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Structural Factors and Voting Decisions by Recipients of Means -Tested Government Assistance Programs, Who are Enrolled in Community Colleges

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Structural Factors and Voting Decisions by Recipients of Means -Tested Government Assistance Programs, Who are Enrolled in Community Colleges

Adelaide K. Sandler, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2017

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored how recipients of means-tested government assistance programs, who are enrolled in community colleges, make decisions about voting, and how structural factors affect their decision to vote. It used a grounded theory approach to generate knowledge about why some recipients of means-tested assistance vote and others choose not to vote. The qualitative design provided the framework to unpack motivations for voting or not. There have been no social work studies on this topic, and few political science studies have been conducted using qualitative data.

Several major findings were discovered in this study. Distinct voter types emerged of dedicated voters, voters, dedicated nonvoters, and nonvoters. Each voter type makes decisions about voting and not voting based on different criteria. Dedicated voters and dedicated nonvoters are thoughtful in their voting decision making, and are aware of the relationship between electoral

politics and means-tested government assistance. In other words, they make informed voting decisions. Voters and nonvoters are less thoughtful and less aware of this relationship and do not make informed voting decisions. Analysis of these voter types allowed for the differentiation between the sub-processes related to empowerment. Implications are important to social work to inform consideration of how to promote effective voting by recipients of means-tested government programs. Because each voter type bases their decision making about voting on different factors, a variety of interventions are needed to encourage informed voting by all.

Keywords: means-tested government assistance, voting decisions, social work, empowerment, political inequality

Structural Factors and Voting Decisions by Recipients of Means-Tested Government Assistance
Programs, Who are Enrolled in Community Colleges

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2017

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APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Structural Factors and Voting Decisions by Recipients of Means -Tested Government Assistance
Programs, Who are Enrolled in Community Colleges

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2017

DEDICATION

Dedicated to mothers everywhere: especially mothers who are recipients of means-tested government assistance, and mothers who are pursuing higher education.

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Thank-you to Dr. Nancy A. Humphreys for her continued guidance, support, and mentorship. This research was inspired by her work and commitment to increase voter turnout of vulnerable populations. Thanks also to Dr. Cristina Wilson and Dr. Thomas Hayes for being on my committee and for their insights and encouragement. I am deeply appreciative to Maureen Dimock Clark for her tireless co-coding, intellectual support, and friendship. Special thanks to the faculty and staff at Three Rivers, Capital, and Tunxis Community Colleges for allowing me to conduct this research at their campuses. Most importantly, thanks to the twenty-eight participants of this study. Their honesty and authenticity gave this study meaning and importance, and their voices will continue to inspire my future research.

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INTRODUCTION

This section will provide background data about why voting matters, how voter turnout is related to the allocation of public resources and responsiveness of elected officials, the individual benefits of voting for voters, and the decline in voter turnout. In addition, it will delineate the problem of low voter turnout by low-income citizens, especially those receiving means-tested government assistance. Lastly, the significance of this research to the social work profession will be explained.

Who Votes Matters

Despite the fact that the United States of America was founded on the principles of democracy and a representative government, politicians prioritize the needs of citizens who engage in the highest and most frequent levels of political participation (Bartels, 2008; Griffen & Newman 2005; Leighley & Nagler, 2014). Therefore, the collective needs of those who vote less are not prioritized, nor are they reflected in governmental policies (Bartels, 2008; Campbell, 2007; Martin, 2003; Piven, 2011; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2003). For those groups historically known not to vote---the poor, the less educated, minorities, immigrants, and young people---the consequences of not voting are significant (Rolfe, 2013; Piven & Cloward 2000).

Voting blocs with lower voter turnout rates lose influence over elected officials to represent their groups' interests and needs (Leighley & Nagler, 2014). "Because the poor vote and participate less than other groups, the political system has often been free to ignore them" (Gans, 1972, p.283). Political parties and candidates do not even mobilize those known not to vote. Who votes matters because politicians (elected by wealthy citizens, PACs, and lobbyists)

enact policies that maintain the status quo, benefit the rich, and stigmatize the poor. As a result, higher income citizens feel valued, which reinforces their voting behavior, and lower income citizens feel alienated, which reinforces their non-voting behavior, thus perpetuating the political cycle that leads to inequality (Hacker, Mettler, & Soss, 2007; Leighley & Nagler, 2014).

This dynamic is institutionalized in our political system. Past and current practices such as poll taxes, literacy tests, political gerrymandering, strict voter identification requirements, and voter registration purges have been used to suppress voting by groups with policy interests opposite of those in power. President Obama referred to this at his last press conference on January 18, 2017:

The reason that we are the only country among advanced democracies that makes it harder to vote is it traces directly back to Jim Crow and the legacy of slavery. And it became sort of acceptable to restrict the franchise.

American politics has been shaped by the historic under-representation of vulnerable populations (Piven & Cloward, 2000). As President Obama said in 2015, “It would be transformative if everybody voted -- that would counteract money more than anything...” (Yan, 2015). In other words, elected officials would have incentive to represent all their constituents, not just the wealthy. Who votes is important in determining priorities of politicians and government policy.

