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The Thirty-First Dudley Allen Sargent Commemorative Lecture 2012

The Politics of Physical Education

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This paper, which was given as the Dudley Allen Sargent lecture at the 2012 conference of the National Association for Kinesiology and Physical Education in Higher Education, discusses the politics of physical education. It examines how both national politics and local/campus politics affect the discipline. Drawing from the history of national leaders from both the Republican and Democratic parties and from the autobiography of Dudley Sargent, it demonstrates the important role that politics plays in the lives of Kinesiology and Physical Education professionals. The article discusses political perception, public relations, conflicting political interests, the political importance of program success, and provides recommendations for political survival in the university culture.

Keywords Physical Education, Kinesiology, Politics, Advocacy

It's January, 2012, and in case you haven't turned on your TV or radio in the last few months, let me inform you that it's an election year. This is political season, the only season that lasts longer than major league baseball. For the next ten months all eyes will be on who gets the Republican presidential nomination, and how President Obama is dealing with the latest financial crisis, natural disaster, or international conflict. This summer North Carolina will be hosting the Democratic national convention. The skeptic in me thinks that the choice of North Carolina as the convention site probably has more to do with the fact that Obama carried North Carolina by the slimmest of margins in 2008 rather than he likes North Carolina barbeque.

It's time for us to prepare ourselves for robo calls and e-mails asking us to contribute to the political campaign of an untainted political hopeful who has great ideas that can come only from someone outside the beltway, or to an experienced incumbent who has become well positioned on the important committees that can keep the money flowing to your state. As you listen to their pleas, I'm sure that you'll be told that the nation (or the state or the county or local school board) simply cannot flourish unless the candidate on the other end of the telephone line or computer connection is elected to the position for which he or she is running.

People approach politics differently. To some people, the next ten months will surpass the excitement of the NCAA basketball national championship tournaments. Others

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will sleep through the political campaigns without casting a vote on the first Tuesday in November. They will tell you that they don't like politics and don't want to be involved. I think those who take that viewpoint are misguided. Camacho and Fernandez-Balboa (2006) stated it well:

We tend to rationalise our political apathy thus: "I've got enough sorting out to do in my own life to want to be sorting out other people's." To be sure, taking this position may seem reasonable at times; yet, it has dire consequences for us in particular and society in general, for it leaves public affairs in the hands of small groups of people who seldom fight for the common good. (pp.10–11)

We are all affected by politics at some level, both personally and professionally. If we choose to be uninvolved at the national level we lose the opportunity to affect decisions that shape our nation. But if we are unaware and uninvolved in the politics at our institutions of higher education, we run what I think is even a bigger risk—the risk of losing the programs on our own campuses and thereby weakening our profession overall. The theme of the National Association for Kinesiology and Physical Education in Higher Education conference this year is "Flourishing in a Contemporary University Culture." In the last half of the 19th century Dudley Sargent faced political obstacles as he was establishing the foundation of our discipline, and we face many of those same obstacles today. I contend that we will not flourish if we ignore the political realities in which we live.

Former U.S. Speaker of the House Tip O'Neil is credited with having coined the phrase "all politics is local." I interpret that to mean that politics affects each of us at the local level—as in your city and your university. My goal for the Sargent lecture this year is to help us, the current and future leaders in kinesiology and physical education, to understand that for us to be successful both at the campus level and at the national level, we must not only appreciate the political process, but we must be politically involved.

Politics Defined

Wikipedia, the best source of information on everything, according to my students, defines politics as "the process by which groups of people make collective decisions" (Politics, n.d.). Daryl Siedentop (2009) provides this definition of politics: "When you try to decide what the common good is for . . . the department you administer . . . or the students you teach, you are in the field of philosophy called *politics*" (p. 58). Politics also involves authority and power. According to Houlihan (2002), in *The Sociology of Sport and Physical Education*, "Power is the central concept in the study of politics . . ." (p. 191, emphasis mine).

The power to which Houlihan refers is a different kind of power than Dudley Sargent was measuring with the vertical jump as our discipline came into being. It is a kind of power of which we must be aware. We need to know who has it and how it is being used. This knowledge may be the key to survival at our contemporary universities.

