

Metaphor Perceptions of Nurses Related to Policy

Hemşirelerin Politikaya İlişkin Metafor Algıları

Serap Altuntaş¹, Fatma Er²

¹Bandırma Onyedi Eylül University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Management in Nursing, Balıkesir, Türkiye

²Inonu University Faculty of Nursing, Department of Management in Nursing, Malatya, Türkiye

Cite as: Altuntaş S, Er F. Metaphor perceptions of nurses related to policy. Journal of Health and Nursing Management. 2026;13(1):1-9. **DOI:** 10.54304/SHYD.2026.79836

Abstract

Aim: The aim of this study is to determine perceptions of policy by nurses through metaphors.

Method: This is a descriptive study. The study sample included 424 nurses working in Turkey. The data were collected online using a personal information form and a questionnaire between 30 December 2022 and 1 March 2023. The analyses were carried out using frequencies and values as well as the content analysis method.

Results: The majority of the participants (53.1%) were not interested in policy, and only 1.7% attempted to participate in policy-related decisions. The participants produced 178 metaphors regarding policy, which were grouped into three themes (positive, negative, and neutral) and 20 categories. Among the positive metaphors produced by the participants were a beacon, a source of power, a problem-solving tool, and a source of life. The participants produced the following negative metaphors: lying, a broken clock, a mask, war, interest, a chameleon, and weather conditions. They employed the neutral metaphor of uncertainty.

Conclusion: The metaphors produced by the participants regarding policy were mostly negative, indicating that they had negative perceptions of policy.

Keywords: Metaphor, nurses, policy, political perception.

Öz

Amaç: Bu araştırma, hemşirelerin politikaya ilişkin algılarını metaforlar aracılığıyla belirlemek amacıyla gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Yöntem: Bu araştırma, tanımlayıcı türde bir araştırmadır. Araştırmanın örneklemini Türkiye’de görev yapan 424 hemşire oluşturmaktadır. Veriler, 30 Aralık 2022 - 1 Mart 2023 tarihleri arasında kişisel bilgi formu ve soru formu kullanılarak çevrimiçi olarak toplanmıştır. Analizler frekans ve değerlerin yanı sıra içerik analizi yöntemi kullanılarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Bulgular: Hemşirelerin çoğunun politikaya ilgi duymadığı (%53,1), sadece %1,7’sinin politik kararlara katılmaya çalıştığı görülmüştür. Politika kavramına ilişkin olarak hemşirelerin toplam 178 metafor ürettiği ve bu metaforların 3 ana kategori (olumlu, olumsuz, nötr) ve 20 alt kategori altında toplandığı belirlenmiştir. Hemşirelerin olumlu olarak ürettikleri metaforlar arasında yol gösterici, güç kaynağı, çözüm aracı, yaşam kaynağı vb. olduğu; olumsuz olarak ürettikleri metaforlar arasında yalancı, bozuk saat, maske, savaş, menfaat, bukalemun, hava durumu vb. olduğu, nötr olarak ise belirsizlik metaforunu ürettikleri belirlenmiştir.

Sonuç: Hemşirelerin politikaya karşı ürettikleri metaforların daha çok olumsuz olduğu yani politikayı olumsuz algıladıkları ortaya çıkmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Hemşireler, metafor, politika, politik algı.

Corresponding author / Sorumlu yazar: Fatma Er • fatma.er@inonu.edu.tr

Received / Geliş: 24.02.2025 • **Accepted / Kabul:** 08.03.2026 • **Published Online / Online Yayın:** 30.04.2026

Introduction

The concept of policy refers to rules established to regulate the lives of individuals in the workplace, school, or society to manage their behaviors or improve a service, as well as the principles and activities formed by decision-makers and governments to maintain or change these rules (Heywood, 2013; Türedi et al., 2019).