Importance of Voting

The “transformative” power of “everybody voting” is illustrated by data that shows when citizens with the lowest income levels vote at higher rates, politicians are more likely to increase government spending on programs important to them (Franko, Kelley & Witko, 2014; Larcinese,

2007; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). States with less restrictive welfare policies and fewer welfare spending cuts have the highest levels of voter turnout among lower socioeconomic groups (Avery & Peffley, 2005; Hill, Leighly, & Hilton-Anderson, 1995; Johnson, 2001). “Municipalities with higher turnout spend more on welfare and other redistributive programs favored by minorities and less on areas favored by more advantaged whites” (Hajnai, 2010, p.175). Furthermore, congresspersons give more federal resources to the geographic areas within their congressional districts that have the highest voting rates (Martin, 2003). Conversely, they are less likely to consider policy positions of constituents in areas with the lowest voting rates (Martin & Claibourn, 2013). These examples underscore the pertinence of this study to improving the general welfare of populations served by the social work profession.

In addition to these community benefits, data suggests the act of voting is beneficial to individuals. Voters have better health and greater happiness in comparison to nonvoters (Klar & Kasser, 2009; Sanders, 2001). Regardless of election outcomes, voters feel more positive, more connected with others, and more satisfied than nonvoters (Klar & Kasser, 2009). For other voters, voting has been found to combat some of the negative mental health consequences related to stress associated with discrimination, oppression, poverty, and unfair treatment (Sanders, 2001). Furthermore, casting a ballot enhances an individual's capacity for self-advocacy and sense of competence (Hanrahan, Matorin, & Borland, 1986; Postle & Beresford, 2007), increases a sense of empowerment by those with psychiatric disabilities (Davis, 2010), and lowers recidivism rates among ex-offenders (Florida Vote Parole Commission, 2010). Lastly, regardless of the level of election (local or national), voting is positively associated with economic well-being (Weaver, 2012).

Decline in Voter Turnout

Since 1964 voter turnout in the United States has been on the decline--- 69.3 % of all eligible voters cast a ballot in the 1964 presidential election, 63.6% voted in 2008, and 61.8 % voted in 2012 (Census Bureau Press Release, May 8, 2013). Declining voter turnout rates are common on the national, state, and local levels. Yet, as will be discussed later, many potential voters believe their vote does not count. The decision to vote or not vote has consequences, despite what some believe. Unofficial reports of the 2016 presidential election are that just over 56% of eligible voters went to the polls, the lowest rate since 2000 (Becker, 2016). More than 120 million ballots were cast, but the election was decided by 107,000 people in three states: Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania. This number equals .09% of all votes cast in this election (Meko, Lu, & Gamio, 2016). Certainly, this is an example that voting does matter.

Historically, voter turnout in midterm elections is lower than presidential elections and has been dropping significantly across the United States (Maciag, 2014). The 2014 midterm election had the lowest national turnout in more than seventy years with only 36.3% of registered voters casting a ballot (The New York Times Editorial Board, 2014). In forty-three states, less than half the eligible population cast a ballot, and no state had voter turnout above 60% (The New York Times Editorial Board, 2014).

Voter turnout in local elections is even less. In 2015, average voter turnout in Connecticut local elections was 32.73% but was even less in cities with higher concentrations of lower-income people. For example, voter turnout in Hartford was 19.9 % (Merrill, 2015), and only half of Hartford's residents are even registered to vote (Hartford Department of Health and Human Services' Community Health Needs Assessment, 2012). Major cities also are experiencing this

trend of low voter turnout in local elections, even in highly publicized elections. In the 2013 New York City mayoral election, Bill de Blasio won in a “landslide” but only 24% of voters even went to the polls, the lowest voter turnout in New York City mayoral elections since at least the mid-20th century (Roberts, 2013).

This trend has significant consequences for local communities. Statistical findings suggest if voter turnout increased at the local level, there would be different election outcomes in mayoral and city council races and more representation of Latinos and Asian Americans on city councils (Hajnal, 2010). Low voter turnout by Latinos, Asian Americans, and African Americans in local elections contributes to inadequate local resources and services (Hajnal, 2010). Ironically, literature and data suggest citizens are least informed and least interested in local elections, which have the greatest potential to affect their immediate environment.

The death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri illustrates this dynamic. Before the police shooting of Michael Brown, Ferguson police raised revenue through traffic stops disproportionately targeting and negatively impacting people of color. At that time only 12.9% of the eligible voters cast a ballot in Ferguson, resulting in a nearly all-white city council representing a community comprised of 70% African Americans (Basu, 2015). Brown’s death and subsequent riots highlighted the connection between voter turnout and local policy. As a result, a significant effort was made to register voters in Ferguson, which was successful. In 2015 almost 30% of the eligible population voted in the Ferguson city election, and now the city council is 50% African American (Basu, 2015).