At the same time that Sargent was helping give birth to physical education another scientist was busy breaking ground in another young field. Charles Darwin is often credited with originating the concept of the survival of the fittest. When referring to the survival of the fittest, Darwin was not talking about what we in kinesiology and physical education might think in terms of physical fitness, but was referring to those animals which are the most suited to their environment and the best fitted to survive. What can we do to best suit ourselves to survive and prosper at our colleges and universities? I contend that if we are to survive on our campuses and as a discipline, we must be politically savvy and politically involved.

Current Political Camps

For those who took political science a long time ago and need an overview of the political landscape, here is a brief summary of what our political parties are about, and some references to their association with kinesiology, physical education, and physical activity over the years.

First the Republicans. The Republican Party has controlled the White House for 20 of the last 32 years and is now the majority party in the House of Representatives. In recent decades the Republican Party has been the more conservative party, supporting issues such as immigration control and support for school prayer. Republicans traditionally favor personal responsibility over welfare programs, a strong military, and minimal governmental involvement in the regulation of the economy. They are traditionally strong on national defense and aggressive in their pursuit of US national security interests (Sibley & Boyer, 2001).

Republican presidents over the last 60 years have also played a role in physical education and physical fitness. Shocked by the results of the Kraus-Weber tests that showed that children in the United States were less physically fit than their European counterparts, President Dwight Eisenhower established the first President's Council on Youth Fitness in 1956 (The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 2011). Eisenhower was well known as an avid golfer, and was a member of the Augusta National Golf club where a tree still bears his name.

In 1984 during Ronald Reagan's presidency the first National Women's Leadership Conference on Fitness took place with first lady Nancy Reagan as the honorary chair. George W. Bush, the most recent Republican president, was a good role model for a physically active lifestyle. It was reported that during his presidency, Bush ran regularly at a seven to eight minute per mile pace. He also cross trained with swimming and free weights. His doctors placed him in the top 2% of men his age for cardiovascular fitness (Cooper, Dickerson, & Waller, 2003).

Going well back in history, Republican president Theodore Roosevelt (US president from 1901–1909) was arguably the most physically fit and vigorous president of all time. He was quoted as campaigning with the slogan "I am as strong as a bull moose and you can use me to the limit." After his presidency, Roosevelt participated in an incredibly physically taxing expedition through the jungles of Brazil (Millard, 2005) that cost several of his party their lives, and almost his own.

Now, the Democrats. At the time of this Sargent lecture (January, 2012), a Democrat, Barack Obama, is president, and the U.S. Senate has a narrow Democratic majority. The Democratic National Committee describes itself as representing the interests of working families, fighting for equal opportunities and justice for all Americans, being committed to the conviction that wealth and privilege shouldn't be an entitlement to rule, and rescuing our economy not just in the short term but also rebuilding our economy for the long run—an economy that lifts up not just some Americans, but all Americans (Democratic National Committee, n.d.). Lofty goals, indeed.

University faculty tend to vote Democratic. In a 2005 survey, nearly 72% of full-time university faculty members identified themselves as politically liberal (Kurtz, 2005). Democrats are generally viewed as more liberal than Republicans.

Several Democratic presidents over the last 60 years have had an impact on the nation's involvement with or perception of physical education, fitness, and physical activity. John F. Kennedy made physical fitness a major principle of his administration. In 1963 he restructured the original President's Council on Youth Fitness to become the President's Council on Physical Fitness. Lyndon Johnson changed the name of the council to the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports and in 1966 established the Presidential Physical Fitness Award. Jimmy Carter spoke at the first national conference on physical fitness and

was the first U. S. president who was a self-described jogger. Bill Clinton was also a jogger, but balanced that off with a penchant for fast foods. Clinton issued an executive memorandum directing the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Secretary of Education to identify strategies to improve the fitness of our nation's youth (The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 2011). Barak Obama has reportedly quit smoking and stays physically active, most often by running and playing basketball. He is also a golfer. Once during his first presidential campaign he made national headlines when he demonstrated less than outstanding bowling skills during a campaign stop. President Obama's wife, Michelle, chose fighting childhood obesity as her primary target as first lady.

