that I felt like I could be deliberate about it. And I didn't get that language until I was in my 30s.*

Prior to her most recent graduate education, Frances identified that she “learned by doing, about how those systems all interacted. But [...] I wasn't deliberate about it.” Through graduate education, Frances gained language that helped her to be conscious and deliberate about transforming systems, whether inside or outside of those systems.

Christine also looked to her social work program for the language and understanding to help her process the political climate of the time. She said, “I thought that the program would help me understand why is it that I feel this need to go out to the street and walk around with a sign and look, look silly.” Christine’s MSW experience was congruent with her experience as a labour organizer in the 1990s; she looked to her MSW for the language and theory to explain her desire, and the purpose, of her activism against the provincial government of the time.

For some participants, their social work education helped them make the connections between theory and practice, and helped give language to the inequities they saw or experienced in their lives. That language could parallel existing activism, or inspire new advocacy work. Interestingly, participants note that education helped them better discuss or explain what they saw in the world; they did not share ways in which social work education exposed them to oppressive systems or inequities that they had not been previously aware of. Rather, formal education helped frame experiences within theory and with language that was useful for future interventions or advocacy work.

### *Field Placement Experiences*

Over the course of attaining a social work degree, all participants would have participated in field placements at various agencies. For several, these experiences helped them make connections between systems and theory, and the ways that social work and politics could collide in practice.

One participant described ways that their social work education made visible the ways that systemic oppression operates. As a placement student with young offenders on probation, they witnessed how youth from different backgrounds experienced that system. They described seeing ways in which, “In that system the rich kids show up with their parents and their fancy suits and they get off with, ‘Oh have a nice day,’ and the poor kids in foster care, they get nailed, you know?” The experiences of their placement confirmed the understandings they already held about approaches to social work based on their own experiences, and the ways that privilege and oppression work within institutions.

Emma shared ways that both of her field experiences as a BSW student made cogent the intersection of social work practice and governance, both in the office of an elected official and within municipal bureaucracy. She said,

*Getting involved in social work, I was always very much interested in the political and social justice areas. So when I completed my [BSW], my placement, one of my placements, was with [an] MP [...] And I also did a placement in restorative justice which was attached to the [City]. So municipal politics.*

These experiences solidified those connections for Emma: social work and political work intersect in practice, and there is a field of political social work to pursue as a career.

Grayson shared the way that his first placement led directly to opportunities for community leadership. As a placement student with child welfare in his community, he was sent to a community meeting on behalf of his supervisor. He shared that,

*And the former mayor was chairing it, and all these Executive Directors were there, and they were forming a roundtable on poverty. And I got, I guess just based on answering some of the questions [...] They put me on the roundtable. They appointed me with a bunch of other executive directors, and me.*

Based on chance, and on participation, Grayson found himself participating on a community roundtable with not-for-profit and political leaders in his community, while still a social work student. This was an enormous opportunity for Grayson, but also demonstrated the level of trust that his supervisor had in him, that he was able to fill that roundtable role. This field placement opportunity led to Grayson building networks among people with community and political influence in a professional capacity.

For many participants, field placement was a time in which they had opportunities to see systems in action, both positively and negatively. One participant saw the ways that systemic oppression plays out for young offenders, while Emma and Grayson both had opportunities to connect social work practice to political and leadership initiatives. For all three of these participants, their field placement experiences stand out as parts of their social work education that were most influential for their future political careers.

The experience of becoming a social worker was important for every participant. While participants had varying motivations in beginning their social work education, through it they gained a common professional designation and common ethical obligation to pursue social justice. For some, their experience also helped them to develop the language and understand the

theoretical foundations of the injustices they saw in the world or activism in which they were already participating. For others, field placement experiences helped them to develop structural or macro-level frameworks for their own social work practice.

### **Theme Three: Catalysts**

In this section, I will explore the catalysts that participants identified as moving them from being politically aware individuals to politically active individuals. For some these catalysts are specific events, for others, social policy issues that compelled them to action. First I will explore the impact of political climate. Next, professional influence will explore the ways that social work practice spurred some participants to becoming actively political or to decide to run for office. Finally, I will explore the impact of perceived bad representation as a catalyst for participants to seek elected office. Though participants may have considered themselves political people or political social workers before these catalysts, it was these events that confirmed their future paths as activists, as vocal lobbyists, and as candidates for office.

#### ***Responding to the Political Climate***

The political climate of the late 1990s acted as a catalyst to political action. A number of participants identified the Ontario Mike Harris government as a catalyst that moved them from passive political awareness to political action. The social policy changes of the mid to late 1990s Harris government had a number of effects on those working in social services and other organizations serving vulnerable Ontarians. Others spoke of the ways that political climate influenced their perceptions of both politics and their ability to participate in political discourse.

These changes impacted participants personally and in their workplaces, compelling them into political roles.

Jean shared that in the 1990s she was a director of a youth offender facility in Ontario, serving young men in the criminal justice system. The Harris government’s changes to youth corrections compelled Jean to add her voice to a provincial network of corrections workers, who lobbied together. She shared that the Harris government

*closed halfway houses for adults across the province, and did some things that I’ve already mentioned with youth corrections and, and I wrote an editorial about this that actually got picked up not only by our local paper, but actually by the Toronto Star at the time. And I started having the opportunity to talk about those issues. And I think that was when I, when I, that was the issue that really mobilized me.*

The government of the day’s cuts to her workplace and sector mobilized Jean. They compelled her to lobby collectively, and compelled her to add her voice to the public sphere through writing and advocacy, which increased her influence and opportunities to speak as a leader and advocate in the sector.

As identified earlier, Christine’s activism began when she was a union member protesting the Mike Harris government. Though her first protest was attended under “peer pressure,” where she marched “with my sign in front of my face,” she became active in speaking out against the then-Premier of Ontario. Christine shared an incident when she learned, while at work, that the Premier would be at a large community event near her workplace. She shared that,

*I was working and it was [a local festival] and Mike Harris was going to [be at the opening]. So a bunch of us, staff, some staff at [my workplace], we made some signs came down [to where the festival was taking place], which I’d never come to before, and stood there with our signs and protested his appearance.*

Christine was motivated to protest because of the social policies enacted by the Harris government. This catalyst spurred her onto leadership with her union and helping on friends’ campaigns, experiences which eventually led to Christine running to become a school board trustee.

Michelle also shared the influence of the Harris government on activating her politics. She shared that “I worked in health care, and getting laid off during the Harris years, [...] I think also the politics of the time, the real politics, were all of a sudden, you know, meshing with my, say, my educational experiences.” Michelle returned to school after being laid off from her job in healthcare. She refers to this time, when her job, her husband’s labour activism, and her social work education overlapped with one another, “part of my awakening, my political awakening.” Different influences converged for her at the time when government policy led to her job loss, and compelled her into a social work education where she focused on coalition building and social policy.

Sara also shared the ways that the political climate when she immigrated to Canada shaped her political activism. Sara came to Canada in the early 2000s, and she quickly found herself involved in her community and speaking out against the second Gulf War. She said,

*I did a big anti-war rally before the second Gulf War and I wasn't even a citizen at that time. We were just permanent residents. And there were several people who warned me that that can jeopardize your like, you know, even you becoming a citizen. It was a time when general public, the media, was very much in favour of going to war. [...] The square was filled with people, full with people. And speaker after speaker and it was a very, very big. Not necessarily successful in stopping the war from happening, but at least it gave people an avenue to, to see that they're not alone. You know what I mean? There are other people who don't agree with what's happening. There are other people who are asking for more peaceful ways to resolve the conflicts, right?*



As a newcomer to Canada, and a visibly Muslim woman, Sara was compelled by the pro-war political climate around her to speak out, even though she was warned that such action could jeopardize her ability to attain citizenship. Sara’s opposition to the war in Iraq, in contrast with the prevailing political climate, compelled her to create a space where community members opposed to war could come together in protest.

Emma also spoke about the impact of collective action in response to the contemporary political climate. As a child, she recalled travelling to Québec with her mother before the 1995 referendum. She shared,

*When I reflect back, I did not fully understand, but I knew that there was Canadians who were not happy, they did not feel that they were part of the wider Canadian community. In my mind back then it was we were travelling to Québec to let Québec know that we cared about them. And um, that was, which, essentially, is what it was. [laughs] Like, that's what Canada was doing when when everyone showed up. But that's how I framed it in my mind as a child.*

Emma shared that this event was foundational for how she saw collective action moving forward in her life. She was shown by her mother that she had a place and an ability to respond to the events around her, and that her presence in political events mattered.

Contemporary events and climate have acted as catalysts for participants, compelling them into political activity and action. For some, that political climate is associated directly with the Harris government in Ontario, which impacted a great number of social workers and social service workers. For others, global and national political conversations gave them the opportunity to step into active political roles, whether this was self-motivated or through family invitation. The ways that they experienced these larger events and larger conversations shaped their perceptions of politics, political participation, and their place in change-making.

### *Professional Influence*

Working as a professional social worker led several participants to experiences that spurred on their political activity and involvement. For some, these experiences made them angry, and political action was a direct response. In other cases, these experiences highlighted for them the connections between micro-level social work and macro-level social work, and compelled them to look at the structural barriers set before their clients.

As shared above, Jean became politically active while working in youth corrections during the 1990s. Jean shared that in a leadership position at her organization, “I get this fax. An overnight fax from the provincial government saying that your funds have now been cut by 9%, and there's no discussion, there’s no negotiation, effective now. And that was horrifying to me.” The Harris government’s overnight cut to her workplace’s budget compelled her to act. She was not merely upset but horrified by their decision and the immediate impact on the work she was doing with young offenders. She elaborated, “But I was living in this environment and thinking these decisions are terrible. They hurt the most vulnerable people. And that's really when I became so politicized.” Her strong reaction and experience of having her immediate workplace directly impacted compelled Jean to take up collective lobbying efforts, advocacy, and a career change that embraced advocacy more directly. When Jean changed careers, she prioritized advocacy work when choosing a new role. She shared that when she began at her current organization “the biggest attraction was that doing advocacy work was built right into my role. It was a requirement of my job, and not just something that I had to do sort of secretly or off the side of my desk.” After the experience of working in corrections under the Mike Harris

government, Jean made sure that her future work would have advocacy work as a feature of her work, not as a response. She chose subsequent work with political action in mind.

Frances shared the ways that working as a social worker at the micro and mezzo level acted as a catalyst to political action. As someone who had not considered herself political before adulthood, Frances did not base her social work practice in a systems approach. However, over time she shared that,

*I think the thing that has driven me to be political is that sort of micro practice where I really have cared about the people who I’ve worked with on an individual level, and the communities that I’ve worked with on a neighbourhood based level, and those kind of inequities that I see that have made me want to be in this role. Try and make this kind of change.*

Working with individuals and in neighbourhoods made inequity clear to Frances, and her micro-level social work practice led her to see the structures that created those inequities, and the positions that could do something to address them. Frances cites her micro-level work, and her desire to challenge inequity for the people she worked with, as a driver for her to run for office.

Grayson also noted the ways that social work micro-level practice confirmed his understanding of the ways that macro-level political work impacted his clients. He said,

*I realized when I’m doing social work, I can I can be sitting with somebody for an hour and counselling them but if their issue is, public transportation or poverty or the job market, words aren’t going to help me. They need systemic changes. Systemic action.*

Grayson shared that as a social worker in the mental health field, he directly witnessed the mental health impacts of poverty in his community. He said,

*I was also working in social work in children’s mental health and later in healthcare system mental health, and the healthcare system to me just needed improvement and still does. Um, and remember this was at a time when the recession was happening. And there were a lot of people who were literally killing themselves because of lack of work.*

*And that to me was a big one. I see the intersection of mental health and quality of life, and how communities thrive or shrink, and that really concerned me.*

Grayson witnessed the trauma and crisis that was brought on by lack of work and poverty in his immediate community, to his clients. Already politically involved, Grayson quickly made the connections from individual experience to government action, and again from government choices to the experiences of his clients as he walked with them through the healthcare system.

Mary worked in international human rights settings before returning to Canada with a plan to seek elected office. While abroad, she continued to make connections between her human rights work and the inequality in her home community. She said she experienced,

*this constant dilemma of, I'm fighting for all the social and economic rights in [a South American nation] when I know that, for example, one in four kids in [my hometown] is living below the poverty line. And in my neighbourhood that's close, it's one in three, and in some parts of my neighbourhood it's half of children. So, like that constant dilemma and, and then comparing that with the track record of our local representation. It just, I don't know, it came, it all came together.*

Mary’s work abroad, and her ability to compare that work to the lack of progress in her own community, compelled her to return to Canada. She believed, “I was doing the right, the kind of work I was supposed to be doing but I just didn’t feel like I was in the right place for it.” Her professional experiences provided the contrast in equity progress that convinced her of the real need for action in her own neighbourhood.