In summary, voting is important. When vulnerable populations vote in greater numbers, elected officials respond with policies more reflective of their needs. If lower-income citizens

voted at similar rates as other citizens, governmental assistance might be more progressive, resulting in greater equality and access to services by marginalized populations (Franko, Kelley, & Witko, 2014). Nationally, voter turnout is on the decline and most elections are determined by very small margins. Increased voting by groups with historically lower voting rates can make a significant impact on election outcomes and subsequent policy priorities by elected officials. For example, “even in landslides, most states’ electoral votes are won by margins of 5 percent or less, so the 6.8 million additional low-income voters (6.5 percent of the total electorate) could decide the outcome” (Shipler, 2005, p. 288). Lastly, voting has the ability to increase the psychological happiness of individuals.

Despite the preponderance of evidence suggesting that voting is important, many scholars and political elites contend low voter turnout actually increases government functioning and cohesiveness (Gans, 1972). Many believe that nonvoting is a sign of satisfaction and support for the status quo. For them, “the size of the non-voting population actually demonstrates the strength of the American democracy” (Piven & Cloward, 2000) and is used to justify government policies. Others believe that low voter turnout improves government efficacy by reducing political conflict and lessening the economic demands of government institutions. For over forty years, George Will has maintained that lower voter turnout increases the “quality of the electorate” and that efforts to make voting more “convenient” hurts government by encouraging the “slothful” and “uninformed” to vote (Will, 2008). These beliefs emphasize the need for social work research, analysis, and advocacy related to voting in order to represent the voices of low income nonvoters and further economic and social justice.

Problem Statement

Low voter participation, particularly of marginalized populations, is a problem because it reduces democracy and responsive governmental solutions to problems of those who typically do not vote (Bartels, 2008; Campbell, 2007; Frasure & Williams, 2009; Piven, 2011; Shipler, 2005; Verba, Schlozman, Brady, & Nie, 1993). Elected officials often base policy decisions not on the greatest need of all citizens but on the needs of groups historically known to vote---elderly, wealthier, and educated Americans (Leighley & Nagler, 2014; Rolfe, 2014). The income of those who receive means-tested government assistance depends on the actions of elected officials, and therefore it is especially harmful when this group has low voter turnout. Unlike broad-based/universal programs (G.I. Bill, Medicare, and Social Security), means-tested benefits are increased only when elected officials take political action to increase them. For example, because of “in-action” since the 1970’s, the value of food-stamps and welfare (AFDC and TANF) has been reduced significantly (Hacker, Mettler, & Soss, 2007) and stricter limits to eligibility have been put in place. This has occurred at the same time as restrictions to voting have been increased and voting rates have declined.

No conclusive theory explains why vulnerable populations vote less or how to increase their voting (Rolfe, 2013). Low voter turnout among recipients of means-tested government assistance is especially problematic because election outcomes impact the benefits on which they depend. This is important to social workers because recipients of means-tested government assistance are often our clients. Thus, social work as a profession can play a valuable role in encouraging their voting. This research explores structural barriers to voting and the decision-making process to vote or not to vote by those who receive means-tested government assistance and for whom election outcomes have the greatest significance. Such focus is congruent with the NASW Code of Ethics (2006) to

improve the general welfare of society and promote social justice.

Significance of Study

Historically, social workers from Jane Addams to more recently Richard Cloward and Nancy A. Humphreys have been committed to increasing voting participation. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context. The profession's foundation rests on its commitment to improve the fit between person-and-environment, which is influenced by social policy enacted by politicians, who are elected by citizens. However, the profession has struggled with how to incorporate practices to increase voter turnout and encourage the critical consciousness needed to vote in one's self-interest (Lane, Humphreys, Matthews, Graham, & Moriarity, 2007).

Through her work at Hull-House, Jane Addams viewed poverty as a consequence of economic, social, and political structures, not individual deficits (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999). She believed social reform was necessary to improve conditions of those living in poverty and worked to change state and national laws to do so. In addition to being political advocates, settlement workers were educators for democracy by aiding immigrants in becoming citizens, registering voters, and informing residents about social issues. Addams (1902) believed that without "real" democracy, meaning all citizens vote in the same proportion, the needs of people living in poverty would not be met. She was an active member in the National American Woman Suffrage Association and hoped the added votes of women would bring about social reform (Levine, 1971). Once the 19th Amendment was signed into law in 1920, Addams became a member of the League of Women Voters to encourage informed voting by women. More recently, social workers Richard A. Cloward and Nancy A. Humphreys added voting to the menu of social work services in the their

establishment of Human SERVE (Service Employees Registration and Voter Education) and the Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work (respectively).

In 1983 Richard A. Cloward and Francis Fox Piven founded Human SERVE at the Columbia School of Social Work (Barker, 2014). Its goal was to mobilize social workers and social work students to register voters and participate in related GOTV activities through NASW and schools of social work, in advance of the 1984 election between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. Additionally, it mobilized national social service and women's organizations, like Planned Parenthood, to register their clients. As a result, seven million new voters were registered to vote, yet voter turnout in the 1984 Presidential election declined (Piven & Cloward, 2000).