Policy introduces general rules to ensure order and fair sharing and involves an action plan that determines aims and principles that provide guidance for solutions to a certain problem (Heywood, 2013). It is also accepted as a conflict resolution process when interests are compromised (Heywood, 2013). Health and nursing policies can serve as examples of these. Nurses, one of the professions most affected by policies, should be sensitive to policies, be aware of ongoing developments, form positive or negative views of situations, adopt a critical perspective, and contribute to the development of new policies to protect themselves from ineffective policies regarding healthcare services or the profession and to resolve inadequacies (Alhassan et al., 2019; Kuşcu Karatepe, 2019; Williams, 2018).

The participation of nurses in the policymaking process and having political skills in the rapidly changing health systems in the world is necessary for the advancement of individuals, communities, and societies influenced by various health reforms as well as for the healthcare system (Salvage & White, 2019; Santillán-García, 2020; Wilson et al., 2022). This is because nurses, who constitute a great majority of health professionals, have a significant role in providing health services successfully (Cervera-Gasch et al., 2022). Hence, when developing health-sector policies—especially those affecting the nursing profession— with the aim of making effective decisions and empowering nurses, policymakers should ensure that nurses participate in decision-making and that their political knowledge, skills, and behaviors are developed. This is also very important in terms of promoting their protective roles (Arabi et al., 2014; Eren & Altuğ Özsoy, 2021; Han & Kim, 2020; Türedi et al., 2019).

How nurses perceive policy is important in terms of their participation in decisions that determine policies, as well as their political development and empowerment (Han & Kim, 2024). In understanding how individuals describe policy and their perceptions of policy, metaphors are accepted as a facilitating, valid, and commonly used tool (Sharoff, 2013). Metaphors are cognitive tools which individuals frequently use consciously or unconsciously in their daily lives and which are used to understand events, objects, and especially abstract concepts that are difficult to grasp by employing various similes (Keskin et al., 2019).

Nurses' perceptions of policy will be effective in creating policies, particularly with respect to their willingness to participate in political decisions. It will also affect their self-empowerment and, therefore, their ability to improve the profession and enhance occupational professionalism. However, it was reported that the political power of nurses was not at the desired levels, even in crisis periods (Çatıker, 2022), and managing nurses could not participate in health policies due to certain individual, organizational, and environmental factors (Hajizadeh, Zamanzadeh, Khodayari-Zarnaq, 2021). It has also been stated that nurses and nursing associations are apolitical, keep a distance from political issues, and have little political influence (Higazee & Gab Allah, 2022; Kuşcu Karatepe, 2019; Williams, 2018). It was emphasized that the reasons and antecedents of the low political influence of nurses should be investigated (Tiryaki Şen et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). This situation is thought to result from nurses' perspectives on policy. However, no study in which the political perceptions of nurses regarding policy were investigated was found in the literature. This study, conducted to address this need, aimed to determine nurses' policy through metaphors.

The results of this study will present the negative or positive perspectives and perceptions of nurses regarding policy and will reveal prejudices that may form barriers to strengthening nurses' political perspectives.

Method

Aim: The aim of this study is to determine perceptions of policy by nurses through metaphors.

Design and Research Question: This is a descriptive study. Answers to the following research questions were sought:

What are the metaphors used by nurses to describe their perceptions of policy? (What do nurses liken policy to?)

Population and Sample: The study population consisted of nurses working in Turkey (N = 227,292). The minimum sample size required for the study was calculated to be 384 participants, based on a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Convenience sampling was used. The online data collection form was distributed via social media platforms (WhatsApp and Instagram) and e-mail to nurses, who were invited to participate in the study. A total of 434 nurses were reached, of whom 424 agreed to participate. Thus, the participation rate among those who accessed the survey was 97.7%.

Data Collection Tools: The researchers collected the data using a personal information form and an online questionnaire. *Personal Information Form:* The form consisted of nine questions asking about participants' personal characteristics, such as age, gender, and education level. (marital status, position, clinic, professional experience, institution works and weekly working hours.