Social work often means working with those who are vulnerable, who are on the outside of power. Working with those experiencing inequality or going through a time of crisis moved many participants to reframe their social work practice. Furthermore, their experiences witnessing the ways that policy impacts individuals in an ongoing way, in practice rather than in

theory, allowed participants to move from a place of making those connections to determining to take action to address them.

### ***Responding to Bad Representation***

While some participants are moved to political action through a desire to take action on specific issues, others were compelled as a direct response to the representation they saw in their community. Having witnessed inadequate representation, they were compelled to put their own names forward in order to do better.

This experience was expressed most intensely by Grayson, who had previously run for office before deciding to put his name forward in the 2018 municipal election. He shared that it was an enraging experience as a delegation to council that convinced him he had no choice but to run for a seat. He said,

*I went to speak about public transit at council. And a lot of the council members are really crappy to me. They were, they were lying about like public transit systems in like, other countries, they just wanted gotcha stuff. [...] Okay, I sat down, and then they, they did the same thing with an environmental advocate. My gosh, she's run before too, she's run municipally. Maybe that's why they're being so hard on her, but I don't like it. And then there was an older lady [...] and I remember she spoke about a stop sign on the corner, and they were like that with her. And she walked away and she said, "I'm never going to do that again." [...]*  
*I went home to my wife and I said, "I've got to run again. I'm sorry. I have to, because it's just bullshit what they're doing and how they treat people."*

Grayson had run for office before, and had been asked to run municipally by a number of people. Despite all of those factors, Grayson identifies this moment, watching council members treat delegations incredibly badly and rudely, as the moment that convinced him that he not only would run again, but that he had no choice. He felt compelled to run again to change that council.

Leanne also found herself compelled to run because of ways she saw council failing to represent her community. She shared that she saw how,

*our population really felt as though city council in [my city] was not listening. They they had their own agenda. So I think people maybe trusted a little bit more, because of my background, that when I said it was important to me the people were listened to, I think they believed that.*

Leanne saw community frustration with a council that did not appear to be listening. She was able to address that frustration throughout her campaign, and felt that her social work background helped draw a contrast between the kind of representation she wanted to practice and what the community was accustomed to experiencing.

Sara also shared the ways she felt compelled to run based on poor representation at her community’s council table. Despite identifying that her community is diverse and that cultural diversity is growing, Sara shared that every single council member was white. She said,

*the driving force behind my decision to run was the representation piece because I was advocating for members of, you know, ethnic communities to participate in electoral democracy in every way that they can for such a long time, and I wanted people to run but very few people would run. [...] So like everything together, I felt that it was time for me to do what I’ve been asking everybody else to do.*

Sara saw neither herself nor her community represented at council. When she tried to recruit others to seek a seat, very few put their names forward. It became clear to Sara that if she wanted to see her community represented, she would need to be the representative: she had to run herself if she wanted to diversify council.

Like Sara, Mary saw representation in her community that did not reflect her community. She shared that the incumbent councillor she challenged had held the same position since before

Mary was born. “I remember thinking that we needed better local representation in my neighbourhood,” she explained,

*And so I felt like coming back to [my hometown], given the fact that the work that I was doing needed to be done [here], I needed to be my own neighbourhood, but also the fact that the councillor had been a councillor for longer than I had been alive? Without having, without having recent real opposition? It just, it kind of just all came together for me.*

Mary saw the problems in her home community, and saw that nothing was changing — including the councillor who was supposed to represent the community. Mary’s perception that change in representation was needed to make change in policies acted as a catalyst to bring her back to Canada to plan a run for office.

Some candidates for office are inspired or compelled to run to fix a problem they see in representation. That problem could be the actions of a council member or council as a whole. For others, it is the ways that council fails to reflect the representation. A lack of policy change can be directly tied to a lack of change in representation. These participants saw that a healthy democracy requires participation and competition, and recognized that they, as individuals, were compelled and capable of changing those governing bodies for the better.

Though they may have seen themselves as political previously, many participants identified a catalyst in their life that compelled them to political action, whether that action was protest, organizing, or to put their name on a ballot. For some, the catalyst came from the political climate and events they lived through. Others identified catalysts in their work experiences. Others still were compelled to run for office as a direct response to witnessing failures of representation. In all of these catalysts, there came a time when participants felt

compelled, felt obligated to participate in political action. To paraphrase Grayson’s observation, they *had* to act. They had to run.

#### **Theme Four: The Political Landscape**

Social workers can be and are elected to serve communities of all types, at all levels of government. This section will identify commonalities in how participants described their communities and the political landscapes within which they work and advocate. As identified in Chapter Three, participants in this study represent those who sought to be councillors and trustees in urban, rural, mixed, and suburban communities. First I shall explore growth and changing demographics within communities. Next, I shall present participant perceptions of poverty and wealth within their communities. Finally, I shall explore the ways in which participants identified their own privilege within their communities.

##### ***Growth and Change***

Many participants describe their constituencies as communities in flux and transition. For some, this is a result of land development and population growth, for others, it is a sense that communities are shrinking or demographics are rapidly changing. These changes impact how participants view both the needs of their community and how best to serve their community.

For Grayson, the rapid change within his community was the primary way he described the political landscape within which he works. He described his town as one of rapid growth. He said that his town has “had a doubling of residential development just before I became elected. So it’s a town with five thousand homes that has five thousand new homes approved, before we even got this current council underway.” Rapid change and growth is at the forefront when



Grayson describes his community, and is the source of a community divide. As Grayson explained, “There’s old [Town] and there’s new [Town]. I’m new [Town].” People who are newer didn’t feel represented at Council, which is one of the reasons he believes he was encouraged to run by other young parents in his neighbourhood. He describes his community in the midst of transformation, rather than describing its fixed characteristics.

One participant described the dual phenomenon of having one section of their constituency growing rapidly, and the other shrinking in population. They described one neighbourhood within their constituency as one of the fastest growing suburbs in their city, and the other as one with population decline. Half of the constituency,

*is emptying out so I had to close two — well I didn’t, the board agreed — so I closed two schools there, and in [the other neighbourhood] I have kids hanging out the windows, I have portables everywhere. I have parents saying that there’s crowding.*

The need to balance the differing demands of these very different areas within one community is the most prominent feature of their constituency. These population changes both affect the description of the constituency as a space within which to live, as well as the political considerations they must make as a representative. Issues of overcrowding and school closures are front of mind as a result of shifting demographics.

Frances describes change in her community as being of one demographics, rather than in population size. She shared that her community has “an increasing immigrant population, the history of manufacturing and like many people, many communities, that’s sort of dying off or has almost completely died off and now, economic development wise anyways, that focuses on the tech sector.” Frances sees a transformation in who makes up her community and the employment

sectors thriving and struggling within its boundaries. This is a contrast with others who describe community changes as being population-focused.

Sara also described her community’s transformation in terms of immigration and shifting employment sectors. She said,

*cultural diversity is growing in the region. I think some estimates are about 25%, or at least 20% of the region's population is visible minority. And the majority or the, the dominant group, when it comes to cultural diversity is South Asian. Which is basically mostly like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan. Um, there has, there was quite a bit of influx of Syrian refugees in 2015, 2016. So there must, there must have been an increase in that population too, but we haven't seen the numbers after that, because of the change in census, how the census tracts demographics.*

Sara describes cultural shifts in the community, linking the way that population growth relates to a shift in the cultural make up of the community. She also describes a shift in employment sectors in the area, saying, “My community is known for tech. It used to be manufacturing, known for manufacturing.” Similarly to Frances, she has seen a shift from traditional manufacturing to the high tech sector as a prominent employer type. She prioritizes the qualitative transformation within her community as a descriptor when speaking about the landscape in which she sought elected office.

These political social workers describe their communities as being in flux, not as fixed. They describe growth, decline, and transformation as both qualitative and quantitative within their communities. They describe their communities in social terms: how many people? Where do those people come from? What do these people do?

### ***Poverty and Wealth***

For many participants, their perceptions of class and income feature prominently in their perceptions and descriptions of the constituencies within which they ran for office. These

perceptions provide driving forces for their campaigns, shape how they view their roles and constituents, and impact the ways they have formed and enact their politics.

Mary is one such participant whose politics have been shaped around her understanding of what it means to grow up in a poor community. She said,

*the neighbourhood where I live and grew up and spent most of my time in is also known as one of the poorest neighbourhoods of [the city]. There are a lot of challenges in this community. But I hold it, I don’t know, I hold it really close to my heart and it’s been home for me for a long time.*

Mary grew up in the neighbourhood where she ran for office, and alongside its challenges. She further noted that her “interest in formal politics stemmed from seeing, like the kind of lack of services, lack of rights being realized, seeing this unequal city that I was, you know, living in the middle of.” Mary identifies things that are lacking in her neighbourhood: lack of service provision, lack of rights realized, lack of wealth, and she has based her politics around addressing those areas where she sees her community being under-served or under-resourced. She is compelled to electoral politics as a solution for the failures of government that she sees around her.

Jean spoke about the ways that poverty in her community drives her political action. She shared that,

*one of the issues that’s, that’s really absorbing me is, is the situation we’re in with our homeless population. And our numbers in our, in the homeless shelters are up [a large percentage] this year over the previous year, which is up over the previous year. The acuity of the people that we’re seeing in our shelters and on the streets is way higher than it used to be, which is related in part to the opioid epidemic.*

Jean describes the number of people experiencing homeless as growing in her community. This is an issue that is occupying her as an elected official, and especially as an elected official who is a social worker. She described policies in place as being from another time, that,

*some policies in place at [the municipality] made sense in 2015-2016 when we were looking — when our environment was different. And, and what I’m doing in terms of my, my work as a social worker, is trying to push to get those policies to reflect our current reality.*

Jean sees this policy area as something that is a prominent area for improvement in her community, and as an opportunity for her to bring her social work experience into the political discourse.

Grayson, who described his constituency as privileged, shared ways in which that privilege can lead to frustration as a representative and social worker. He described,

*the dynamic of being a social worker, and yes, a politician, in a relatively privileged area [...]. But so many of the calls I get or complaints I get are about traffic being five minutes longer than people expect it to be. About, again, like, some, some good, some good things that maybe have one inconvenient part, the very first world issues. [...] I thought, and if I was if I was in a more downtrodden urban, urban area, I’d be doing a lot more about drug abuse issues, vandalism, equity, right? Like making sure that this, this neighbourhood gets the same amount of parks, so equitable to others and seeing that level of service and, and that’s not happening here because this is a very well off community.*

The wealth within Grayson’s constituency has resulted in a different kind of service than he had imagined as a social worker politician. As a result of that relative privilege, he has come to value other aspects of his role more than he had anticipated, sharing that “I am actually doing more of the policy social work which I’m loving, but far less of the constituent social work.” The wealth Grayson sees in his constituency has given him space to refocus his energies as a representative to broader policy matters.

Emma described her constituency as one of privilege that contrasts with the larger area’s lower income demographics. The school board where she is a trustee includes a city that has the “the second highest child poverty rate in Ontario. It is a diverse city with, I would say, a working class city.” Yet within that city are neighbourhoods with starkly different income levels. Emma acknowledged that her constituency is “is a rural area and also the wealthiest area in the city.” This contrast means that Emma is consistently aware of the differences between the schools she immediately represents and those in other areas of the community. The privilege within her constituency as compared to the other areas represented by the board is front of mind for her when she describes her community.

Frances described the tension that is created because of unequal access to education institutions in her community. She described the ways that,

*many youth in our community who are not actually accessing those institutions and so it's sort of this like tension between being a growing city and the gentrification that occurs because of that, and the exclusion that occurs because of that, and all of the inequality that that already existed gets kind of thrown under the rug even more.*

She sees a tension between groups within the community, and the ways that inequality is perpetuated within the community as a result of elite institutions, resulting in gentrification and unequal access to those same institutions. She sees the economic success of parts of her community as making invisible, rather than alleviating, inequality in other areas.