In the 1980's, voters were required to register in-person, with a specific registrar designated to a geographic area, which made it difficult for agencies to register clients (Lane, Humphreys, Matthews, Graham, & Moriarity, 2007). The efforts of Human SERVE to register voters provided them firsthand experience in navigating the hindrances of the voter registration process. This prompted Human SERVE to lobby for legislation to modernize voter registration and allow agencies serving poor and minority people to register voters (Piven & Cloward, 2000). With substantial effort, organization, and mobilization of other social service agencies, the National Voter Registration Act of 1991 was passed by Congress but vetoed by President George H. Bush. Two years later, the National Voter Rights Act of 1993, commonly known as the Motor Voter Law, was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Bill Clinton on May 20, 1993. This legislation made voter registration easier and more accessible by giving citizens the opportunity to register to vote when applying for a driver's license, welfare assistance, or any other government program (Barker,

2014).

Nancy A. Humphreys, who had been an advocate for Human SERVE, founded the Institute for Political Social Work, later to become the Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work (NAHIPSW) at the University of Connecticut's (UConn) School of Social Work. The Institute's mission was twofold: (a) to get more social workers elected to office, and (b) to increase political empowerment of social work clients (Nancy A. Humphreys, personal communication, January 19, 2017). In 2000, the NAHIPSW began an annual nonpartisan voter registration project at UConn's School of Social Work to educate students and social service agencies on the importance of voter registration. Each fall MSW students in field placements work in cooperation with their agencies to conduct nonpartisan voter registration drives, which has resulted in thousands of voters being registered. Recently, in 2015, the NAHIPSW launched a pilot program with the Schools of Social Work at the University of Connecticut and the University of Nevada, Reno to include content on nonpartisan voter engagement in required curricula and field placement activities. Its goal is to create a culture of nonpartisan voter engagement within social work education and practice.

Nancy A. Humphreys conceptualized three legs of a stool necessary for all people to access political power: (a) They must register to vote, (b) they must vote, and (c) they must base voting decisions on their self-interest to protect their basic human rights. (Nancy A. Humphreys, personal communication, January 19, 2017). Casting a ballot is considered to be in the interest of recipients of means-tested assistance because regardless of for whom they vote, elected officials are more responsive to demographic groups with higher rates of voter turnout (Humphreys, personal communication, January 19, 2017). Voting is recognized as a

basic right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights because it allows citizens to influence governmental decision making about policies to protect their economic and social rights and to assure their basic needs (housing, food, healthcare, education, and safety) are met (Wronka, 2015). When voter turnout of any one particular demographic or social group is significantly less than other groups, that group loses its power to protect its basic economic and social rights. This dissertation begins to address the missing third leg of Humphreys' metaphorical voting stool.

Its purpose was to explore how recipients of means-tested government assistance programs, who are enrolled in community colleges, make decisions about voting and how structural factors affect their decision to vote. Insights gained from this research can direct future research and provide evidence to inform the creation of effective direct service interventions and policy recommendations by social workers. Furthermore, this research illustrates how the intersection between micro and macro knowledge and practice in social work can be used to further social justice. As such, it addresses the eleventh grand challenge for social work as identified by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare "to promote social and economic participation for all." There is a direct relationship between voting participation and social and economic policy. Therefore, efforts to increase effective voter participation can be used as a strategy to increase responsive social policy by electing candidates representative of client populations served by social workers, with policy positions congruent to social work values. The findings and implications of this dissertation are critical for the social work profession to consider in respect to our commitment to promoting the general welfare of society.

Lastly, it should be noted that data was collected between October, 2015 and February,

2016 during a time when national attention was focused on the Republican and Democratic political races leading up to the 2016 presidential primary elections. These political races dominated the news cycle, late-night comedy, and social media. As many as twenty-three GOP candidates ran to be the Republican nominee before hopefuls began dropping out. GOP candidates garnering support included: Donald Trump, Ben Carson, Senator Ted Cruz, Gov. John Kasich, Senator Mark Rubio, former Governor Jeb Bush, and Senator Rand Paul. On the Democratic side, Senator Bernie Sanders drew huge crowds and media attention challenging Hillary Clinton's run for the White House. During the time data was collected, Republican and Democratic debates were held, Benghazi hearings occurred, the U.S. State Department announced its review of Hillary Clinton's emails, Clinton and Trump won the Iowa caucuses, and Sanders and Trump won the New Hampshire primary. These events may have influenced the perceptions of participants about how they make voting decisions.

Summary

This chapter introduced the importance of voting to affect the outcome of elections and influence social welfare policy. Inherently, elected leaders prioritize the needs of citizens who engage in the highest and most frequent levels of political participation (Bartels, 2008; Griffen & Newman 2005; Leighley & Nagler, 2014). Conversely, the collective needs of those who vote less are not prioritized nor are they reflected in governmental policies. The decline of voter turnout in the United States continues and is especially alarming in local elections. This chapter discussed and gave examples of how rates of voter turnout affect the ability of demographic groups to influence their elected officials and gain access to public resources. It highlighted how social workers have worked to improve the functioning of voting as a conduit for democracy and increasing the general welfare of all citizens. The results of this study can provide valuable

insight into how recipients of means-tested government programs make decisions about voting.