Questionnaire Form: A questionnaire form, examples of which are widely used in metaphor studies, was created by the researchers by reviewing the relevant literature (Kale & Çiçek, 2015; Keskin et al., 2019; Turan, 2022). The form consisted of two open-ended questions that aimed to determine what the participants likened the policy to and their reasons. The participants were asked to respond to the question "If you were to liken policy to an image/object, what would you liken it to? Why?" with the answer template "Policy is like ... because"

Data Collection: The data were collected between 30 December 2022 and 1 March 2023. The access link to the data collection tool, which was prepared online by researchers, was sent to nurses via social media platforms (WhatsApp, Instagram) and e-mail, inviting them to take part in the study. After clicking the online data collection link, participants were asked whether they agreed to participate and their consent was recorded. Examination of participants who completed the data collection forms showed that they did not have identical demographic characteristics. Thus, it was assumed that each participant filled out the forms once, and there were no repeated responses. Answering the questionnaire took approximately 7 minutes. Data were collected from 424 nurses.

Data Analysis: The personal characteristics of the participants were summarized as percentages and frequency distributions using the SPSS 25.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

While categorizing the data collected in this study, not only the metaphors provided by the participants but also their reasons for providing these metaphors were considered. This is because the same metaphor, created by two different individuals, may have been used with different meanings. Therefore, the analysis was performed to examine why the metaphor was produced.

During the analysis, metaphors created based on frequency of use were listed alphabetically. Metaphors with shared properties and related ones were grouped under specific conceptual categories. The reasons provided by the participants for the metaphors they produced were examined, and these concepts were categorized. At this stage, 20 categories under three themes, thought to best encompass the 178 metaphors produced, were formed. Then, some participants' responses that included evidence for the findings considered prominent regarding their metaphors about policy were set aside as examples. These statements are presented in the results section.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Bandırma Onyedi Eylül University Health Sciences Non-Interventional Research Ethics Committee (Date: 15.12.2022, Decision No: 2022/192). Additionally, potential participants were informed about the study. The explanatory text of the online survey form stated that participants' answers to the questions would be kept confidential and used only for the purposes of this study, and that participation was voluntary. Additionally, selecting the "I accept" option at the bottom of the text indicated that the participant agreed to participate voluntarily in the study. Participants who selected "I accept" were able to access the remaining questions and complete the data collection forms. Those who chose the option "I do not accept" were unable to see the other questions. All participants were included in the study after their consent was obtained using the informed consent form.

Limitations: This study had certain limitations. One of the limitations of the study was that the data were collected online rather than face-to-face. Another limitation is that the research results are based on nurses' self-reports. Also, data collection via open-ended online forms may have prevented participants from explaining the metaphors in greater depth. Voluntary participation in the online environment may lead to self-selection bias. The results of this study may be generalized only to the nurses who participated. In addition, insufficient studies on the subject have limited the ability to compare and discuss the research results.

Results

Individual and Professional Characteristics of the Participants

The majority of participants were older than 30 years (55.9%); 79.7% were female, 61.8% were married, 64.4% had undergraduate degrees, 61.8% worked in hospitals affiliated with the Ministry of Health, 82.1% were care nurses, and 40.1% worked in inpatient units. The participants had a mean work experience of 11.5 years.

Furthermore, the majority of participants were indifferent to policy (53.1%), while those who were interested in policy (25.0%) mostly followed the news on this issue. Only 1.7% of participants attempted to engage in political decision-making.

Themes of the Results

Participants produced 178 metaphors in total across three themes (positive, negative, and neutral) and 20 categories. The metaphors under these themes and categories are presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

Theme 1: Positive Perceptions of Policy (67 Metaphors)

Under the theme of positive perceptions of policy, the 67 metaphors used by the participants were grouped into 10 categories. The categories developed under positive perceptions of policy were “pathfinder, source of power, solution tool, source of life, strategy, organizer, difference, indispensable, balance, and belief.” The in which metaphors are most frequently used are pathfinder, source of power, source of life, and organizer. These categories are also presented as sub-themes. These sub-themes include statements regarding the most common metaphors created by the participants (Figure 1).