Communities hold tension within them, and several social worker candidates for office identified that tension within their own communities as being rooted in poverty and class structures. Some participants, such as Mary and Jean, see inadequate policies and services that act, in part, to drive their political participation. For Grayson, Emma and Frances, awareness of

ways that tension is perpetuated is a perspective that they bring with them to their political roles as representatives of their constituencies and in thinking about their broader communities.

Wealth and class privilege impact the ways that participants view their communities, and those perceptions contribute to the shape of their political worldviews.

### ***Privilege and Positionality***

The privilege that many participants hold within their communities is clear to them.

Several described their own privilege and opportunity as a part of the political landscape: their privilege in comparison to their peers or neighbours is a factor that they see as allowing them to participate.

Sara specifically names the privilege of financial security she holds within the context of being an immigrant to Canada. She said:

*Like not that I was very rich when I came to Canada or even at the time that I ran but still like, you know, very comfortable in terms of my financial situation. Like, you know, I just signed, checked the box and it's like, about a hundred, over 100,000 family income, right? So all of these things play a big role. It means I have money to set aside. It means I can take time off from work or I can leave work for a little bit. It means I can go out, I don't have to worry about my clothing.*

Sara observed that among immigrant communities, it is still the most privileged members who are in positions to participate in civic discourse. Sara sees the financial stability to take time from work to participate or run a campaign, the privilege to have a professional wardrobe, and the ability to save money as privileges her family holds that allow her to be political.

Emma describes the ways in which her experiences as a youth allowed her to be political as an adult, particularly as a woman. She described the ways that she has,

*had opportunities to be successful, I think earlier in some capacity, whether it's getting involved in student politics [...] I think it's that initial involvement, and having other*

*people include you and reinforce that. That is, that is, that does not happen for everyone. I would say that, that there's privilege in that too.*

Emma sees the privileges she has had to be politically involved, and to be invited and encouraged in political involvement. This invitation and reinforcement of belonging in political spaces is a privilege that is not afforded to everyone.

Grayson spoke indirectly about male privilege he holds within political spaces when compared to his women colleagues. He shared,

*I was really young, I was 28 and I started running and I would hear from some more seasoned politicians, these weren't [from the same party as me], who were like, municipal saying, “You know, the thing is you sound too academic,” and like the, the expectation I think some people had of this young guy running is he’s, he's a dummy, he’s just doing this to get his name out there... I’ve supported a lot of women candidates and they then have on top of that, like, “You’re, are you sure this is you?” I’ve heard these, “Are you sure this is you? You’ve gained some weight. Why would your hair, why would you do your hair like that?” [...] and I’ve actually heard some of the men talk about it, sort of, like two tables over, you know, they like draw naked pictures of their female councillor person, and like, pass it around the table during meetings and stuff. And I couldn’t imagine.*

Grayson identified that though he faced judgement and misconceptions about his abilities as a result of his age, and that he has not experienced other forms of discrimination, particularly sexism or sexual harassment, he has witnessed being directed toward women in electoral politics. He identified that he could not imagine facing sexual harassment at the doorstep and in council chambers because of his sex or gender. While Grayson did not explicitly identify his maleness as a privilege, he sees the additional barriers faced by women candidates that he has not personally had to face.

Jean spoke about the privilege she experiences in her workplace, and the flexibility that allows her to take on the additional work of being an elected official. She shared that she believes,

*you have to be old to get to get into a position in your work that you have that sort of flexibility. Younger people just don't tend to have workplaces that have... And not in no cases but that it, it's harder.*

She identifies that workplace culture and seniority afford people the time and flexibility to participate in political action, and that workplace culture or rigidity can also work to prevent participation. Her seniority and age, she believes, afford her the ability to make time for political activity.

Privilege is measured in a multitude of ways. Many of the participants in this study have identified ways that they are privileged within their communities, and ways that these privileges contribute to their ability to be political. Financial privilege, social capital, male privilege, and workplace seniority are all identified as personal privileges that facilitate political participation. These participants identified ways in which their own positionality within their communities work to facilitate their political action.

The ways in which participants see their community, and their own place within that community, is related to both the fact of their participation and the shape of their political participation. Participants see their communities as spaces in transition and communities in flux. They identify tensions in opportunity and income that have shaped and are shaping their communities. Finally, they identify their own positionality within their constituencies and communities, and ways in which privileges they hold help to shape their experiences as political actors.



**Theme Five: Skills & Strategies**

This theme explores the skills and abilities that participants identified themselves bringing to their political work as a consequence of being trained as social workers. While they may have been unaware of gaining these skills throughout their education or professional work, they came to identify the ways in which their social work background and skillset make them better politicians and representatives. This skillset can generally be divided into two groups: the specific practice skills and tools that are transferred from professional practice to political work, and the ways that, as social workers, participants were trained to think, to frame, and to transform issues they encounter in their political work.

***Conscious and Unconscious Skills***

Participants cited a number of skills that they acquired through their respective programs that served them well in political roles. Interestingly, it was often so-called traditionally clinical skills which were most often identified as useful in the political context, even by those who think of themselves as macro-level social workers. Participants identified skills such as reflexivity, counselling skills such as active listening, and the skills developed as frontline caseworkers or intake workers that translate most directly to work as a municipal elected official or candidate for office.

Sara was not positive about her MSW experience on the whole, and had identified that she “didn’t feel a lot challenged. Actually, I had to keep my mouth shut most of the time.” Nevertheless, she identified self-awareness and an ability to be reflexive as important skills gained through her MSW. She explained,

*So, a big part of who I am is also like the self-awareness, and really this introspection, whatever, like reflection all the time[...] Even being able to reflect in the moment. So taking the social work course like really helped understand different terminology and the difference between reflection after something has done, has been done, and being able to reflect when you are in that moment, doing something, why things are not, why things are going this way or that way.*

The ability to be reflexive, to assess one’s actions and shift in the moment, is an ability that Sara has brought to her community activism and it has served her well as a political candidate. Sara has incorporated reflexivity as a part of her work and her identity as a community advocate, and she values its usefulness for assessing her work and making changes in the moment.

Frances identified the skills she had developed through micro-focused MSW education, and the theoretical perspectives she has gained in further education, as those that she finds most helpful in her role as a city councillor. She identified “soft skills, you know, like the active listening and paraphrasing, and, and just generally apologizing for a shitty situation” as being particularly useful in her role as a councillor. Additionally, Frances identified “leaving silence. [...] is definitely a thing that social work does, or teaches, that is key.” Leaving silence is a tool that allows the people she represents to feel heard while taking initiative to propose or find their own resolutions to many of the concerns they bring to her. She can use this skill to collect her own thoughts, or allow constituents the space to propose their own solutions. Frances has been able to translate many of the skills she gained as a social worker in practice with individuals into the way that she approaches constituency work. Bringing her social work skills to constituency work helps her demonstrate to her constituents that their concerns are being heard and taken seriously.

Christine, who strongly identified as a macro-level social worker, nevertheless identified specific skills from a mezzo-level facilitation lens. She spoke about her skillset in terms of,

*Talking to people, being comfortable, people being approachable, knowing how to, how to kind of, like we, we get calls from parents and they’re very upset. And our role is not to take their side. Our role is to help them navigate the system and maybe have... be a sounding board or just listen. Right? And those are skills, I think I did pick up in the social work program.*

Though Christine’s role is not to be an advocate for the people she represents at the school board, she is able to use the de-escalation, facilitation, and active listening skills she developed through her MSW to understand and appropriately direct their concerns, acting as a guide rather than as a champion. She also identified skills she developed as an MSW student which are useful in her governance role. Christine shared that her background in program evaluation is something she regularly relies upon at the school board. She said,

*you learned about how to measure success. You know, you do this, you do this groovy program, then how do you know what’s success and all that jazz? That’s all stuff I learned in social work that I can apply and ask questions at the school board about a new program we might initiate, or doing something differently.*

When policy or procedure changes at the board level, Christine is able to ask the right questions to gain insight into the success, or failure, of that change. Christine sees the ways that her social work background supports her abilities to be effective on both the governance side and public side of her elected role.

Leanne made a specific link between clinical skills and why she felt they are so useful in political work. She explained that she relies on,

*the core values of social work, the respecting people’s... respect for people, active listening, like all the really core social work values, especially when it comes to counselling and frontline. It seems to be a surprise to people to get that from a politician.*

Leanne contrasts skills she gained in her BSW and as a frontline worker with the expectations she feels people have of politicians; she is able to use these skills to surpass constituents’ expectations of her as their councillor.

Jean identified specific skills gained in political advocacy throughout her social work education which she has made use of both as an advocate and now as a councillor. She remembered a course in which,

*one of the things we had to do was do a delegation, we had a mock council or government or whoever they were, which was a panel of profs, and we had to sort of pick our, pick our issue that we wanted to delegate on and we had to go in and we had our 20 minutes, or whatever it was, to delegate and then they give us feedback on whether we were good or not. I was not good. But that, that actually there was a course that included that as part of our experience.*

This explicitly political skill — direct engagement with a group intended to represent government — is one that many political social workers outside electoral politics will take on. This was of particular use for Jean as she went on to be a regular delegate and advocate to council on behalf of her workplace, and now regularly presents her ideas to that same council table as one of its members.

Participants found that practical skills taught at all levels of social work practice, and further refined through their professional work experiences, were easily translated to their political efforts. In particular, many felt that micro and mezzo level social work skills were appreciated and experienced as a welcome change by community members in a public-facing setting. Meanwhile, practical macro level skills helped political social workers develop communication, governance, and engagement skills within the bodies some are elected to.

Participants overwhelmingly found that their social work skillset was an advantage and helpful to them in their political roles, often in ways they had not anticipated.

### ***Compromise and Push-Back***

In addition to specific skills that participants have been able to put into practice in their political activities, many also spoke more broadly about the approaches they take to politics and the ways they have been trained to frame issues and systems work, as stemming directly from their training as social workers. Many identified experiences that required them to consider when to compromise to achieve their goals, or when to push back against oppressive or harmful policies. This can be understood as a spectrum where more or less compromise or rigidity was required to move a participant’s agenda forward, based on the individual’s goals or political considerations. This framework for decision-making, and framework for ethics-based decision making, is rooted for many in their identity as a social worker.

Grayson shared that he regularly plays a translator role for other councillors who have no social services background and may not be aware of the services run in their community. He said, “I joke with social services staff all the time that I’m there to speak social services and translate it to politics. And I’m there to translate the political speech to the social service people.” He sees himself as able to speak both languages, and translate between organizations and the council that funds them. He notes that “my education, my formal education gave me a good baseline for being able to discuss [systemic] issues.” This ability to discuss and translate to different groups helps Grayson to find solutions between those groups.

Jean spoke of lessons around collaboration she brought from her social work background to her political role. She identified that her social work practice had given her an expectation of compromise and an understanding that,

*you don't achieve things by setting out win-lose situations [...] You're going to have to make compromises, you're going to have to come to consensus and not, and not always, you know, get exactly what you want. You might get what you like. I think that that's something that comes from my social work orientation that is really important.*

Jean here identified compromise as a necessary skill that helps to move the needle forward. In giving an example about transit costs in her community, she explained that even though she would like transit fees to be lower and income thresholds for subsidy to be higher, “I need [a majority of] other councillors to agree with me. So there's no point. There's no point digging in my heels and then losing.” Jean is pragmatic in her political work; she relies upon her experiences as a social worker in leadership to make change in the direction of her goals, even if that means accepting smaller gains than she would have liked, rather than see no progress at all. This means grappling with her own ideals and ethics, and making choices about when she is willing to compromise and when she cannot.

Sara also highlighted the need for social workers to be able to compromise and foster relationships to be effective political agents. She explained that, “You pick your battles, and what’s more important, telling someone that they are wrong or having a better relationship with them so that maybe over time they can have some understanding themselves?” As an activist and advocate, Sara has developed positive relationships that allow her to achieve some goals very quickly, but she is clear that those relationships did not happen overnight, and that she is careful and strategic in selecting when she will make demands of those in power. She said,

*knowing about like being political gives you a lot of... kind of like, I don't know, in depth understanding of the system and in depth understanding of what can work at what time and what cannot. And then you can strategize in a way which is most efficient, do you know what I mean? [...] It allows you to be strategic in everything that you do. You definitely build relationships but the actions that you take are strategic too.*

Sara is very cognizant of the years she worked to build positive relationships with leaders in her community so that when there is an issue that requires immediate action, she has the political capital to make things happen very quickly. Sara is both aware of this ability and careful not to overuse it: as she identified above, she picks her battles. Sara understands the way that she can strategically leverage relationships to support action. As a community organizer who was not elected, Sara is advocating from outside of council, which means she often requires a partner or partners on the inside in order to accomplish her goals.