This can in turn inform micro and macro interventions to increase voting of marginalized populations as a strategy to promote the enactment of policy that is responsive to the needs of all citizens.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will review social work and political science research related to factors promoting and impeding voting. Particular focus will be given to demographic predictors, socio-psychological factors, environmental/social contexts, and structural barriers related to voting. In the conceptual framework section, critical constructionism, internalized oppression, political framing, and empowerment theory will be reviewed. Empowerment theory will be deconstructed and used as a framework to understand how and what factors affect a recipient's decision to vote or not.

Background

Research about voting has been primarily located in political science literature that emphasizes quantitative methods to identify demographic factors related to voting. The study of elections and voting began in political science literature during the 1930's and 1940's as scientific behavioral analysis emerged (Bond, 2007). V.O. Key (1908-1963) pioneered the study of elections and voting behavior. In 1942, Key published one of the first textbooks that covered quantitative studies related to voting behavior. Similar to research today, Key's textbook reported that wealth, race, and party affiliation were important characteristics associated with voting, and that voter choice was determined by "economic status, change in economic status, cultural background characteristics, and business cycles" (Bond, 2007, p. 903). Additionally, voter turnout was understood to be linked to the policy positions of elected officials. "The blunt truth is that politicians and officials are under no compulsion to pay much heed to classes and groups of citizens that do not vote" (Key, 1949, p. 527). Much of the focus, methodology, and purpose of political science research on voting remains the same today. A plethora of literature exists about statistical data related to voting behavior, and there is agreement that those with

lower incomes vote less and that politicians have no reason to consider the policy interests of groups who vote less.

In contrast, social work literature on voting emerged more recently and focused on how to get the profession more involved with encouraging informed voting by the clients we serve--- lower-income vulnerable groups. This literature first appeared when Human SERVE was founded to encourage social workers, social work students, and community agencies to register voters and increase voter turnout of lower-income, historically disenfranchised citizens. There is research focused on civic engagement and increasing the profession's awareness of political participation, which mentions voting. However, there are only two social work articles solely focused on voting: One is focused on voter registration strategies (Lane, Humphreys, Matthews, Graham, & Moriarity, 2007), and the other is focused on the merits of encouraging clients with psychiatric disabilities to vote (Davis, 2012).

No voting-related research has been conducted from the perspective of recipients of means-tested government assistance programs. Walsh (2012) used a qualitative method to understand voter decision making in rural Wisconsin. Other studies (Hirshi, Rank, & Kussi-Appouch, 2011; Rank, 1994) have explored attitudes of welfare recipients about welfare, causes of poverty, and governmental assistance but not how such attitudes affect their decisions to cast a ballot or not. This gap in research limits the effectiveness of strategies designed to increase voting of vulnerable populations. Rolfe (2013) notes, "As a result of incomplete understandings of the causes of turnout, policies designed to increase participation have often failed to achieve their aims" (p.2). It is important social work expand research on voting to include voices of the clients served by the profession. The aim of this dissertation is to begin to fill this gap in research in order to gain insight into why recipients of means-tested government assistance

programs vote less, in order to inform micro practice and macro advocacy.

Factors that Promote and Impede Voting

Demographic/Individual Predictors

There is a socioeconomic divide between voters and nonvoters, with the wealthy and the most educated voting more and in their own self-interest (Pew Research Center, 2012; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Those with higher levels of education face fewer obstacles to voting such as time, transportation, and ID requirements. Additionally, through their educational experiences, the better-educated gained greater internal capacities for voting---political knowledge, interest, and civic skills (Beaumont, 2011; Hillygus, 2005; Ozymy, 2012; Verba Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Likewise, exposure to political experiences as well as voting in families also promote voting (Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2003). Family discussions about politics, current events, and government also increase political knowledge and interest. Both educational and family experiences related to voting increase an individual's sense of self-efficacy and agency, which increases the likelihood they will cast a ballot (Beaumont, 2011; Hillygus, 2005; Ozymy, 2012; Verba Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

On the other hand, citizens with the lowest income levels are the least likely to vote (Pew Research Center, 2014; Bartels, 2008). Nonvoters are more likely to be poor, less educated, younger, and non-white (Pew Research, 2014; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1972 & 1995). Nonvoters are more likely than voters to have family incomes of less than \$30,000, have trouble paying their bills, receive a means-tested government benefit, and are more likely to lack health insurance (Pew Research Center, 2014). Lower-income people are less likely to vote because of structural barriers hindering their ability to get to the polls, apathy

(Piven & Cloward, 2000), and their belief that politicians neither care nor address social issues relevant to them (Blau, 2014). One exception to lower rates of voting by lower-income people is when lower-income college students have a student loan. In this case, the status of having a student loan creates a “self-interest” to vote in lower-income college students that is greater than in their more affluent counterparts, resulting in higher voting turnout rates for this specific demographic (Ozmy, 2012). This is noteworthy because it highlights a unique condition reversing the correlation between low incomes and lower voting rates within a cohort. Additionally, it is in contrast to the effect of receiving means-tested government assistance, which data shows does not lead to greater feelings of “self-interest,” but rather to greater feelings of alienation, which in turn is associated with lower voter participation.