Although we hear quite a lot about the differences between the parties, they have at times come together to provide support for physical education and physical activity. For example, in 1987 the House of Representatives passed House Concurrent Resolution 97 that called for high-quality, daily physical education (Siedentop, 2009). Unfortunately, the resolution provided no funds, so not much came of it.

On the other hand, the Carol M. White Physical Education Program (PEP) is an example of the government putting money into a program for physical education. The PEP program provides grants to enhance physical education for students in kindergarten through 12th grade. This program was championed by Republican Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska whose strong support of the bill was critical to its adoption. The bill had strong bipartisan support. To date, PEP grants have provided an average of \$54 million per year for the improvement of K–12 physical education programs. But PEP funding is always in danger, and today PEP funds run the risk of being consolidated into the Safe, Successful and Healthy Students Initiative. If this consolidation occurs, physical education programs will have to compete with non-academic areas for funding (Carol M. White PEP grant competition, 2011). Our efforts are needed to help the PEP program continue as a stand-alone program. American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) regularly sends requests to its members asking them to contact their senators and representatives in Washington to support PEP funding.

Similarly, our support is needed to help pass the Fitness Integrated with Teaching (FIT) Kids Act (H.R. 1057/S. 576) (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, n.d.). This act would require schools to provide information about the quantity and quality of their physical education programs, support professional development for teachers and principals to promote healthy lifestyles and physical activity, and examine the effect of physical activity on student achievement. This act, sponsored by a Democrat, Tom Harkin, this is another example of federal legislation that supports what we are doing in kinesiology and physical education.

Campus Politics

National politics, however, play a much smaller role in our daily lives than campus politics. If politics is about people making group decisions, we have to pay attention to what people are doing on our own campuses. As E. Newton Jackson (2011) pointed out in a recent Sargent lecture, both The University of Florida and Florida State University have fairly recently discontinued their once strong undergraduate and graduate physical education programs at a time when the obesity crisis is receiving national attention. While I claim no personal insight into what was behind the elimination of those programs, it is clear that people were involved in making group decisions which in these cases were disastrous for those programs. Campus politics matter.

We have to stay politically involved. We cannot leave the important decisions to other people. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jill Carroll (2003) suggested that for adjunct

faculty to keep their jobs they should avoid campus politics. She contends that they have not had enough time to learn the history of the issues on campus, meet the players, or attend the meetings they would need to attend to be credible in the decision making process. While that may also be good advice for adjunct faculty and tenure track faculty as well, I suggest that we tenured faculty must be involved in the political process if we want to see our programs survive and flourish. We have to be on committees, go to faculty meetings, assume leadership positions, and be involved. In addition to being politically involved, which is a fairly general concept, here are some specific suggestions for political survival.

Perception

The first political goal is perception. Perception is an important weapon in the political arsenal. Dudley Sargent was no stranger to political perception. Early in his career as a professional gymnast he was subjected to “the public prejudice which I was later to know well and battle hard” (Sargent, 1927, p. 62). As he tried to make his fledgling gymnastics troupe profitable by touring throughout Maine, he met with resistance from parents prohibiting their children from attending the exhibitions, stemming from perceptions of physical activity being a waste of time. Physical activity had not yet received the support from the medical field that it has today.

Later, Sargent, then a medical doctor, made an interesting comment regarding one of the biases he perceived that affected his efforts to use physical activity as preventative medicine in the late 19th century. We may be dealing with these same biases today.

From the old days of slavery and serfdom, comes an idea that only menials work with their hands. The upper class of society uses only its brain and are consequently professional men. Based upon this absurdity is the prejudice that places surgeons in England socially below physicians, because the former, performing the operations done in the good old days by barbers, stoop to manual labor, while the latter, writing prescriptions upon pieces of paper in mysterious Latin terms, displaying learning and magic, occupy the position of priests and medicine men of primitive tribes . . . (O)ne can easily realize the intense prejudice which such censors of mankind would hold against a profession which originates in physical exercise. (Sargent, 1927, p. 193)

This battle of political perception continues today, even in our own field. Jan Rintala (2009) in her 2009 Amy Morris Homans lecture at this conference encouraged us to reflect on how we can better help people to enjoy the experience of moving—that physical activity doesn’t have to be solely for health. Douglas Booth (2009) also contends that it is the intrinsic pleasure in play that may be the most important factor in getting people physically active, yet it is pushed aside for political expediency as we emphasize physical activity for its contribution to “nationalist goals of performance (e.g., war, international sport) and health” (p. 139). So even if the intrinsic attraction of pleasure provides the best opportunity to increase physical activity in our students (which may be far stronger motivator than the benefit of better health at some point in the distant future) political expediency has thus far prevented pleasure from becoming the focus of our discipline. The health argument still dominates our justifications for physical education. This may or may not be an unfortunate situation. But in either case, flying the health banner is a good example of political awareness as we lobby state legislatures and school districts for support for physical education.