Leanne spoke about the importance of learning to be intentional to move forward issues that matter to her. Though Leanne rejects the label of being a politician, she shared that,

*Out in the community I'm an advocate, I'm a representative, I'm a community developer. Internally within the municipality and the staff, and the fellow councillors, and trying to move issues forward, I have learned to play the game a little bit more internally. That's, that's politics, I'm willing to play because that's not — that's for the betterment of what I'm trying to do outside of this building.*

Leanne describes playing the game, working strategically with staff and fellow councillors, in order to move things forward on the governance side of her role at council. She sees these procedural steps as less-than-ideal actions or compromises she is willing to take in order to achieve better things for the community she serves.

Emma spoke of the ways she can leverage her knowledge of social policy and procedures at the school board to push back when needed. She said,

*I have a lot of experience, experiential knowledge of um, how I am able to utilize, I guess, and work within and around the rules. So sometimes I will have new superintendents that will tell me that there is a rule in place and such and such cannot be done to which I can reference, you know, past experiences where I was able to accomplish the exact same goal, and the rule was not held dead fast. And I think, you know, just helping them to understand where we can have more flexibility or finding, finding compromise.*

Emma sees herself bringing her knowledge of systems navigation to the school board table and using that knowledge to find compromise or creative ways to address issues of importance. She sees the value of knowing institutions well in order to achieve her goals through them.

Frances also shared the tension she feels between compromise and holding firm to her ideals. In both her earlier work and political work, she shared the importance of knowing the policy context of an issue in advance so that she could strategize a way to achieve her goals. She said that she prioritized,

*just knowing beforehand what was possible and wasn't possible. Because then I felt like I could kind of ask questions — which puts you in this position of allowing who you're advocating to, to be in the expert position, which people love to be in — so you get to ask the question, but you get to ask a targeted question that you know, will lead to sort of, like, some advantage for the person you're working with.*

By strategizing in advance, and preparing to advocate through a certain framework, Frances found she was able to navigate challenging situations in ways that were successful for clients, and did not alienate those to whom she was advocating. Now a councillor, Frances acknowledges that she has more power than when she was advocating in her social work. She shared an anecdote about being presented a draft bylaw that simplified a complex process, but simultaneously increased opportunity for implicit bias to impact bylaw enforcement. Frances shared that,



*I said, “I like a lot about this bylaw, but I cannot vote for it without considering what, like, how will we mitigate against implicit bias.”*

*And they're like, “That doesn't really belong in a bylaw, it belongs in a policy.”*

*And I was like, “Well, I can't have it in a policy, because bylaws are sort of like the foundational, structural part of what makes up the work that we do. And implicit bias is a structural problem. And so I need to have the solution match the problem in some way.” Anyways, I got it in there.*

By being strategic about her navigation of systems and fostering positive working relationships, Frances identified ways that she brings her advocacy skills into her political work. Choice is key; participants chose the strategy that will be best for making change on their priorities.

Institutions are rigid and can certainly be oppressive through their rigidity. In operating within political circles where they are the only person, or one of a minority of people with human services background, participants highlighted the frustrations they felt and skills they relied upon to compromise, navigate, and push the needle within their communities. Relationships and the ability to compromise were identified as key components of making change. Having a deep knowledge of the policies and procedures in place was identified as being useful for strategizing and finding creative solutions to moving forward one’s goals. Finally, having the knowledge of one’s own values and perspectives, and a sense of when to compromise and when to stand firm on one’s values, was identified as an important lesson from social work backgrounds.

### ***Filling the Gaps***

While participants agree that skills gained through social work education are useful and transferrable to political practice, some participants also highlighted aspects of political engagement and practice that were most surprising to them and for which they were unprepared. Navigation of bureaucracies, encountering different paradigms about public service, and the pace

of change were highlighted as specific gaps in their knowledge or understanding before entering political work.

Jean shared that she was unprepared for the complexity of municipal policy change, and the number of players potentially involved in many proposed changes at the municipal level. She shared,

*I wasn't prepared for how difficult things are to achieve and for how long, and for how long they take. I think that, I think that I was somebody who from the outside was saying, you know, “This should be easy and this should be faster,” and I just didn't have any sense of... I didn't have enough sense of how unrealistic that is. Not that it shouldn't be easier and faster. But, you know, when you're working as [the municipality], we are, you know, there's not much that we do on our own. Everything that we do seems to involve other levels of government participating or cooperating or giving approval. And I think I, I think I misjudged how complicated that is.*

Jean’s expectations for how governments interact with one another, and particularly the ways that the initiatives of the municipality are impacted and dependent on policy at other levels of government, was a factor of municipal governance she had underestimated. The result of this underestimation is that Jean has had to readjust her own expectations for how quickly or efficiently she is able to achieve her goals as a councillor.

One participant shared frustrations they have experienced with social workers in the field lacking what they consider to be basic civics knowledge. They said,

*Everybody’s got to understand what a ministry is. Like at least know what the Ministry of Community and Social Services is. [...] Knowing who funds what where, knowing what a federal issues is and what a provincial issue is, like what a municipal issue is.*

They perceive that too many of their professional peers enter the field, or begin advocacy work, without knowledge of the structures to which they are advocating. They identify this lack of

civics knowledge as a major barrier they perceive to social workers being effective in their advocacy efforts.

Emma spoke about having to develop her own understanding of what self care meant in an elected role, in contrast to what she had been taught throughout her social work education. She shared that as a social work student, self care was taught through a medical model. She said it was,

*more about, are you mentally in a position to take on this work? You know, if not, you know, step back from the role. [...] And I think in politics, things can happen, where you're, you're under tremendous pressure. And what's really important is building up your support network. And that having, because you're not going to be able to step out, you know, or you're going through a period of growth, and you could step out but instead, you could have that support network in place to help you succeed. There should be more than the option, than stepping out, right? Like it's, um, and I think for women that's particularly important, like really important to have that in place. I think, I would say that that is, that's the gap. So preparing, preparing people for, for the stress of advocacy and the stress of carrying that responsibility.*

Emma had to develop her own models of community care in order to take on leadership and growth while caring for her own wellbeing through times of stress. She felt that in her education, the response to intense stress she had been taught was always about doing less; in practice, she found that form of self care would mean giving up opportunity. Emma learned community care models from working in politics, and found it lacking in social work.

Participants identified gaps in their own knowledge and gaps that they perceive in social work peers that need to be filled in order to be effective in political work. These gaps are procedural, structural, and reflexive. Social workers engaging in political action must understand where their issue of concern fits within the scope of possible political action. It is also important to be realistic about the complexity and time that change may take, and to set realistic

expectations. Finally, social workers should interrogate what self care means for them, and how they can develop models of support other than stepping away from leadership and growth opportunities, in order to care for and be reflexive about their political work.

Participants identified their social work skillsets as being useful for political action. Whether engaging in constituent work or governance work, the skills developed through social work education and social work practice were transferrable to political campaigns and to their elected roles. In addition to specific skills to put into practice, participants identified their social work background influences the ways they approach issues. Participants are strategic and pragmatic: they strategize, prepare, and make ethical considerations to determine how and when to compromise or hold strong. They are also aware of gaps of knowledge that needed to be filled, and are continually being filled, in order to be more effective political social workers. They are conscious of, willing to learn, and willing to work strategically within existing power structures to make change.

### **Theme Six: Deepening the Political Identity of Social Work**

This theme explores ways that participants view the intersection of social work and politics. They see social work as an inherently political profession, and they are concerned about what happens in political spaces. Several made direct appeals to have more social workers involved in electoral politics. Within this theme, I will explore the varied political identities of participants: some hold politics as a part of their core identity, while others struggle to see themselves as political even while serving in office. Next, I will outline the importance of collective action and feelings of belonging that many participants experienced as a result of

political action. Finally, I will share the calls to action that participants made for more social workers to join them in active political participation.

### ***Political Identity***

Across interviews I became aware that some participants readily labelled themselves as political people and others — even as elected officials and candidates — resisted being called political. Participants had varying relationships with the idea of being a political person, or a politician, and taking that role on as a part of their identity.

Sara grew up watching her father run for office and serve in various elected roles, culminating as a federal cabinet minister before his retirement. Her lifelong participation in political activity as a family activity has made political participation a deep-seated part of her identity. She described this as, “so we say it's been in my blood.” For Sara, childhood experiences of her father’s political identity are ingrained in her identity: politics is a part of her, it is how she was raised and runs throughout her being, like blood.

Mary began volunteering on campaigns as a teenager. She describes her participation in electoral politics as a default position, something she always, rather than often, takes part in:

*I had always been involved in electoral politics. You know, I had worked on other people's campaigns and I've been involved kind of in, in, in that way from as early as, like, I don't know, 14, 15 years old.*

Her early experiences on campaigns helped to form her identity as an activist. She felt a pull to activism and political activity and shared a specific memory of attending a protest during high school,

*I remember thinking oh, this is what a protest looks like... I remember thinking, wow, like we really need, we really need more people to know about, you know, what's going*

*on. And yeah, I just remember there having like a very specific urge to want to do more political advocacy around that.*

That urge stayed with her across activism combatting poverty and in human rights work as a core part of her identity.

One participant grew up volunteering on Liberal Party campaigns and interacting with Liberal politicians. They shared that, “I joined the Liberal Party when I was fourteen, which is when you can join the Liberal Party.” Their membership in the Liberal Party is an identity and affiliation they have carried since long before they could vote. This membership has been at the centre of their political work, and is also foundational to their ongoing work and identity as an elected official.

In contrast, Leanne does not consider herself to be political in a traditional sense. As an elected councillor, she resists the label of politician. She shared that,

*As a politician you don't have to be a stereotypical politician. You can be, as I say to people, I didn't go into this to be a politician, and I don't want to be politician. I want to be an advocate. I want to be a community developer.*

Leanne did not have campaign or partisan experience before she was asked to run for office; she does not think of herself as being political despite her successful campaign and role as councillor. Rather, she sees her council position as one of community advocacy and community development, an extension of her years of experience as a frontline social worker.

Frances spoke of her growing understanding of what it means to be a political social worker. She shared that for many years of her social work practice, “I don't think I saw myself as political as a social worker. I saw myself as advocating and I saw myself as adversarial in many instances and trying to navigate that system.” While she can look back at her actions and see

their political nature, she would not have applied that label to herself for many years. However, after making critical connections and entering electoral politics, Frances frames her social work differently, and continues to interrogate the intersection of the two halves of her professional life. She asked, “So if social work is political, and I’m assuming you would argue it is, and I would argue it is or should be, what does it mean to be political as a social worker?” Frances is working through the answer to this question as she practices social work and represents her community as a councillor. For her, social work is or should be political, but the ways that she can manifest that identity is not fixed.

Participants perceive themselves differently in relation to political action. For some, political action and being political is a deep-seated part of the way they see themselves in the world. For others, being political is a self-label they do not embrace, even as they actively do political work. Social workers do not need to perceive themselves as political beings to succeed in political work. Participants are able to be effective in political circles without holding politics as a core part of their identity. Participants’ political identities are varied, that variety of political identity is a demonstration that social work as a practice overlaps with political work as a practice, whether or not the practitioner embraces the label.

### ***Emotional Responses to Activism***

Elected officials have the most direct path to make change in their communities (Lane et al, 2018). Many participants shared the feelings that have accompanied their political action, and particularly around what they perceive to be their political wins. As social workers, it is possible to push for the same change for years without seeing change. Many of these social workers have achieved or partially achieved goals, and shared the way that those successes compel them

forward to continue their activism and political work. At the same time, many have experienced challenges and negative feelings as a result of political work. How they reflect upon those reactions and process those feelings was raised by many as a means to support others who might undertake their own political journeys.

Mary shared the joy she felt around two wins that occurred in short order, one achieved on her electoral campaign, another an advocacy campaign she organized in her workplace. First, she spoke about a tenants’ rights organization she helped organize in a building she had been canvassing, when she had multiple residents raise tenant issues when she asked for their vote.