Lastly, voters and nonvoters have different policy interests, especially regarding economic and redistributive issues (Leighley & Nagler, 2014). According to Pew Research (2014), 51% of nonvoters versus 43% of voters believe governmental aid to the poor does more good than harm. Additionally, nonvoters are more likely than voters to favor government spending for health care and education (Leighley & Nagler, 2014), support free community college and a \$10.10 minimum wage, and believe government aid to the poor is good (McElewee, 2015). Therefore, the socioeconomic divide between voters and nonvoters is significant because it prioritizes the policy positions of the wealthy, who vote at higher rates.

Socio-psychological Factors

Besides factors related to family, education, and wealth, there are individual socio-psychological factors that promote and impede voting (see Table 1.1). Beliefs and motivations correlated to voting include the following: perception that benefits outweigh the costs (Blais, 2010; Driscoll & Krook, 2012; Duncan & Stewart, 2007; Edin, Gelman, & Kaplan, 2007); desire

to express a viewpoint (Blais, 2010); show of solidarity for a group (Driscoll & Krook, 2012); connection to a political party (Driscoll & Krook, 2012; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady 1995); political interest (Blais & St. Vincent, 2011); high sense of civic duty and being a good citizen (Blais, 2010; Blais & St. Vincent, 2011; Driscoll & Krook, 2012; Edin, Gelman, & Kaplan, 2007; Jankowski 2002); altruism (Blais & St. Vincent, 2011, Jankowski 2002); trust in others and trust in government (Kelly, 2009); and protection of self-interest or group interest (Platt, 2008). Lastly, a sense of self-efficacy is critical for individuals to feel they have the ability to vote and make a difference (Beaumont, 2011; Condon & Holleque, 2013; Ozymy, 2012; Verba; Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Additionally, having a sense of group identity and feeling a part of a “collective we” impact voting behaviors. Identity politics focuses on shared experiences between those of similar demographic groups---race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, social class, and social status. Those with a strong group connection are more likely to vote in order to express solidarity with their group, affirm allegiance to a party, and establish their own political identity (Driscoll & Krook, 2012). Racial group consciousness and identity increases the likelihood of voting and is a more influential factor in making voting decisions than the protection of economic interests related to social class identity (Austin, Wright, Middleton & Yon 2012). Regardless of with which group an individual feels a connection, having a strong bond to a group and a shared fate with similar others encourages voting as a means to protect the group’s interest.

Conversely, data shows there are many socio-psychological factors known to discourage voting. Apathy about politics, government, and elections is a primary internal barrier to voting (Piven & Cloward, 2000). Those who are less altruistic (Dawes, Fowler, & Loewen, 2011), are

not connected to a group, or lack a sense of civic duty are less likely to vote. This makes sense as participation in democracy is a collective act. As previously referenced, those who feel alienated from a candidate or indifference between candidates are less likely to vote (Adams, Dow, & Merrill III, 2006). In general, those who choose not to vote think their one vote does not matter and/or voting is not important (Blais & St. Vincent, 2011). This was evidenced by results from a 2012 USA Today/Suffolk University poll that found 41 % of those not expecting to vote in the 2012 presidential election said, “my vote doesn’t make a difference anyway” (Page, 2012).

Table 1.01 Summary of Socio-Psychological Factors Related to Voting

| Factors that Promote Voting | Factors that Impede Voting |
|---|---|
| Belief benefits out-weigh costs | Belief one vote does not matter |
| Desire to express a viewpoint | Belief political participation is not important |
| Sense of a group identity, part of a “we” | Alienated from political system |
| Connection to a political party | Indifference between candidates |
| Political interest | Lack of political knowledge |
| High sense of civic duty | Apathy |
| Altruism | Selfish personality traits |
| Trust in others | Lack of trust in others |
| Trust in government | Lack of trust in government |
| Protection of self/group-interest | Stigma |
| Group Identity/Collective consciousness | Belief that voting does not matter |
| Racial group consciousness | Belief that system is stacked against me |
| Social connectedness | Politician’s lack of response to needs |

| Factors that Promote Voting | Factors that Impede Voting |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Voting schema | Disagreement with candidates' policy positions |
| Self-efficacy | Lack of perception of ability to exert control over a system |
| Agency | Lack of knowledge/skills to cast a ballot |

Environmental Influences/Social Context Related to Voting

The foundation of social work practice rests on the assumption of the person:environment relationship, not just internal functioning as has been discussed so far. Social and environmental contexts play a major role in determining the likelihood of effective voting behavior (see Table 1.2). Growing income inequality in the United States has an enormous effect on political participation. Data shows the greater the level of income inequality in a nation, the lower the level of voter turnout (Uslaner & Brown, 2005). Compared to all other Western nations, the United States has the greatest level of income inequality and also the lowest level of voter participation (Uslaner & Brown, 2005). Clearly, current economic conditions in the United States fuel a context detrimental to voter participation and democracy. Income inequality reduces voter turnout because those with lower incomes have fewer resources to vote and believe “the system is stacked against them,” (Uslaner & Brown, 2005, p.876) so voting is useless.

