Politics and Money

Why it matters to psychologists

Radio ads, TV commercials, excessive news coverage and nonstop social media postings. It is election year 2016, and it feels like political campaigns dominate the airwaves and Internet in record numbers compared to other election cycles in the past 20 years. Behind so many ads are the political action committees trying to influence voters and strengthen ties with candidates.

According to a 2015 Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll, more than 80 percent of the public, regardless of party identification, said campaign contributions directly impact the decisions made by elected officials, and half of them said that impact is large. The poll also revealed that the public favors the current campaign funding system of candidates raising money through donations. But when it comes to political action committees (PACs), people seemed less enthusiastic and divided, according to poll findings, with 44 percent considering PACs an acceptable method of political fundraising.

Political action committees are set up to raise money to support campaigns and elect candidates to public office whether it’s on the state, federal or presidential level. Many PACs represent big business, labor and even special interest groups like medicine.

So what does this all have to do with psychologists? Why should you care about PACs? Politics and money influence decisions that affect our health care system and the professionals working in it, including psychologists.

Advocacy is a core function of most health professional associations. It typically involves a multi-tiered approach including lobbying, grassroots action, coalition building and monitoring legislation and regulatory issues. As the U.S. health care system and marketplace evolved over the past several decades and Congress became increasingly involved in setting direction and policy for our nation’s health care structure, many health professional associations expanded their advocacy efforts into the political arena, establishing PACs.

“The health care climate is dominated by those who show up and in order to stay relevant we have to participate in the discussion,” says Lindsey Buckman, PsyD, an early career psychologist in Arizona. “I believe it is crucial for psychology to be at the table to educate and advocate for mental health and the profession. A PAC is one of the ways that we can advocate for psychology and educate legislators on the issues that are important to us.”

There are more than 4,000 registered PACs in Washington. Among those, 124 are health PACs representing medical and allied health professionals including physicians, nurses, optometrists, chiropractors, and dentists. PACs give health professionals a voice on important issues in local congressional districts and on Capitol Hill as well as face time with candidates and members of Congress to discuss their issues.

Psychology’s history on the Hill

Psychologists’ engagement with PACs dates back to the 1970s with the Association for the Advancement of Psychology’s (AAP) PAC, known as Psychologists for Legislative Action Now (PLAN). Through AAP, psychologists had a voice in the political process for 40 years. PLAN closed in 2012 and the APA Practice Organization launched a new political action committee called APAPO-PAC. This new PAC focuses intensely on addressing practitioners’ concerns, such as cuts in reimbursement for psychological services and inappropriate barriers to psychologists’ scope of practice.

Further, APAPO-PAC, working with the Education Advocacy Trust (EdAT), supports efforts to advance psychology as a health profession through funding the education and training of psychologists in working with other health professions.

“Psychologists should understand that political giving enables them to influence broad social policies, which they have with passage of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability and Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act,” says Doug Walter, JD, government relations associate executive director for the Practice Organization. “But make no mistake, that giving also enables them to help themselves as professionals where they are in direct competition with psychiatrists, social workers and other health professionals vying for fair payment and recognition of their services in the healthcare market.”

“Psychology’s PAC communicates to legislators and to other groups that we are serious about advocating for mental health and for our profession,” says Buckman. “It allows us to support those who support our issues and creates opportunities for relationships.”

Yet, only one percent of psychologists in the US supported psychology’s PAC in 2015. PACs for social workers,
dentists, nutritionists and optometrists outrank the APAPO-PAC. As of July 2016, the American Dental Association’s PAC contributed more than 2 million dollars to political campaigns. PAC’s for psychiatrists and social workers contributed three to four times as much as psychology’s PAC.

“I believe some psychologists were taught that we are above the need for advocacy,” says Ohio psychologist Kevin Arnold, PhD, ABPP. “We do not address advocacy and political giving adequately in our education and training programs so that our colleagues understand the need for giving.”

Minnesota psychologist Robin McLeod, PhD, wonders if some psychologists have issues with how money and power work in politics. “When they read about special interest PACs, maybe they think about big money working for interests that do not benefit typical people living ordinary lives,” says McLeod. “Psychologists, in general, tend to have big hearts. Maybe they are associating PACs with hurting the little guy. If there is a PAC that has a heart, it would be the APAPO-PAC.”

According to Jennifer Johnson, director of the Political Action Committee at the APA Practice Organization, PACs are tightly regulated by the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and must comply with the Federal Election Campaign Act, the law governing the financing of federal elections. “The truth is PACs are transparent and must disclose the amounts of contributions received and disbursed,” says Johnson. “In other words, PACs ensure that money going to politicians is clearly visible and not ‘under the table’.”

Advocacy’s lasting impact

Some future psychologists already understand how the psychology profession benefits from having a PAC. Graduate student Giselle Gaviria thinks many students do not realize that legislation passed now will affect their training and employment prospects. “As a graduate student I understand the need of supporting candidates who support psychology and the need for services and grants in our communities both large and small.”

Other health professions are getting a head start when it comes to advocacy training for the next generation. The American Association of Nurse Anesthetists (AANA) implemented an advocacy training program for graduate students seven years ago. AANA also appoints a student representative to their PAC board who is involved in creating the organization’s advocacy training plan for graduate students.

“With more and more master’s level practitioners entering the field, if psychologists are not politically active, we will become invisible in the health care political fray,” says McLeod. “If we want our voice to have enough power to create change that is in the interests of psychologists, we need to put some umph behind that voice. And as much as I might wish it wasn’t the case, money is the umph that becomes a powerful voice for change.”

Written by Luana Bossolo