She shared,

*You know, as a social worker, as a housing worker, you can go around and tell people you know, these are your rights, and this is how you can fill out this form, or this form, but as, you know, as a, as a social, as the kind of social worker that I like to think I am or always strive to be, is, you know, it’s like the next level. It’s like, yeah, of course you help them fill out the form, but organizing a tenant union in a building and then winning! [Laughter] It’s just, it was, yeah. It was it was the proudest, I think that was the proudest part of the campaign.*

Though Mary lost her campaign for council, she continues to experience pride and joy from the success of the work she undertook to help residents in that building organize and exercise their rights as tenants. Mary feels similarly about another campaign she undertook at her workplace, in which she organized across agencies to push back at a policy change within the Ontario government. She said,

*The same thing happened at work, being able to get together that petition and having over 1000 signatures in a matter of like a couple days, and then presenting them and then having, you know, and being part of a larger movement, of course, and then having the Premier roll back his announcement is another victory, and all of that comes with, with organizing right? And challenging a system that’s unfair.*



Mary sees victories stemming from her organizing work. She experienced a great deal of pride and happiness — still causing her to laugh at the memory — through facilitating collective political action. Making change, facilitating others’ political action, makes Mary happy.

Christine also discusses joy in collective political action. Thinking about her initial involvement in the labour movement, she remembers the feelings she experienced when her organizing came to fruition. Of organizing and participating in large marches, she said, “It was awesome! And I felt, it was really invigorating. It was fun!” When Christine was organizing politically, she was enjoying her work, she was having fun. She elaborated on the experience of being a part of a movement, saying, “they’re really invigorating these big, huge, huge marches where, you know, 50,000 people are walking down a street that’s not normally got 50,000 people walking on it. They were very impactful.” Christine felt moved by solidarity, and inspired to continue organizing by the enjoyment she was experiencing. Collective organizing, even under trying circumstances, was fun.

Emma spoke about the need for a supportive community to help her through more difficult times as a leader. Emma shared that,

*I think most social workers are passionate, and they have huge hearts, and they care about social justice, and they care about equity. They, they, they’re already bringing those values to, to their practice, I think that when they’re looking to take that next step, having all those experiences and opportunities and mentorships in place becomes really important. Once they get there is also really important. And I think always going back to community, because I think oftentimes you can feel that you’re in it alone and you’re not.*

Emma acknowledges that there is a loneliness to political leadership, and the need to build networks for community care. She observed that political work, especially as a candidate or

elected representative, can have an isolating effect, and that social workers in leadership positions can build communities of care to return to for support when facing difficulty.

Sara spoke about the dual disappointments and joys she has experienced through her community political organizing. She spoke to the changes she has seen over the past decade, particularly in relation to issues of discrimination and violence. Sara shared,

*I want to have the world free of violence. That’s my biggest passion. I just don’t know how to do this. I feel very small. Because of the magnitude of the problem. [...] I feel hopeless, like what can I do? Nothing. Right?*

When Sara thinks about the magnitude of violence in her community and the world, it is overwhelming. She feels small. Yet, still she feels compelled to act and organize. And over the last decade, she described the way she has seen progress in her community. She said,

*So things have changed so much that now when we ask people in the community in general, they understand what the problem is. And we feel that there is, there are a lot of people who understand and they’re on our side, including people and systems who have power. Isn’t that amazing? [...] And people get, they feel empowered. They feel like, you know, their, their leaders have, like, you know, they give them importance, and they have the best of their interest in their minds as well when they make big decisions.*

Over more than ten years of organizing, Sara has seen large shifts in public perception, and in her abilities to reach community leaders. She shared both the amazement she feels at these shifts in support, as well as the feelings of empowerment she sees in the community of people with whom she organizes. After more than a decade of work, people feel empowered. They feel seen. They feel like their interests are important. That shift in perception and support, from the time of Sara’s early anti-war and anti-Islamophobia work, has amazed her.

Political work can be difficult, can feel overwhelming, and indeed isolating. Participants shared their feelings, both positive and negative, about their political activism and

accomplishments. They spoke about the pride of making a difference, and the hopelessness of tackling systems that are much larger than one person or even movement can address.

Particularly as social workers, it is important to acknowledge the emotional aspects of political activism, to acknowledge how political work impacts individuals as whole persons. These feelings are not only valid, but are responses that participants acknowledge to and work through in order to be effective in making change.

### ***The Call to Action***

Social workers are capable of participating successfully in electoral politics in Canada. Participants expressed simultaneous laments that they feel isolated as social workers, and calls to action to encourage more of their peers to join them in electoral political work. Many participants expressed surprise at the topic of this thesis, and wondered whether enough people in similar positions even exist for it to be possible. At the same time as they feel isolated from professional peers doing political work, participants feel that the political systems in which they operate would be made better by the presence of social workers, and that social work is made better by incorporating political practice.

Mary echoed the sentiments of former BC Premier Dave Barrett when she spoke about the way she perceives the political nature of social work as a profession (Strandberg & Marshall, 1988). She said,

*I mean, you can do a kind of social work that has, that is apolitical, but I would even say that kind of social work is just reinforcing. Like, you know what I mean? Unless you are consciously trying to practice social work in a way that is, I guess critical, of the political structure, then, then what you, what you are doing is just reinforcing the status quo.*

While she acknowledged that it is possible to practice a social work that is not political, Mary questions whether that kind of practice is meeting the obligations of social workers. Without a critical political element to one’s practice, social workers are merely enforcers of the system, and are participants in harmful systems.

Emma reinforced the need to act to change and challenge systems. She said, “Our systems should be about serving people. When they don’t serve our interests, that’s when we need to correct that.” Political and government systems, for Emma, are constructed to serve; they were established in certain ways, and the choices of leaders can reconstruct them to function in different ways. Emma sees not only the possibility of transformation, but the need for political involvement to hold those systems to account to ensure they serve the interests of communities.

For Michelle, there is a need to have people on the inside and outside of governance systems, pushing those systems, in order to achieve change. As an activist, she brought this perspective to her organizing work, and now as an insider, she is able to be a partner to coalitions on the outside of power. She said,

*If you’re part of an advocacy group that’s going out and picketing, or anything, you also need people on the inside. When I talk about inside, those who make decisions. So, you know, like say elected officials, who were also going to try to make those changes. Or else you’re just pushing for the rest of your life. And I think that was what my politics, my political involvement also brought me to the fro in terms of my social work experiences. I was always looking then for who had the authority and the power?*

Michelle saw the need for coalitions and partnerships to make change, and the dual push and pull from within and without a system to move the needle on an issue. She elaborated,

*whether you’re in social work or part of an advocacy group or anything, you’re pushing on the outside to some kind of politics, that has, say, authority to make decisions, whatever that may be. That there’s only so much you can do. It’s really important also*

*have people on the inside, who can also press for those kinds of changes. One is not better than the other, they’re both totally important.*

Insiders and outsiders are needed to make change. For Michelle, it is important to find insiders, work to elect people who can become insiders, or become an elected insider oneself, in order to achieve that foothold of power and allow for a dual push and pull to happen, rather than, as she expressed, “pushing for the rest of your life.” To make change happen, there must be allies on the inside, allies with authority, to act as partners.

Sara also spoke about the need to push and connect with those in power to achieve desired change. She used the metaphor of opening a door to talk about the persistence that is required to make change from outside of power structures:

*We don’t have to, like, you know, what’s the word, like push open the, the door. We can still wait for people to open the door but keep knocking. Do you know what I mean? We don’t have to knock down the door. [...] We don’t have to walk away. We can consistently, like you know, keep knocking until the door is open...*

Sara speaks to her pragmatism. She does not want to push down the door, she does not want to overthrow structures in place, but she will not give up. She will persistently knock, ask, advocate, and show up until she is able to find a partner on the inside who will open that door. Sara is resigned to the length of time and the persistence it takes to make change, but alludes to the importance of having someone open that door. If such a partner does not exist, Sara sees more progress in continuing to knock until they appear than breaking down the door.

Leanne’s perceptions of what it means to be a social worker in politics have evolved greatly, perhaps more than any other participant, and continued to evolve after she had been elected. She shared that for much of her life,

*I think I had already always had, similar to a lot of the public, this view that politics was more of in the way of party politics, which is more provincial and federal. And I hadn't necessarily, to me living in a community and in a municipality, my understanding of how municipalities worked was more about how the City Hall staff worked, and less of an appreciation [...] that there were policymakers in the form of city councillors who were steering how City Hall worked. And when I quickly came to realize in my conversations about perhaps throwing my hat in the ring, about how as a municipal level politician, obviously you're not connected to any party politics at all. It is purely an extended level of community development. Purely. There's no platform that you need to adhere to. There's no party message that you need to back. It is about, am I the person that the public in [the constituency] want representing their needs and their interests here at the city? As far as them getting what they need? This just comes down purely to that.*

Leanne shared ways in which her perception of local politics changed through her involvement, and how she came to see the community development value of being involved in electoral politics. Rather than being oppositional to her grassroots work, politics is an extension of that community development work. By understanding political work as community development work, Leanne perceives opportunities for social workers in particular to transform political spaces for the better. She said,

*So the core, core values that I have internalized that are part of who I choose to be as a person and that always served me well in my social service career seemed to be out of the ordinary in this [political] field, which never ceases to amaze me. You know, when people will say how refreshing it is, and I find that both nice to hear but disturbing to hear. And that's why I say it would be so great to get more social workers involved because that should not be of the ordinary.*

Leanne sees the potential to transform political spaces, and the way that cities can work with and for constituencies, by increasing the number of representatives who approach municipal issues from a social services lens. By involving more social workers in local politics, Leanne sees the potential to transform the culture of municipal councils.

Participants in this study, who are incredibly politically involved, see space and opportunity for social work in municipal politics and for municipal politics in social work. They

speak to their understanding of social work and the need to address structural causes. Some speak of the way they theorize change-making, and how they have operationalized those theories through coalitions and persistence. There is opportunity for those who have always been political, and those who have never been political, to reframe community development through political action and take action to make change and transform political spaces.

The intersection of social work and politics is a space with opportunity. Some political social workers see politics as a part of their being, while others can reject the label of politician while embracing inherently political work. Many political social workers believe aside from their own identities, that social work as a profession is inherently political. They see political action as a part and extension of their social work practice and ethics. Participants shared the ways that political action impacts them emotionally, and how they process these feelings in order to continue their work for change. Finally, reflecting upon the spaces in which they work and organize, participants call on their peers to take up political action, to push from the outside and transform the way that political power operates in Ontario municipalities.

## Chapter Six: Discussion

In this chapter I will discuss this study’s results in relation to its original research questions regarding social workers who sought elected office in the 2018 Ontario municipal elections, in relation to the broader literature on social workers’ political action, and within the context of theory, followed by a discussion of the limitations of this study.

The original research questions being addressed are:

- 1) What do these social workers believe were the contributing factors that led to their seeking elected office?
- 2) Was social justice a motivating factor for social workers who sought elected office or did other factors compel them to become politically involved?
- 3) Do social workers who sought elected office believe their social work education prepared them for seeking office?

It is clear that social workers participate in a wide variety of political action and can come to municipal politics from varied backgrounds. It appears that these social worker candidates for municipal office in Ontario hold beliefs about the inherently political nature of social work, and perceive political work as an extension of their social work. For some, indeed, social work practice that does not involve political analysis or action fails to be social work altogether. The space at the intersection of politics and social work, for them, goes beyond a crossing of paths. They see social work practice and political action as being deeply intertwined, and reflective of the ways that they view community development and participation in civic life as a whole. They describe political journeys with different motivations at different points along their journey, including specific catalysts to action. They also reflect upon the role that social work education



has played in preparing them for political office, and where their social work education failed or needed to be supplemented with experience. The journeys shared by participants allow for a rich exploration of the political experiences and perceptions of social workers in municipal politics in Ontario.

### **Contributing Factors**

Social worker candidates for office come to candidacy through varying journeys, which hold common features. Participants put a great deal of value on relationships and group experiences: they credit families, colleagues, friends, and networks with shaping their perceptions of political action and with inviting them into political action, or offering them permission to be involved. This is in line with literature, where it has been established both that recruitment networks are key factors that allow participation in civic life, and that recruitment networks are significant contributing factors for social workers specifically (McLaughlin et al., 2019; Ritter, 2008; Verba et al., 1995). The results of this study support existing scholarship on the importance of recruitment networks to social worker political participation, which in turn emphasizes the important roles that schools of social work, professional associations, and communities of practice can take on to promote political action among students and professional members.

Participants whose families promoted political activity, or who participated in political action while young, see political action as an extension of their personal and professional identities. As a result, many participants perceived their own high levels of psychological engagement in political issues well before their social work education or running for office.