Rates of voter turnout are not just related to national economic trends, but to local ones as well. Neighborhood poverty creates social isolation of an entire community to political and economic resources (Cohen & Dawson, 1993). Those living in poverty feel powerless, pessimistic about the future, not represented by elected officials, and as a result decide not to vote (Uslaner & Brown, 2005). Since the poor are less likely to vote, a vacuum is created in

which their voices are not heard nor prioritized by politicians (Uslaner & Brown, 2005). And so goes the vicious cycle: the poor do not vote because they feel alienated from the political system; the system does not respond to their needs because politicians lack incentive to respond to a group who neither votes nor makes campaign contributions; and finally, income inequality increases because no social policy is enacted to reduce the income gap. This demonstrates the reciprocal relationship of person:environment. This cycle maintains the status quo and benefits those with greater power and wealth at the expense of those whom the system fails.

Social interaction is critical to overcome this dynamic and increase voting as a means to improve the lives of vulnerable, marginalized, and poor populations. Social interaction and social networks encourage political participation (Rolfe, 2013). People who interact more with others have greater opportunity to discuss current events, be invited to political activities, and spread the norm of voting (Hopkins & Williamson, 2012; Platt, 2008; Putnam, 2000). This is illustrated by how African American church participation reinforces and encourages group consciousness and provides a social network which encourages social action and voting (Austin, Wright, Middleton, & Yun, 2012; Pardo, 1990).

However, social trends are moving away from individuals participating in communal activities such as going to church, volunteering in civic organizations, shopping in a mall, or bowling in a league (Putnam, 2000). Instead, individuals have become more solitary; they are more likely to stay at home and watch television, work from home, shop online, and bowl alone. Reduced social interaction and connectedness has led to a decline in voter turnout (Putnam, 2000) because social interaction is essential to spread political ideas and reinforce the norm of voting. For example, communities with low population densities and high levels of dependency on car transportation (instead of public transportation) have lower rates of voting and political

participation, which is associated with decreased opportunities for personal interaction (Hopkins & Williamson, 2012). As individuals engage less with others, they lose opportunities for critical dialogue, exposure to different perspectives, a sense of connectedness, social capital, and social trust, all of which encourage voting.

In addition to social interaction between community members, social proximity to and interaction with politicians increases voting. Analysis of political participation by African Americans from 1980-1994 found access to elected officials and opportunities for political engagement were predictors of individual political participation (Platt, 2008). Political participation was highest when communities faced an external threat because it created greater opportunity for individuals to gain access to elected officials and make more social connections (Platt, 2008). Conversely, literature shows African Americans living in poor communities have reduced levels of political participation due to a lack of opportunity to engage with political leaders and a lack of confidence in their own effectiveness to influence power (Cohen & Dawson, 1993). This makes sense as politicians are known to be less inclined to engage with and mobilize poor communities to avoid having to address their concerns and needs (Blau, 2014). Again, this dynamic is self-perpetuating. Perceptions by those living in poverty that politicians do not care about them reinforce feelings of alienation and powerlessness, thereby reducing the likelihood of their voting.

Individuals closer to a candidate, campaign, or social network are more likely to vote (Rolfe, 2013). Door-to-door nonpartisan community get-out-the-vote campaigns are effective because of social interaction between volunteer and potential voter. The mobilizing message that voting is important and the act of being personally asked to vote increase the salience of the election and establish voting as a community social norm. Door to door get-out-the-vote

campaigns are effective because they provide a social condition for a citizen's schema to change from thinking of themselves as a "nonvoter" to thinking of themselves as a "voter" (Bedolla & Michelson, 2012). Once potential voters actually vote, they adopt a voting identity and are 30 % more likely to vote again (Bedolla & Michelson, 2012). Citizens who have continued to vote from the time they were eligible have developed a voting schema. This is supported by an abundance of literature associating the age when a person first votes with life-long voter habits: those who start voting at a younger age are more likely to continue to vote throughout their lives (Aldrich, Montgomery & Wood 2011; Gerber, Green & Shachar, 2003; Plutzer, 2002).

Social context and a community's perception of their relationship to political power explains why in one study people in rural Wisconsin voted against their self-interest (Walsh, 2012). Rural Wisconsin voters made decisions about who to vote for based on their perceptions of how important a politician viewed their community in relationship to other communities. This mattered to them because they believed larger, more urban areas were given priority over their poor rural communities, geographically isolated and forgotten by those in power. This belief stemmed from their feelings of deprivation related to their social-class and place-based identities. In this case, voter perceptions of the political context in relationship to themselves and their communities determined for whom they voted, even if it meant supporting a candidate whose policy positions were against their self-interest. This underscores the importance of class-based and place-based identities and the power of collective consciousness (Walsh, 2012).