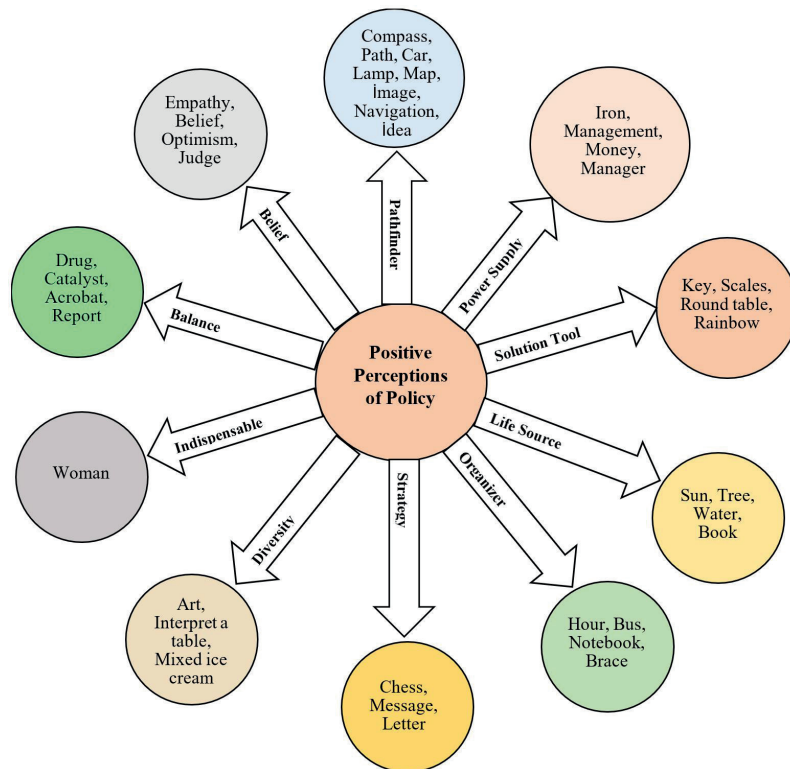


Figure 1. Representative positive metaphors about policy

Subtheme 1.1. Pathfinder: In this subtheme, participants mostly used the compass, path, car, and map metaphors. Participants' statements regarding these metaphors are as follows:

"Policy is like a compass, because it helps us find our bearings."

"Policy is like a path, because it gives us options in what we do and allows us to have different ideas."

"Policy is like a car or similar vehicle, because it gets us to our destination."

"Policy is like a map because it involves different routes to the target we aim for and different guides for reading the map. We select our guide and attempt to reach our objective."

Subtheme 1.2. Source of Power: In this subtheme, participants mostly used the iron metaphor. Participants' statements regarding this metaphor are as follows:

"Policy is like iron, because the power belongs to the politicians."

Subtheme 1.3. Source of life: In this subtheme, participants mostly used the sun and water metaphors. Participants' statements regarding these metaphors are as follows:

"Policy is like the sun, because it gives energy."

"Policy is like a spring of water, because in the right hands, policy can make our lives easier, guide us and take us further."

Subtheme 1.4. Organizer: In this subtheme, participants mostly used the clock metaphor. Participants' statements regarding this metaphor are as follows:

"Policy is like a clock, because it needs to function systematically, regularly, and perpetually."

"Policy is like a clock, because it teaches us to set the timing of our actions."

Theme 2: Negative Perceptions of Policy (95 Metaphors)

Under the theme 'negative perceptions of policy', the 95 metaphors used by the participants were grouped into nine categories. These categories were: "lying, disagreement, chaos, inconsistency, destructive, repulsive, and useless." The categories in which the most metaphors are used are lying, inconsistency, disagreement, and destructiveness. These categories are also stated as sub-themes. These sub-themes include statements about the most common metaphors created by participants (Figure 2).