These participants perceive themselves, and social work as a profession, as political in essence and definition. Indeed, some expressed doubt that one could say they are practicing social work without bringing a critical and political lens to that work. This perspective has been expressed elsewhere in literature, where both elected social workers and scholars have called for social workers to take up direct political action as an essential part of their social work identity (Bisman, 2004; Strier & Feldman, 2018; Strandberg & Marshall, 1988). This deeply embedded identity and perception of social work’s political identity speaks to the psychological resources of these social workers, the knowledge, beliefs, and self-perceived efficacy they possess that contributes to their ability to participate in electoral politics and activism more generally (Verba et al., 1995). Certainly a very high degree of belief in their own political nature is a strong contributor to the political activity that they have taken on.

Nevertheless, the experiences of other participants illustrate that holding a political identity is not a prerequisite for full participation in electoral politics. Participants with few political experiences and lacking or rejecting political identities made successful bids for office with encouragement from their networks and following positive consultation with communities and established elected leaders. This supports the findings of other scholars such as Elmaliach-Mankita et al. (2019) and Lane et al. (2018): learning experiences within spaces of governance and support from people already within those spaces can be influential for social workers’ abilities to see themselves belonging in political work. This finding implies that there is opportunity to promote activity and improve psychological resources among those who have been inactive, and even among those who have previously rejected political activity. Through

encouraging and inviting relationships, social workers can begin gaining political experiences regardless of whether they hold a political identity.

Participating in a variety of political actions, within and outside of one’s professional social work role, is consistent with literature. Domanski’s (1998) prototypes of social worker participation are not exclusive categories, and they include a number of categories of action in which a majority of social workers participate (communicator, advocate, voter, lobbyist, persuader, and collaborator), as well as many in which fewer than half or very few social workers participate (campaigner, individualist, witness, activist). It is expected, then, that participants in this study would participate in numerous types of political action both concurrently and along the journey to becoming a candidate themselves. It is worth noting, again, that running for elected office is outside the scope of Domanski’s (1995) prototypes.

No participant’s first political act was to run for office. Participants engaged in a wide variety of political and policy-related activity before seeking municipal office, though not all would agree with a label of their activities as political. Participants speak of early experiences such as helping on others’ electoral campaigns, rally and protest attendance, and student politics as experiences that demonstrate their range of activities, but also place their current activity within a longstanding narrative and journey of activity that increases in responsibility and levels of initiative. Other participants identified advocating for clients and within their organizations as activity that grew their perceptions of the connections between client advocacy and structural change. Participants describe political journeys, not isolated events. These journeys are filled with choices, but are also described as involving compelling, external factors. Participants perceive that they came to see the world differently, got involved, attended their social work

program(s), or began organizing because of something that happened to them or to their community, rather than something that came from within them. They share experiences of strong catalysts to participate at multiple points across their journeys. In this way, participants diminish their own choices and leadership capabilities when describing their journeys, which shall be explored further in the next section.

Many participants also discuss the contributions of partisan politics to their journey towards running as non-partisan municipal candidates. Several participants ran at other levels of government as partisans, some share experiences of working for partisan elected officials, many worked on campaigns at federal or provincial levels. Partisan political connections and opportunities for learning appear to be a significant contributing factor to the eventual runs for office of many participants. This is consistent with many previous studies’ findings. It supports the theory that psychological resources and recruitment networks allow for participation (Ritter, 2008; Verba et al., 1995). Participating in partisan politics as a precursor is consistent with previous surveys that show that a great deal more social workers have volunteered on a campaign than run for office themselves, and that more social workers participate in political activity at national or provincial levels than municipal; thus it is reasonable that candidates gained campaign experience elsewhere before running themselves (Douglas, 2008; Mary, 2001). That experience can begin by joining existing networks with resources, training opportunities, and ongoing political activities. Partisan politics appear to contribute learning opportunities, networks to plug into for future support, as well as being the basis of relationships and friendships among activists that can provide for mentorship, community support, and encouragement throughout participants’ political journeys.

The most common and strongest motivating factor to put one’s name forward and seek municipal office appears to be the invitation to run. Participants cite invitations to participate when describing both their political journeys broadly and the decision to seek municipal office specifically. This is consistent with earlier literature demonstrating the importance of network involvement for general population political participation as well as social worker participation (Lane & Humphreys, 2011; Ritter, 2008; Verba et al., 1995). Family members, friends, professional colleagues, partisan acquaintances, and volunteer network acquaintances were all cited as issuers of those invitations that laid the groundwork for political involvement and provided invitations for increasing leadership and engagement, up to candidacy. This supports the idea that the type of network is less impactful than the fact of the invitation; participants did not appear to value an invitation to run from one type of recruiter over any other. Each invitation was impactful regardless of its source.

Though rarely raised in interviews, it is also clear that privilege plays a large factor in these social workers’ experiences and contributes toward their political journeys. Participants’ demographics reveal that all but one participant lived in a home with a household annual income of greater than \$80,000 in 2018. Many were incumbents to the position sought in 2018, and the vast majority experience white privilege. From this perspective, most participants in this study possess the resources needed for engagement in civic life (Verba et al., 1995). One participant spoke about financial security as being a contributing factor to their run for office, while another spoke of the resource of time, which they are able to access through their workplace seniority and flexibility. Other participants identified male privilege, and the privilege of growing up with political parents and experiences as contributing factors which they acknowledge are far from

universal. These observations and demographics fall closely in line with Lane and Humphreys’ (2011) findings that social workers who run for office have more resources and are less racially diverse than the general population of social workers. This study’s findings do not support Ritter’s (2008) finding that resources are not a significant factor in social workers’ political participation; however, Ritter measured political participation of social workers generally, while this study is exploring a very narrow group.

Participants additionally identified a structural framework for social work practice, a framework originally put forward by Mullaly (1993), as a contributing factor to their political participation. Whether that framework for practice was developed through life experiences, in their social work education, or was developed through their professional practice, they came to see ways in which the personal was political in their lives and the lives of people with whom they worked. Participants regularly identified this way of perceiving and thinking about issues and representation as being a contributing factor to their desire to be political, and their desire to see that framework be applied at council or at the school board which they ran to join.

### **Motivating Factors**

Social justice acts as a motivating factor for political activity, but participants more often cited goals such as inclusivity and centring the community as their motivation for running for municipal office. Candidates cited encouragement from others, invitations to run, and the desire to represent and work for their community as more significant motivators than any policy area or social justice itself. This is significant as it demonstrates that the key to engaging more social workers in electoral candidacy may have less to do with particular motivating social issues, and

may be more closely associated with emphasizing the possibilities for community development, and the need for particular ethics and values in leadership roles. This is in partial contrast with other English-language scholarship, where the majority of quantitative literature has asked respondents about political participation based on issues of professional or personal concern, rather than exploring political participation as a perceived continuum of one’s community development practice, or exploring the perceived importance of having a representative with particular ethics or leadership practices in elected roles in municipal government (Dudziak & Coates, 2004; Gray et al., 2002).

Despite this, social justice was cited as a motivating factor for political involvement generally, and in particular as a motivating factor for entering protest, lobbying, and partisan political activity, as well as a motivator for entering the social work field. Participants cited war, poverty, violence, inequality, workplace inequities, and mental health as motivating factors for political action and engagement generally. Their desires to take up various forms of activism to address these issues coincides with Craig’s (2002) definition of social justice as a broad, values-driven framework for approaching political objectives. These compelling issues are also consistent in part with literature, where Lane and Humphreys (2011) found that American social worker candidates for office were most likely to cite education, health, and mental health as motivating issues. It is also in line with McLaughlin et al.’s (2019) finding that social justice was a motivator for entry into political action for Alberta social worker MLAs. Participants frequently cited witnessing or experiencing injustice as an external catalyst to their political journey.

Participants perceive themselves as being compelled to action by forces outside of themselves. They were compelled by bad representation. They were compelled because they were nominated or asked to run by others, persistently so. Many are somewhat surprised to be leaders. Many are motivated by the idea of bringing a critical lens to council chambers or the school board, filling a perspective which they see as lacking among their political peers. They are motivated by the ways that others perceive their skills and values, and by a desire to be in collaboration with their community or to accept a perceived nomination from their community. They experience a push toward leadership from community members, at the same time as they experience a pull towards the leadership potential in elected roles. This finding offers strong evidence that motivation at the municipal level is based in expectations for quality community relationships and community representation, rather than motivations related to particular municipal level policy changes. That is to say, social worker candidates for office appear to be motivated by the possibility of ongoing relationships of responsibility and care across issues and across communities, rather than by moving particular issues.

Externalizing the catalyzing experiences that lead to political action is an unexpected commonality across participants’ political journeys. Several, though not all, participants minimized their own leadership capabilities and choices when they shared the various ways that they experienced being motivated to seek elected office and participate in political activities more generally. This experience of having an outside, compelling factor, that participants frame as giving them little choice but to engage in political action, leads me to questions about their use of this framework for their journeys. It is clear that participants indeed did have choices, as a great many people experience these same hardships and external catalysts without running for



office or engaging in political action. The use of this framework for describing entry into political action is interesting because it justifies political action outside of oneself, and so provides an immediate rebuttal to gendered critique that candidates for office may receive about seeking or holding power, or the common critique and questioning of seeking power within social work circles. The experience of an external motivator or compulsion limits this critique and may well be a tool to justify political action in the face of a system that remains uneasy with women in power or who seek power (Bashevkin, 2009).

Based on the motivations cited for political action generally, and running for municipal office specifically, it may be the case different types of political action — protest, contacting one’s elected representative, campaigning, or running for office — are most effectively catalyzed by different kinds of motivating factors for social work professionals. The catalyst for joining in a protest movement may not be an effective catalyst for putting one’s name on a ballot. More research is needed to determine programs and methods of engagement that are the most effective for various types of political activity: results of this study indicate that participants’ motivations for entering into electoral politics were based in desires to represent communities well, engage in community development, and bring specific sets of ethics and values and perspectives to the governing table.

Though participants in this study do not identify themselves as being motivated by social justice in their runs for office specifically, it is interesting that their cited motivations to provide responsible representation, replace bad or lacking representation, and engage in community development may well be understood as having social justice roots. Social justice understood as “a framework of political objectives, pursued through social, economic, environmental, and

political policies [...] informed by values concerned with” issues such as equality of outcome and treatment, dignity and equal worth, or the participation of all, absent specific issues of inequality, remains consistent with Craig’s (2002) definition of social justice (pp. 671-672).

Participants may hold their own narrower definitions of social justice, or may resist being labelled as a social justice candidate or councillor for other political reasons. Social justice is not cited as a motivating factor for seeking office, however the motivations participants have cited may still fall within a broader understanding of a social justice framework.

Interestingly, pragmatism features heavily in responses about how participants think about the ways they use their political power. When participants think about how they see change happening in their communities, they speak about compromise, about choosing one’s battles, about persistence and partnerships. They are specific about that which they avoid: breaking down the door, digging in their heels and losing. The frameworks through which they see change-making can be considered a motivator for the paths they have chosen. It is very difficult to work within political spaces without ever compromising one’s goals or ethics. Despite these regular setbacks and partial wins or losses, participants stay motivated for continued political action not in spite of, but because they see compromise and incremental change as an effective tool, and perhaps the best tool available to them. These social workers are motivated to stay persistent and to accept change that moves the needle, rather than change that overhauls.

This framework for change-making cannot be separated from their relative privilege; incremental change and persistence can exist because of relative security in other aspects of participants’ lives, such as the financial resources and time to continue their participation. Like Lane and Humphreys’ (2011) elected respondents, social worker candidates for office within this

study are, for the majority, financially secure and privileged. The capacity for patience and persistence that accompanies financial privilege cannot be overlooked.

### **Social Work Education**

Finally, participants overwhelmingly perceive the skills they gained through their social work education and practice to be transferrable and useful to their political work. Participants identify skills, language, and understanding gained throughout their social work education that has positively translated into their political work. Some also identified field placement experiences that directly contributed to giving them further opportunities for leadership or altered their perceptions of institutions and systems. Participants also identify ways that social work education could have better prepared them and their peers for engaging in electoral politics specifically and political action generally.

It appears that social work education can be incredibly valuable for framing and putting into context existing feelings and experiences of inequality. As also noted by McLaughlin et al. (2019), participants of this study cite having experienced inequality, oppression, and having sought education to help them understand the roots, the *whys* of that inequality. Social work education gave social worker municipal candidates the “language and skill to frame important questions about social justice,” educational experiences also cited by social worker MLAs in Alberta (McLaughlin et al., 2019).

