

# Equipping Nurse Leaders for Elected Office: Healing Politics Q & A

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Lisa Summers, DrPH, MSN, RN

Healing Politics is a 501(c)3 nonprofit, nonpartisan organization with a mission to inspire and train nurses and midwives to run for elected office, up and down the ballot, while building a culture of civic engagement. To learn more, AONL spoke with Lisa Summers, DrPH, MSN, RN, Healing Politics co-founder and president.

## What was the impetus for forming Healing Politics?

Healing Politics began as a DNP project! I met my co-founder, Kimberly Gordon, in 2018 when she was a DNP student at Yale School of Nursing. Her DNP project explored the question, “Why are nurses so underrepresented in elected office, and what could we do to change that?” At the time, we had limited data, but we knew there had never been a nurse in the Senate and only six nurses in the House (three currently serve). Only 73 nurses are in state legislatures, and 14 state legislatures are without a single nurse. To encourage and train nurses to run for office, Kimberly and another DNP student developed the campaign school, scheduled to be held in May 2020. As you might guess, the pandemic forced a cancellation, but with a faculty, agenda and interested nurses ready to go, we decided to continue the work as a nonprofit nonpartisan educational organization. We were thrilled to hold that delayed campaign school three years later, in May 2023, and to host another this year.

## Why is it important for nurses to run for elected positions?

Representation matters! Political science tells us that elected bodies that look like the people they serve produce better public policy. The reason nurses are underrepresented in elected bodies is not because we don’t have the requisite skills. From school boards to Congress, nurses have skills well suited to elected office. They are accustomed to working in teams and finding solutions through collaboration. Nurses approach problems with a process that entails evaluating the evidence, implementing potential solutions and assessing the results. Nurses know the health care system, but their experience with social determinants of health makes them adept at addressing problems related to education, transportation, climate change and food insecurity, along with a host of other important policy issues. The public has trust in nurses at a time when trust is more important than ever. Nurse leaders should be particularly comfortable applying all these skills in the arena of public service.

## Your mission extends beyond motivating and training nurses to run for office to include building a culture of civic engagement. Why is that important and what does that entail?

Only a small percentage of nurses will run for elected office, but all nurses can improve the health of our communities through civic engagement! Whether it is nonpartisan activity like registering voters or being a poll worker, or working on political campaigns, nurses can have a significant impact.

For example, we are pleased to partner with [Vot-ER](#) - another nonpartisan, nonprofit organization — in their work to integrate civic engagement into health care. We encourage all nurses to commit to voting and all health care institutions to embrace nonpartisan voter registration (go to [Vot-er.org](#) to learn how). We also partner with [Power the Polls](#) to enlist a new generation of poll workers.

We host monthly online events providing practical training on these topics and many more — from writing op-eds to becoming engaged in board service. We encourage nurses to find what is comfortable for them; there are many ways to be involved!

## While many nurses are familiar with advocacy, not many know about running for office or working on a campaign. What is covered at the Healing Politics campaign school

The campaign school packs a lot into two-and-a-half intense days: campaign structure and organization, planning, budgeting; messaging and communications strategy; media training; ethics; campaign finance and fundraising; grassroots organizing and get out the vote efforts. The faculty are seasoned campaign professionals who have worked on nurses’ campaigns, along with nurses who serve in elected office. This is a campaign school designed by nurses for nurses and that shows in the curriculum and faculty. It is relevant for nurses who are considering a run for office, as well as those who are interested in managing a campaign. Perhaps as important as the topics covered are the networking and community that have been built. Healing Politics provides a place for nurses passionate about advocacy and politics to “find their people” and support one another.

## Healing Politics has developed a new one-day program, “So you’re thinking of running for office,” that includes questions to ask yourself before committing to run for office. What are some of the questions to consider?

Many nurses have told us they are interested but don’t know the right questions to ask. So, we start with “finding your why.” Is there a problem you want to fix? What is motivating you? And how would you communicate that to voters?

We explore how your resume will serve you as a candidate. What is your professional organization involvement? Community involvement? Party involvement?

An important question is: What office you are considering? While some aspects are consistent, a run for school board is a different undertaking than a run for Congress. It is important to explore whether the office you’re seeking matches the issues you care about. One very important question for many nurses is, can you work and serve? Other questions revolve around financing. And for many nurses, one of the most important questions is how a campaign (and serving in office) will impact their families.

We take a deep dive into each of these questions and help participants develop a candidate SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis. The responses are as individual as the nurses who express interest, but it provides a path to determining what sort of political engagement is best for that nurse in this moment.

## Do you have recommendations for nurses who would like to learn more about civic engagement and becoming involved politically?

Visit our website [Healing-Politics.org](#) and sign up for our monthly newsletter! Whether nurses are thinking about running, have decided to run, or simply want to help others, our information and programming will help. They can also join our growing following on [LinkedIn](#).

Some advice: Seek further engagement with AONL and your specialty association. Government affairs or advocacy committees are a way to connect with other nurses involved in politics and advocacy.

Become involved in an advocacy organization and work on a social, political or economic issue you care about. It could be a local affiliate of a national organization, or a state or local organization. Groups are working on many issues, from gun safety to water quality.

Visit your elected representatives. AONL and other organizations provide opportunities for Capitol Hill visits and local organizations can facilitate a visit to representative serving at the state level.

Work on a campaign. Volunteers are needed to make phone calls, deliver yard signs and canvass in neighborhoods. It is a great way to see what it takes to run a campaign. You don’t have to live in the candidate’s district to work on a campaign.

Get engaged in your political party. It varies greatly from state to state, but in most cases, being involved in a political party is important to running a successful campaign, should you choose to run.

Vote in every election.

Thank you for your interest in Healing Politics! We want to know how we can help AONL members improve the health of their communities through civic engagement.

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