I am confident that everyone in this room believes strongly that physical education is a core subject in the public schools. Unfortunately, not everyone shares that perception. In the summer of 2011 the House Education and Workforce Committee passed a bill as part of its effort to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in which physical education was not listed as a core academic subject. Therefore, ESEA funds could not be spent on physical education programs in the public schools (AAHPERD, 2011). Negative political perception can come with a high price tag.

Public Relations

A part of the perception issue that we see daily in the political arena is public relations. We do good things in kinesiology and physical education. We have to be sure that the word gets out to the right people. One of Dudley Sargent's regrets in life was the lack of acceptance that physical education received in the academic community at Harvard. R. Tait McKenzie thought that Sargent's greatest error in judgment was his failure to identify himself more completely with the medical profession (McKinzie, 1927). Sargent would have done well to leverage his position as a medical doctor to push his physical education agenda.

Early on Sargent recognized the problem of convincing his constituents that physical education was a valuable undertaking. In his first collegiate appointment at Bowdon College in Maine Sargent recognized that "In launching any new course in the curriculum of a college, one has to consider the attitude of those who take no part in the actual work, but whose opinion carries weight among the people, as well as that of the supporters who advocate its cause with sympathy and fervor" (Sargent, 1927, p. 97). I contend that we all can identify those on our campuses who take no part in the actual work, but whose opinion carries a great deal of weight.

In 2012 we have a chance to take advantage of the opportunity that Sargent may have missed in 1870. Our discipline has much to offer on many fronts. The prediction that this will be the first generation of children to have shorter life expectancies than their parents due in part to physical inactivity (Olshansky et al., 2005) should stun people into support for what we do. The increasing prevalence of type II diabetes in children and the positive effect that physical activity has on the prevention of that disease should gain support for our discipline. The fact that we have support from the Centers for Disease Control lends invaluable credibility to what we are doing. The current research into the positive effects of exercise on brain development and academic achievement provides us with an unparalleled opportunity to reach out to our colleagues across our campuses. The enormous success of *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* by John Ratey, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, and Eric Hagerman (2008), gives us an opportunity to support our discipline that we cannot afford to miss.

The information is out there. The results are in. Yet it is up to us to promote what we are doing to the decision makers who will ultimately decide if our programs at our universities are going to be supported and enhanced or devalued and eventually eliminated.

Conflicting Interests

Despite the evidence of the need for strong kinesiology and physical education programs, not everyone on our campuses is going to support what we are doing. They have their own programs to worry about. Limited resources turn up the heat on Capitol Hill. So it goes on our campuses. Oliver (1992) contends that political pressures occur when relationships

change among established groups and key stakeholders and conflicting interests arise. She goes on to state that deinstitutionalization (read department elimination) happens when the larger organization (read College or University) sees that such a move protects its own interests.

Few, if any of us, can remember a time when resources have been tighter on our campuses. Limited resources magnify conflicting interests. On my campus we are hearing about how it is better to eliminate some programs than to allow all programs to die through the process of death by a thousand small cuts. And while none of us would suggest that there is any program on our campus more important than Kinesiology or Physical Education, faculty from other disciplines who feel just as strongly about their programs will do their best to argue that if a program needs to go, it must not be theirs.

The final decision about which programs go and which ones stay might not ultimately be determined by which program is in fact the most important for society. It may ultimately be determined by who has the best political connections or the program that has caught the eye of the right administrator.