Skills traditionally conceived of as micro-practice social work skills are transferrable and useful in political work, particularly in constituency work. Participants, including those who consider themselves to be exclusively macro-level social workers, cite skills learned in de-

escalation, active listening, active silence, and system navigation as techniques they use regularly with constituents. Several describe constituent work as being similar to the role taken by an intake worker: one of finding the cause of a problem the constituent is experiencing and setting a constituent on the path of have it resolved. Indeed, Mary cited her proudest moment as a candidate to be a situation in which she used her mezzo-level social work skills: identifying a shared tenants’ rights concern while knocking on doors in an apartment building, connecting those residents with one another, and supporting their collective organization and collective advocacy by assisting them to form a tenants association. These tools assist participants who have been elected to guide their constituents to either develop a solution independently, or help lead them to a place where a solution might be found for many issues. These skills are perceived by elected social workers to be appreciated by their constituents, and that their constituents are surprised to find that their elected representative has these skills.

These findings also contribute to the small body of literature surrounding elected social workers, which shows consistently that elected social workers feel their social work background has prepared them with appropriate skills to hold office. Lane (2011) found that a majority of surveyed elected social workers agreed that their program prepared them for office, and elected participants in McLaughlin et al.’s (2019) study also found that micro-level skills were transferrable to elected office and useful. The skills of active listening in particular is raised by both participants in this study and by McLaughlin et al.’s (2019) participants. The results of this study bolsters those earlier quantitative and qualitative findings by identifying similar agreement among elected social workers at the municipal level.

Participants also identify skills traditionally conceived of as macro-level skills as being useful to them as candidates and elected officials. They identify their ability to ask critical questions, to bring an anti-oppressive lens, to evaluate programs, and to assess policy and legislation as skills attained through social work education that are directly transferable to their ability to be effective at a governing table.

These findings support the argument that the tension between micro and macro practice in social work education and practice is an artificial one. Just as micro-practice social workers must be aware of, and act in response to, structural issues in order to meet their obligations to individuals, so to must macro-level social workers embrace and make use of micro and mezzo-level skills to succeed in positions of political leadership. This is consistent with calls made in much political social work literature to complicate the micro/macro divide and push back against a neoliberal view of social workers as specialists (Abramovitz, 1998). Challenging that divide and connecting the use of various skills in various settings is helpful to ensure that social workers are equipped to work in varied settings, and have the self-perceived efficacy to apply their skills in advocacy, activism, and various other forms of political activity.

Nevertheless, the majority of literature measures not whether social workers are prepared for political engagement, but whether they perceive themselves to be prepared for political engagement (Douglas, 2008; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010; Ritter, 2006). On this question, scholarship is inconclusive, but has more often shown that generally, social workers do not perceive themselves to have acquired the skills needed for engagement throughout their social work program (Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010; Ritter, 2006). The results of this study challenge those perceptions by demonstrating the extent to which skills from across the continuum of

social work practice are helpful and transferrable to political practice, and appreciated in political practice. Social workers who ran for municipal office and who were elected to political office agree that they have the skillset to succeed in politics. It appears that social workers with experience in electoral politics have more confidence in the transferability of their social work skills than the general population of social workers.

Despite confidence in their skillset, there remain areas of political practice in which participants felt they were underprepared. As McLaughlin et al. (2019) observed about social worker MLAs’ transferrable skillsets, “while certain skills are seen as necessary they are by no means sufficient” (p. 39). Participants in this study also identify gaps they filled through their own political practice, or that of their peers, outside of social work education in order to be successful as political actors, gaps which could have been addressed within their social work programs. Participants raised issues of knowledge about structures and government processes. They identified that learning about the structures and operations of Canadian government, and how levels of government and bureaucracy interact, were absent from their own, or their peers’ social work educations. A lack of knowledge about where to begin advocating for change, or even where to locate responsibility for a given issue would certainly hamper an individual social worker’s ability to confidently engage with political systems, let alone transform them. If social work programs are failing to meet the civics education needs of their students, programs are bypassing an opportunity to increase the psychological resources of students, potentially impacting those students’ future participation in activities as wide-ranging as running for office, political activism or even effective case advocacy.

The perception of being underprepared or not knowledgeable about the infrastructure of government, its forms and processes, appears to be a shared in literature. Two American surveys in have indicated that a majority of social workers do not feel confident that their education prepared them for engagement in political processes (Ritter, 2006; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010). Meanwhile, one Canadian survey indicated that only a very slim majority (53%) of social workers in Alberta and Ontario believed that their social work education gave them the skills they need to be politically active (Douglas, 2008). The lack of self-perceived efficacy most social workers have towards their own abilities to engage in political systems harms their ability to engage generally. Participants in this study show that those gaps can be overcome, but that they are felt by those who are extremely engaged and politically active as well as the general population of social workers.

One participant also raised the ways that a limited understanding of self-care was taught, which emphasized assessing her capacity to determine if she was able to take on additional responsibility or stress. This was identified as an inadequate approach for those in leadership positions, and potentially harmful for future social workers' potential to engage in political leadership. Self-care that is characterized by not taking on too much, and by stepping back when one is overdrawn, has the potential to be harmful to both individuals and causes. Firstly, as identified by Emma, elected officials can often be presented with stressful situations that they are not able to walk away from without shirking their responsibilities or losing opportunities for growth. Secondly, to present the primary strategy of self-care as backing away from some work or activism can be problematic for anti-oppressive practitioners: it presents an option to those whose privilege allows them to walk away, to justify their lack of engagement or decreasing

engagement on a given issue. For example, such a construction of self-care privileges white social workers in cases of anti-racist organizing, as white social workers are capable of walking away from the harmful effects of white supremacy (that is, the belief in the superiority of white people across civic and cultural spaces). There need to be other avenues of self-care and community care that political social workers can draw upon to prevent burnout, care for themselves and their communities, and continue to work through times of great difficulty. The model of community care that has worked for Emma, in which she relies upon mentorship and networks of trustees who support one another, is a method of community care that she has developed for herself outside of her social work learning and practice.

This study provides responses to the questions developed at its outset. Participants identified a wide range of factors contributing to their involvement including their family backgrounds, career experiences, and their approaches to social work practice. It is clear that participants see their candidacy as a part of their journey of activism, which incorporates disparate political and advocacy actions over their careers. I found that social justice did not appear to be a primary motivating factor for participants’ candidacy, though it may have motivated other parts of their journey; rather, participants were more likely to be motivated by the possibility of community involvement and development presented by municipal roles. Finally, social work education provided participants with a transferrable skillset across constituency and governance work, with spaces identified for improvement.



### **Limitations of the Study**

There are a number of limitations to this study. A clear challenge was the ability to identify and recruit an adequate number of social workers who sought municipal election in Ontario. Many candidates, particularly in rural and small municipalities, do not have active online presences throughout their campaigns, as identified earlier. Further to this, many candidates for office in 2018, particularly those who were unsuccessful, have taken down their campaign materials and do not have a professional online presence, making it difficult or impossible to determine their professional and educational background. This limitation was compounded for school board candidates, where there was no central list of candidates to investigate, as there was for councillors (AMO, 2018). This means that I relied heavily on a snowball sampling method and participants may underrepresent some social workers’ experiences, particularly those who are rural, who live in municipalities without strong digital campaign cultures, and who were unsuccessful in their bid for municipal office, while over-representing urban candidates who live in municipalities with strong digital campaign cultures, who were successful in their bid for election.

Data collection for this project began during the 2019 federal election campaign, during which several interviews were delayed to accommodate participants’ partisan political work, and data collection ended immediately before the COVID-19 public health crisis. A study with more flexibility or longevity in data collection, or conducted in a non-federal campaign year, may have resulted in a higher participation level, or a greater ability on the part of the researcher to seek out additional potential participants. Data collection was therefore also completed before the killing of George Floyd by police in the USA, and subsequent global racial justice movements

addressing anti-Black violence in particular. A longer period of data collection may have resulted in very different perspectives from participants on matters such as privilege and intersectionality in their work, as a result of the dramatically shifting cultural conversation norms.

As I am not fluent in French, I was unable to interview potential Franco-Ontarian participants effectively in their first language. While I was able to identify a potential Franco-Ontarian candidate through online written materials, I did not receive a response to an interview through an English-language request. This limitation means that an important cultural community within Ontario, and particularly Northern Ontario, is absent from this study.

This study is a product of its particular time and place. In particular, this study’s scope within the context of Ontario municipal governments and school boards means that participants’ experiences are very specific to the both the government and cultural structures present in this province. Other jurisdictions, even across Canada, will experience municipal elections and municipal politics quite differently. These differences will only grow internationally, where social work and municipal government may have developed from different origins and frameworks of practice. Like all qualitative research, these results are not meant to be generalized and I do not assume that these results are transferrable into different government contexts. Nevertheless, I hope that social workers in Ontario and elsewhere may find threads of usefulness for their own practice and activism.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the homogeneity of participants. It is clear that the experiences explored within this study fail to examine intersectional perspectives and is thus open to intersectional feminist and anti-colonial critique. The experiences of overwhelmingly white and overwhelmingly cis-gender, women social workers cannot be said to be representative

of Ontario political social workers as a whole, and indeed represents a privileged subgroup. A great deal more study, with much more fulsome and strenuous participant recruitment, must be undertaken in order to gain an understanding of political social workers that is representative and that honours the social work activists making change across Ontario municipalities. In this respect, I acknowledge that my participant recruitment has fallen short. There will also be places in which my analysis has been inadequate, or my own biases have prevented me from going deeper. I have struggled with the feminist goals of simultaneously honouring the knowledge that my participants bring to this study while questioning their responses as the products of power, and in this respect I hope to continue to grow as a researcher. As a result of these limitations, the results of this study cannot be generalized and should be interpreted with caution.

## **Chapter Seven: Implications and Conclusion**

This chapter concludes this study. First I shall discuss areas for future research to further Canadian scholarship addressing political social work and political social workers. I shall then outline implications of this study on both social work pedagogy and social work practice. Finally, I shall offer concluding thoughts on my research.

### **Recommended Future Research**

There is an opportunity for a great deal of foundational research in Canadian political social work. The population in this study is very homogenous. Future research identifying social workers who have run for and been elected to public office at all levels across Canada, and assessing their demographics to compare against the Canadian population at large, as well as the population of social workers in Canada, would provide valuable information about who is able to access power and policy-making opportunities across provinces and territories. Related future work could assess the experiences and perceptions of Indigenous social workers who participate in elections on reserve and across Treaty territories, and the extent to which Indigenous social workers participate in on and off-reserve elections — work that would be inappropriate for this researcher, as a settler, to undertake.

This project looked at both successful and unsuccessful candidates. Future research examining strategies that make social workers’ electoral campaigns successful could provide important context and knowledge to further the influence of social worker voices in elected spaces. Additional research around social worker political participation could also look to social

workers who are employed as political staff, particularly examining their political journeys and backgrounds, and the perceived power they hold within their roles.

This study makes an assumption that adding social workers to political discourse would change that discourse for the better; this is an unproven hypothesis. Future scholarship is needed to confirm this hypothesis by assessing the legislation and policy changes made under the direction and initiative of social worker elected officials. Until such research is accomplished, it is naive to assume that social workers are more likely to enact social justice-oriented legislation or policy.

In relation to social work education, I recommend future research examining the availability and extent to which politically-oriented field placements are available across Canada, similar to American studies such as those completed by Pritzker and Lane (2014) or Wolk (1996). These could involve assessment of current Legislative bodies across Canada to determine the number that have had social work students, currently have social work students, or are interested in having social work placement students, alongside their perception of how social work students would fit into legislative or constituency roles, to determine opportunities for field program expansions.

### **Implications for Social Work Pedagogy and Practice**

In this section I will discuss implications this study has for both social work education programs, particularly in Ontario, as well as social work practice in the field. These implications can be put into place across individual levels by individual educators or social workers, as well as more broadly by practitioners or agencies. Implications result in recommendations to improve

social workers’ current and future capacities to engage consciously in political action and social justice advocacy.

### ***Implications for Social Work Pedagogy***

Results of this study demonstrate the importance of experiences and networks to social workers entering activism and electoral political work. Schools of social work have obligations to ensure that students are able to navigate policy issues in their practice, and can take this obligation further by developing programs to encourage students who are interested in policy development and leadership within social movements. Schools of social work, and field offices in particular, should make particular efforts to find and develop relationships with social workers elected to political office and those who work in political settings in order to create new, interdisciplinary placement opportunities with appropriate supervisors. Particularly at universities with online programs, these efforts could establish macro-level field placement options within municipal government offices and school boards across rural communities, at provincial legislatures across Canada, and potentially in federal constituency offices.