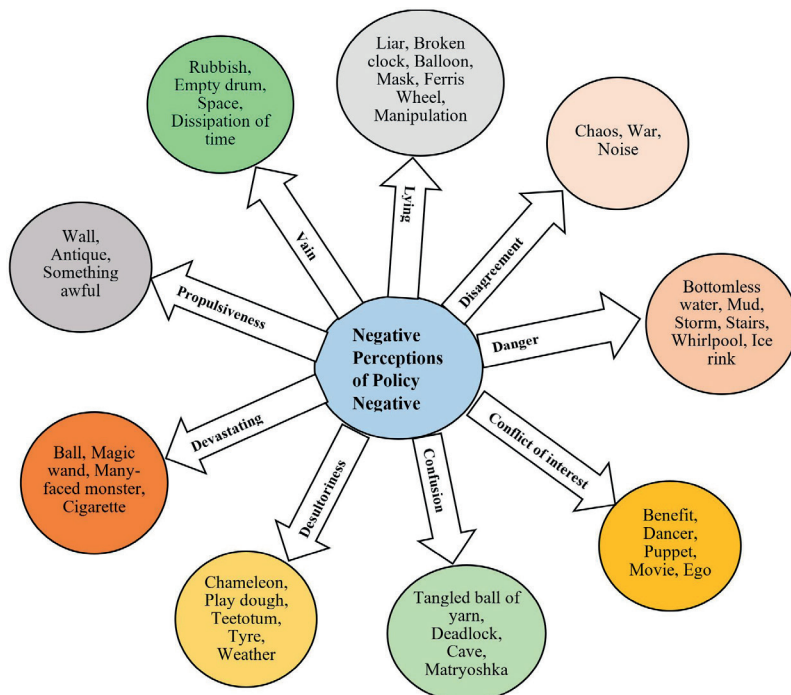


Figure 2. Representative negative metaphors about policy

Subtheme 2.1. Lying: In this subtheme, participants primarily used the liar, balloon, broken clock, and mask metaphors. Some participants' statements regarding these metaphors are given below:

"Policy is like lying, because tomorrow, they will deny what they say today and say different things."

"Policy is like a balloon, because it is filled with empty words. It is like a balloon. It is visible but empty inside. In our country, it is filled with empty promises and blows up in people's hands."

"Policy is like a broken clock, because it was useful when it first appeared and served a good cause, but later it has lost its function and shows the correct time only twice a day, and one cannot depend on it."

"Policy is like a mask, because it lacks values of ethics and justice."

Subtheme 2.2. Inconsistency: Participants primarily used the chameleon and the spinning-top metaphors. Some of the participants' statements regarding these metaphors are given below:

"Policy is like a chameleon, because it is shaped under the influence of situations and conditions, and it changes direction."

"Policy is like a spinning top, because it continuously changes and cannot be understood."

Subtheme 2.3. Disagreement: In this subtheme, participants mostly used the war and noise metaphors. Participants' statements regarding these metaphors are as follows:

"Policy is like a war, because various powers fight for their own interests."

"Policy is like a noise, because everyone tries to express their opinions, but it's hard to come up with a common idea."

Subtheme 2.4. Destructive: In this subtheme, participants mostly used the ball metaphor. Participants' statements regarding these metaphors are as follows:

"Policy is like a ball, because it can blow up at any time."

Theme 3: Neutral Perceptions of Policy (16 Metaphors)