Program Success Results in Political Acceptance

Of course nothing speaks more highly about a program to an administrator than that program's success. Dudley Sargent established summer courses in Physical Training at Harvard in 1887. Acceptance for his program did not come easily (Sargent, 1927). In the late 19th century, the administration at Harvard was concerned that people completing Sargent's summer program were receiving certificates of completion in a non-academic subject. Sargent also perceived a reluctance among the college faculty and administrators to recognize his program because of the (quoting from Sargent) "scandalously abbreviated costumes which physical exercises required for safety and comfort" (p. 207). However, when the program proved to be a huge success, physical education was fully accepted into the summer school curriculum at Harvard. Sargent writes:

The variety of people whom the Department of Physical Education attracted to Harvard Summer School filled the directors with wonder and admiration. Never had they imagined that the subject commanded the attention of people of such importance or of so many walks of life. Many a man who had looked upon the profession as a hobby of cranks and half-educated folk, silently changed his estimate. We had officers of the army and navy, we had school superintendents, college professors, principals of public and private schools, lawyers, physicians, and members of foreign embassies, as well as the school teachers, athletes, and gymnasts whom we expected." (p. 208).

In 1887, physical education had arrived at Harvard, to a large extent because of the well-respected people who were participating in and bringing credibility to the program. We have no less of an opportunity today. The Kenneth Coopers and John Rateys of the world, Healthy People 2020, and the Centers for Disease Control form an impressive group supporting what we have known for many years.

I am sure that good things are happening in the kinesiology and physical education programs on your campuses. Be sure that your administration is aware of the success of your programs. I am also sure that the public relations office on your campus is looking for success stories to share with the campus community, alumni, and the public at large. This is not the time to be self-deprecating. Do good stuff, and then let people know about it.

Thriving in the University Culture

So, what else can we do politically to move our profession forward? We must be advocates. It is crucial that we know who represents us in the legislature at both the state level and the national level. We have to stay informed about issues that affect our universities, the public schools, and our profession. We need to contact our national and state senators and representatives periodically to let them know what we are doing and where we stand on issues that they will be voting on. Most people don't. Individual contact carries a lot of weight in Washington and the state capitol, so we should take advantage of that. I encourage you to have your students contact their congress people as a class assignment. Our students need to learn early-on about the importance of being politically active. I will be taking a group of students from my campus to Washington, DC, this year for Speak Out Day, sponsored by AAHPERD. That opportunity is available to you, too.

What can you do at the campus level? You can get the word out. We cannot afford to hide our light under the proverbial bushel. When we have success, we need to let our deans and provosts know about it. I repeat—this is not the time for us to be self-deprecating, hoping that our administrators will stumble onto the good things that we are doing. If self-promotion makes you uncomfortable, you just need to get used to it.

I believe that we also must demonstrate personal responsibility. The candidates in the current presidential race are all striving to demonstrate their credibility to the voters, and that includes the extent to which they can demonstrate personal responsibility. You're not going to see a candidate who is courting environmentalists driving a Hummer. Neither are you going to see candidates seeking the support of the religious right visiting a mosque. And I get that.

Like most members of the voting public, I have very little patience for hypocrisy. It is very hard for me to listen to a right wing talk show host who shows little compassion for people in need and who speaks of the importance of the need for them to take personal responsibility, while he demonstrates little self control, weighing in at 232 pounds. Neither do I have any patience for the left wing politician who votes consistently to raise taxes, explaining that taxes are an important part of what it means to be an American, but doesn't pay taxes himself.

I propose that this is the most important time in our existence as a profession to practice what we preach. It is essential for us to teach our classes well, to conduct meaningful scholarship, to serve on important university committees, and to follow the NASPE position on physical activity and physical fitness of professionals in our field (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2010). I hope the faculty and administrators on our campuses see us taking the stairs instead of the elevator, using the fitness center, and scheduling in 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day. I hope they see that what we teach is important enough for us to make time for it in our busy schedules. In these ways we can demonstrate personal responsibility.

I feel very strongly that whom we elect to public office has a huge impact on us individually and who we are as a nation. I really hope that you are following the political debates closely and will vote your conscience regarding who you think will do the best job in leading our states and our nation. But even though I feel strongly about the importance of local, state, and national politics, I feel even more strongly about what we do as kinesiology and physical education professionals, and I want only the very best for our discipline. We cannot ignore the important role that politics plays in our lives if we hope to see kinesiology and physical education flourish in our contemporary culture.

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