Following results from this study, schools of social work should also perform evaluations of their own course content to assess the levels to which students are familiar with the ways that governments function, and how social workers can interact with and advocate to governments. This knowledge is appropriate for those working at macro, mezzo, and micro levels of practice, but was identified by participants as having been absent from their education and learned in practice or through other activist activities. Knowledge of the procedures by which change is made could increase the self-perceived efficacy of students, potentially impacting their psychological engagement in political action.

In my experience in my Masters of Social Work program, leadership is rarely emphasized, and electoral political action was never emphasized, despite a municipal and federal election during my time as a student. Students are rightly encouraged to question and problematize power and hierarchies; however, little attention is paid to exploring ways that students can become or promote leaders to make transformative change consistent with the *Code of Ethics*. By neglecting to discuss critical political action as a solution to systemic oppression, social work educators run the risk of perpetuating what data has already shown: social workers are politically aware but politically passive (Domanski, 1998; Hardina, 1995; Wolk, 1981). I encourage social work educators to incorporate readings, discussions, and assignments focused on practical political or civic action as a way to challenge this passivity within the profession as a whole. Social work educators have the opportunity to critically encourage, rather than critically reject, the use of leadership for change-making.

### ***Implications for Social Work Practice***

Social work professionals regularly find their work abutting issues of government policy or legislation. Possessing the skills and the self-perceived efficacy to address those policy and government barriers, and empower clients to do the same, is directly related to social workers’ ethical obligation to promote social justice and advocate for the clients and communities we work with and for.

Across areas of practice, social workers often encounter clients whose presenting concerns are structural in nature. This study shows that whether social workers consider themselves to be political or not, they are capable and have the tools to engage in structural community change. As professionals, social workers can access networks to both seek change

and to identify those already holding power to partner with for positive change. Social work practitioners at the micro level can also work with clients to introduce them and encourage them to join networks and advocacy groups working on the very structural issues they face, working alongside and encouraging clients to take up their own political power. Social workers must confront ways in which we support and promote neoliberal agendas, and how we subvert them through our direct practice work. Social workers across areas of practice have the opportunity to develop authentic allyship with Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities through solidarity and supportive political action, as well as supporting electoral campaigns that promote diverse leadership across municipalities and other levels of government. I recommend that social workers in all areas of micro and mezzo level practice interrogate how they can support civic and political action among their clients and communities.

This study also holds implications for social work professional networks, associations, and communities of practice. This study strongly demonstrates the importance of networks of support for political social workers and the centrality of being asked to run for office in social workers’ political journeys. Social work associations must work to build and train networks of social workers who can then organize and lobby on local issues in their home communities. Associations must train political leaders who can support local efforts for social justice activism. Additionally, professional associations must ask social workers — particularly Black, Indigenous, and racialized social workers — to run for office, and then they must ask again. The importance of being asked to run, and the importance of being asked repeatedly, is clear through this study. Finally, associations have the opportunity to create communities of support within themselves. I recommend that the OASW and CASW establish working groups of elected social



workers and social worker candidates for office in order to reduce isolation, encourage political engagement, and build a space where community support can foster.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of social workers who ran for municipal office in Ontario. Grounded in Verba et al.’s (1995) CVM and in feminist theories, this research sought to understand the paths taken by social workers who sought elected power at the municipal level in Ontario’s 2018 municipal elections. Three research questions asked what these social workers believe were the contributing factors that led to their seeking elected office, whether social justice was a motivating factor for them or whether other factors compelled them to become politically involved, and if they believe their social work education prepared them for seeking office. Interviews with eight social workers elected to municipal office and two social worker candidates for elected office were held. Thematic analysis was conducted and six themes emerged from the interviews: determining relationship and identities; on becoming a social worker; catalysts; the political landscape, skills and strategies; and deepening the political identity of social work. Based on the emergent themes from this study, the initial research questions have been hesitantly answered.

Social workers can come to seeking elected office through a number of paths. Contributing factors include supportive relationships that foster interest, support activism, and encourage leadership; personal or professional experiences that connect the personal to the political; and a catalyzing experience that compels the individual to action. Social justice acts as a motivating factor, but contrary to my initial hypothesis, social work ethical goals around

inclusivity and centring the community are more commonly cited by social work candidates for office than achieving social justice. Finally, social work candidates for office overwhelmingly perceive the skills they gained through their social work education and practice to be transferrable and useful to their political work. Furthermore, they are clear that political work is an extension of their social work and, for some, being political is a central tenet of their social work practice. The results contribute to the very limited research into Canadian political social workers. Insights gained through this study open up many new questions for future inquiry, both in terms of assessing the state of Canadian political social work and for programs that might increase engagement. I hope that this study will offer insight into ways that the social work profession might encourage greater engagement, support, and recognition for those social workers engaged in political campaign work and activism.

## Appendix A

### *Email Invitation to Individuals*

Dear TITLE LASTNAME,

I hope you are well.

My name is Carly Greco and I am a Master of Social Work student at Wilfrid Laurier University.

I am writing today to request your participation in an interview about your experiences as a social worker who ran for office in the 2018 Ontario municipal election.

Interviews will take approximately 90 minutes of your time and will include a short demographic survey.

This research aims to better understand the political and policy experiences, and education, that lead social workers to be successful political actors in their communities. It is my hope that findings will contribute to a model of practice that social workers can use to become more politically active in their communities, as well as contributing to ways that schools of social work might better equip social work students for advocacy and change making.

I hope that you will be willing to share your experiences and perspective at the intersection of politics and social work.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board (REB #6235).

If you would like to participate or have any questions, please contact me at [grec4350@mylaurier.ca](mailto:grec4350@mylaurier.ca). You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Ginette Lafreniere, at [glafreniere@wlu.ca](mailto:glafreniere@wlu.ca) with questions.

Sincerely,

Carly Greco, MA, MSW (Candidate)

Faculty of Social Work  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
120 Duke St.  
Kitchener, ON, N2H 3W8  
[grec4350@mylaurier.ca](mailto:grec4350@mylaurier.ca)

## Appendix B

### *Interview Guide*

#### *Basic information:*

1. What community do you live in?
  - a. Is this where you ran for office?
2. How many times have you run for office?
  - a. For which positions?
  - b. When?
  - c. Have you been elected?
3. What position did you run for in the October, 2018 municipal election?

#### *Getting involved:*

1. Tell me about your political journey.
4. You first ran for office in \_\_\_\_ (year). How did you become interested in politics?
  - a. When did that happen?
  - b. What issue(s) drove you?
3. Did you participate in political action before running for office?
4. Can you tell me about the first activity or action that made you feel politically involved?
5. Can you tell me about the process of deciding to run for office?
  - a. Were you asked to run?  
IF YES How did you meet that person/those people?
6. Was there a specific campaign or movement that was really important to your journey?  
IF YES:
  - a. Why did you feel connected to it?
  - b. What sorts of things did you do you support that cause/campaign?  
IF NO:
  - a. What do you think was the most important factor in you getting involved?

#### *Policy Practice*

1. What is your current job?
2. Are you currently an RSW?
3. How do you understand the term “policy practice”?
4. Do you have a policy practice in your social work?  
IF YES
  - a. Can you give me few examples of the most common activities or actions that are part of your policy practice?
  - b. Can you tell me about the activity or action you’re most proud of from your policy practice?
  - c. Does your workplace support your policy practice?  
IF NO move on

*Social Work Education*

1. Where did you complete your social work education?
2. What skills did you learn there that you use in your political work?
3. Can you talk about gaps you’ve since identified?
4. Did you have a policy stream at your institution?
  - a. IF YES Did you take those courses/stream?
  - b. IF NO Where did you learn about systems and policy?

*Recruitment*

1. Do you know of any other social workers who ran for municipal office in 2018?
  - a. IF YES Would you be able to put me in touch with them or share their contact information?

## Appendix C



**WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT**  
Policy Practice to Policy Making: Experience of Social Workers Seeking Elected Office  
Principal Investigator: Carly Greco, B.Hum, M.A., M.S.W.(C)  
Faculty advisor: Dr. Ginette Lafrenière

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of social workers who sought elected office in the 2018 Ontario municipal election. The researcher is a Laurier graduate student in the Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social Work working under the supervision of Dr. Ginette Lafreniere. This research is the focus of the researcher’s Master of Social Work thesis.

### INFORMATION

Participants in this study will be asked to participate in an interview and complete a demographics questionnaire. The study will take about 90 minutes to complete. Data from approximately 10-15 research participants who ran for office in the 2018 Ontario municipal election, successfully or unsuccessfully, will be collected for this study. As a part of this study you will be audio-recorded for research purposes. You may stop participation or skip a question at any time. Only the primary investigator will have access to these recordings and information will be kept confidential.

### BENEFITS

Participants may benefit from the participation in this research project by identifying positive habits and successful professional experiences. The research will contribute to the body of literature/knowledge on political social work in Canada.

### RISKS

As a result of your participation in this study you may experience negative distressing memories or emotions. The following safeguards will be used to minimize any distressing feelings: interviews can be stopped at any time, information for distress lines will be available to all participants.

You are free to discontinue the study at any time and you may choose not to respond to any question.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

Everything shared in this interview will be confidential. The confidentiality/anonymity of your data will be ensured by removing all names, including names of others you may mention your interview, in transcription and analysis. Data collection can never be completely secure, however the data will be stored on a password protected USB key that only the primary investigator may access. The anonymized data will be stored for 5 years after the completion of the primary investigator’s MSW thesis and may be reanalyzed in the future as part of a separate project (i.e., secondary data analysis). After 5 years these files will be destroyed by the primary investigator. If you consent, quotations will be used in write-ups/presentations and will not contain information that allows you to be identified.

Please know that the investigator is required to break confidentiality if they believe a child is at risk of harm, or if it is revealed someone may harm themselves or others. Research data can also be subpoenaed by court order if required.

## CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study you may contact the researcher, Carly Greco, at [grec4350@mylaurier.ca](mailto:grec4350@mylaurier.ca).

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board (REB #6235), which receives funding from the [Research Support Fund](#). If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Jayne Kalmar, PhD, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 3131 or [REBChair@wlu.ca](mailto:REBChair@wlu.ca).

## PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without consequence. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. You have the right to refuse to answer any question or participate in any activity you choose.

If you withdraw from the study, you can request to have your data destroyed by written request to [grec4350@mylaurier.ca](mailto:grec4350@mylaurier.ca) until March 1, 2020.

## FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION

The results of this research will be published/presented in a thesis, course project report, book, journal article, conference presentation, class presentation. The results of this research may be made available through Open Access resources.



CONSENT

Please read and check off.

Do you agree that:

You have read and understood the information provided for this research study.

- Yes       No

You understand the potential risks and discomforts involved.

- Yes       No

Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction by the researcher.

- Yes       No

Do you agree to participate in the study?

- Yes       No

Do you agree to have your quotations from this survey used?

- Yes       No

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant’s signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Investigator’s signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix D



**POLICY PRACTICE TO POLICY MAKING:  
SOCIAL WORKERS’ EXPERIENCES SEEKING MUNICIPAL  
OFFICE IN ONTARIO**

**RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED**  
**ARE YOU AN ONTARIO SOCIAL WORKER WHO RAN  
FOR MUNICIPAL OFFICE IN 2018? I WANT TO HEAR  
FROM YOU!**

The purpose of this study is to examine the political and policy experiences of social workers who run for office, focusing on those who sought elected office in the 2018 Ontario municipal election.  
Participants' confidentiality will be protected.  
We anticipate that participation in this study poses minimal risk to you.  
Interviews will take approximately 90 minutes.

**If you are an Ontario social worker who ran for municipal office in 2018, contact Carly Greco to participate.**

<b>Research Contact:</b> Carly Greco, MA, MSW (Candidate) Wilfrid Laurier University grec4350@mylaurier.ca	<b>Supervisor Contact:</b> Dr. Ginette Larfreniere, MA, MSW, PhD Wilfrid Laurier University glarfreniere@wlu.ca
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This study has received ethics approval through the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board #6235. If you have any questions please contact Jayne Kalmar, PhD, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, 519-884-1970 x 3131 or REBChair@wlu.ca

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