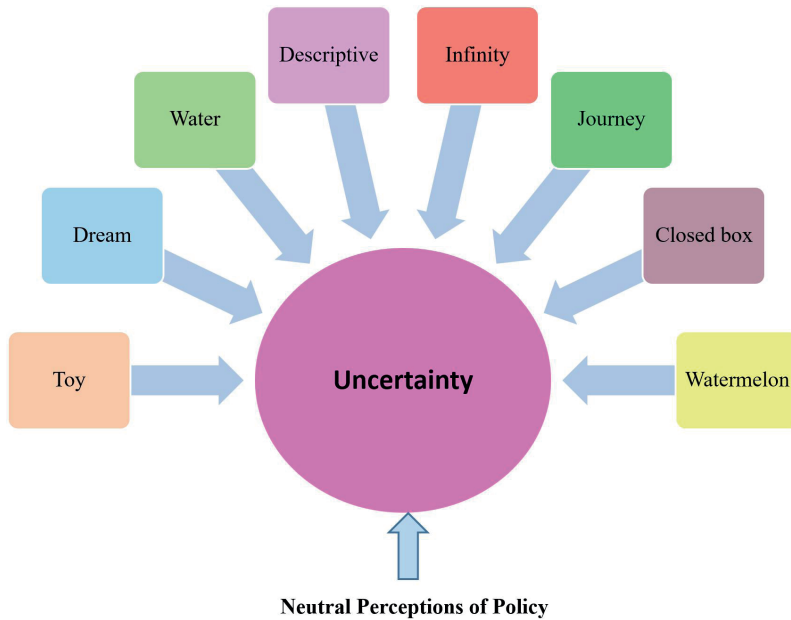


Figure 3. Representative neutral metaphors about policy

This theme was classified as neutral because the exact meaning of the metaphors expressed by the participants was unknown, and they did not lean towards any particular side. Under the theme of neutral perceptions of policy, the 16 metaphors used by the participants formed a single category named "uncertainty". The most frequently reported metaphors in this category were "boomerang, mirror, and closed box" (Figure 3). Some participants' responses were as follows:

"Policy is like a boomerang, because what we say and do comes around and affects us."

"It is like a mirror, because it reflects the inner world of human beings."

"Policy is like a closed box, because you cannot know what is inside; good or evil may come out."

Discussion

In this study, conducted to determine nurses' perceptions regarding policy, most participants were married, held undergraduate degrees, and worked as service nurses in public institutions.

It was observed that most participants were not interested in policy; those who were interested only followed the news, and only 1.7% tried to participate in political decisions. This situation may have resulted from participants' negative perceptions of policy, as evidenced by their producing more negative metaphors than positive ones.

The metaphors produced by the participants regarding policy were mostly negative (95 metaphors/53.4%), suggesting that they had negative perceptions of policy in general. These findings, which support their disinterest in policy, may be interpreted as an undesirable situation that prevents nurses from participating in political activities and from being involved in political decision-making mechanisms. Studies in this area have reported similar results that support the findings of this study. In a review by Smith et al. (2025), it was stated that professional nurses are not included in the policy development process due to multi-level barriers, hierarchical exclusion, and limited skills (Smith et al., 2025). Nurses' barriers to the policy development process include their perceptions and beliefs about their power, knowledge, and skills, as well as their lack of interest in policy development (Smith et al., 2025). In studies conducted, it was reported that nurses were disturbed by the concepts of policy and power (Beauvais, 2018), and they were members of only occupational organizations (Alhassan et al., 2019). Moreover, it was stated that nursing students had below-average political knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Cervera-Gasch et al., 2022), the political power of nurses was not at the desired level even in periods of crisis (Çatiker, 2022), and manager nurses could not participate in health policy for various reasons (Hajizadeh, Zamanzadeh, Khodayari-Zarnaq, 2021). Furthermore, nurses and nursing associations have been found to keep away from political issues and have little political influence (Higazee & Gab Allah, 2022; Kuşcu Karatepe, 2019; Williams, 2018). In a systematic review, it was stated that the reasons for nurses not participating in health policy making are resource limitations, lack of time, political knowledge, heavy workload, gender issues, negative images about nurses, management support, and fear of encountering the beliefs of others that negatively affect nurses' participation in the policy making process (Hajizadeh, Zamanzadeh, Kakemam et al., 2021). These findings demonstrate nurses' distance from policy and their disinterest in it, and suggest that this situation stems from their negative perceptions.

Because most participants in this study were female, their perceptions regarding policy may have been predominantly negative. This is because Turkish society is patriarchal, encouraging women to assume more domestic roles, whereas men are encouraged to assume roles related to the public sphere. This situation may lead men and women to hold different interests within society. Although increases in education and income levels today have reduced the prevalence of gender inequality, traditional roles persist and continue to shape the interests of women and men. Therefore, gender roles are considered to keep women away from their areas of interest in policy and cause the political tendencies of men and women to differ (Atabey & Hasta, 2018).

The positive metaphors produced by the participants (beacon, source of power, solution tool, source of life, regulator, strategy, difference, indispensable, balance, and belief) were a pleasing finding that showed some nurses had positive perceptions of policy, albeit not yet at the desired level. In another study, the political skill levels of nurses were determined to be above-average (Tiryaki Şen, 2021). These findings are considered promising for strengthening the political qualities of nurses, and they are believed to have significant potential for addressing issues related to healthcare and the nursing profession. In this study, a very small proportion of participants expressed neutral perceptions of the policy. This situation may be an opportunity to change their perceptions in a positive direction. The International Council of Nurses (ICN) strongly emphasizes and supports efforts to enhance nurses' preparedness for policy development (Smith, 2014).

Conclusion

Consequently, nurses predominantly produced negative metaphors about policy. In other words, their perceptions of policy were negative. This situation appears to be the greatest barrier to nurses' involvement in political activities and policy creation.

As a result of the study, nurses produced positive metaphors related to policy, and very few had neutral perceptions of policy. These findings are considered promising in terms of strengthening the political qualities of nurses, and they are believed to have a significant potential in terms of issues related to healthcare and the profession of nursing. This suggests that nurses can overcome barriers to policy development and acquire the skills necessary to do so. Nurses' acquisition of

knowledge through research about the importance of policy creation and development can help eliminate their negative attitudes towards policy. In addition, their policy-related leadership skills and motivation can be developed.

Implications for Practice: In line with the results of this study, nursing curricula should be designed to increase prospective nurses' awareness of policy at the beginning of their profession (i.e., during their education); to foster their interest in policy by teaching the concept comprehensively and accurately; to help them develop political literacy; to improve their skills through debates and forums on creating health policies; and to cultivate positive perspectives toward policy. It is also recommended that nurse managers provide nurses with opportunities to participate in political decision-making, strengthen nurses' political engagement by promoting political behaviors, instill trust and courage by supporting politically active nurses, and mentor them. In future research, the policy perspectives of both nurses and nursing students can be evaluated at regular intervals, and any negative perspectives can be addressed by providing training and information on the subject.

Author Contribution: The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows; study conception and design: SA, FE; data collection: SA, FE; analysis and interpretation of results: SA, FE; draft manuscript preparation: SA, FE. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Ethics Committee Approval: Bandırma Onyedi Eylül University Health Sciences Non-Interventional Research Ethics Committee approval was obtained (Date: 15.12.2022 - Number: 2022/192).

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding: The authors declare that the study has no financial support.

Informed Consent: Informed consent of the participants were obtained.

Yazarlık Katkısı: Yazarlar makaleye katkılarını şu şekilde beyan etmektedir; çalışma fikri ve tasarımı: SA, FE; veri toplama: SA, FE; sonuçların analizi ve yorumlanması: SA, FE; aday makalenin hazırlaması: SA, FE. Tüm yazarlar sonuçları gözden geçirdi ve makalenin son halini onayladı.

Etik Kurul Onayı: Bandırma Onyedi Eylül Üniversitesi Sağlık Bilimleri Girişimsel Olmayan Araştırmalar Etik Kurulu tarafından onaylanmıştır (Tarih: 15.12.2022 - Karar No: 2022/192).

Çıkar Çatışması: Yazarlar herhangi bir çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan ederler.

Finansal Destek: Yazarlar çalışmanın finansman desteği olmadığını beyan ederler.

Katılımcı Onamı: Katılımcıların bilgilendirilmiş onamları alınmıştır.

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