Table 1.02 Summary of Environmental Factors that Impede or Promote Voting

| Environmental Factors Promoting Voting | Environmental Factors Impeding Voting |
|---|---|
| Family's wealth | National income inequality |
| Socialization/Social norm of voting | Neighborhood poverty |
| Church membership/Community Connectedness | Low population density |
| Social interaction | Social Isolation |
| Access to elected officials/politicians | Lack of access to elected officials/politicians |
| Being asked to vote by a community member | Deprivation related to class-based and place-based identities |
| Receiving a student loan | Receiving of means-tested assistance |

Effects of Receiving Means-Tested Benefits

Similarly, the “identity” of being a recipient of a means-tested government program also affects recipient perceptions of their importance to politicians, which has an impact on their decision to vote or not. Recipients feel “less than” and invisible to politicians because of their treatment in welfare offices, the stigma related to being a recipient of means-tested assistance, and an inadequate government safety-net to provide for their basic needs. The basis for this treatment and stigma has a long history and is embedded in our culture and social policy.

Social welfare policy in the United States was modeled after the Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1602, which determined eligibility for public assistance by judging citizens as “worthy” or “unworthy.” This moral judgment of “worth” is embedded in social policy today: “Social welfare programs are stratified by class, gender and race, with the more privileged groups receiving the generous, non-stigmatized universal benefits and the less privileged relying on the meager, unpopular, highly stigmatized grants from selective programs” (Abramovitz, 2014, p.59). Thus veterans, the elderly, the blind, and the disabled are “worthy” and entitled to

universal assistance without a review by a bureaucratic administrator (Trattner, 1999). In contrast, welfare recipients (mostly women and children) and the unemployed are “unworthy” and must prove their needs to qualify for selective assistance that is “means-tested” (Trattner, 1999). This assistance is given with requirements for work, limits on how long a person may receive benefits over their lifetime, and restrictions imposed by states such as drug-testing recipients. This bifurcated system is based on two different sets of assumptions about recipient value and goals.

Means-tested programs are punitive, paternalistic, structured to limit or direct recipient behaviors, and designed to keep people from getting assistance (Hacker, Mettler, & Soss, 2007; Trattner, 1999). Those in need are humiliated and stigmatized from the discretionary, punitive, time-consuming, and dehumanizing process to prove their eligibility (Edin & Schaefer 2015; Swartz, Blackstone, Uggen, & McLaughlin, 2009; Trattner, 1999). This is not the case with non-means-tested programs connected to middle and upper-classes (Abramowitz, 2001; Hacker, Mettler, & Soss, 2007; Wise 2015). Social policy directed to senior citizens through social security and/or wealthy citizens through tax exemptions are not stigmatized, and recipients of these programs are treated with respect (Abramowitz, 2001; Hacker, Mettler, & Soss, 2007; Wise 2015). Welfare recipients are deprived of the rights and freedoms of those not dependent on means-tested assistance and are marginalized by society (Young, 2008). In essence they are criminalized (Wise, 2015). The stigma related to welfare assistance “creates unequal social citizenship” (Swartz, Blackstone, Uggen, & McLaughlin, 2009, p.660).

As a result, recipients of means-tested assistance are significantly less likely to vote than non-means-tested recipients (beyond differences in socioeconomic status and educational level), which creates political inequality (Swartz, Blackstone, Uggen, & McLaughlin, 2009). Negative

experiences at welfare offices undermine recipient confidence in government, reinforce their belief that government does not care about them, and further alienate them from elected leaders, all of which reduce their likelihood of voting (Edin & Schaeffer, 2015; Soss & Schram, 2007; Swartz, Blackstone, Uggen, & McLaughlin, 2009). The effects of these experiences continue to reduce their voting over time, even when they have stopped receiving benefits (Swartz, Blackstone, Uggen, & McLaughlin, 2009). Additionally, negative discourse about welfare programs is emotionally damaging and stigmatizing to recipients, which further limits their motivation for voting (Edin & Schaeffer, 2015; Soss & Schram, 2007; Swartz, Blackstone, Uggen, & McLaughlin, 2009). Lastly, recipients are less likely to vote because of practicality; they lack the time, energy, and ability to get to the polls (Edin & Schaeffer, 2015; Soss & Schram, 2007). Interestingly, welfare participants do not have lower rates of other forms of civic engagement, such as volunteering, suggesting that though they feel alienated from politicians, they may not feel the same about their community (Swartz, Blackstone, Uggen, & McLaughlin, 2009). Clearly, the process and stigma of receiving means-tested government assistance fosters political inequality.

Structural Barriers

Because who votes matters in terms of preferred policy alternatives, those in power are inclined to create structural barriers that suppress voter turnout of select populations and in turn influence elections (Leighley & Nagler, 2014). When vulnerable citizens are systematically discouraged from voting through the use of structural barriers and political tactics, politicians consciously promote the policy interests of more powerful citizens (Piven & Cloward, 2000). The political party in power will expand or limit their franchise by targeting certain groups through adoption of electoral procedures and restrictions (Horpedahl, 2011). For example, the

accepted practice of gerrymandering, practiced by both major parties combined with winner-take-all voting rules, leads to predetermined representation for most voters and partisan skews (Louthen, 2015). Research suggests the “reason” why some groups are discouraged from voting is because voter turnout affects policy, and groups historically less likely to vote have vastly different policy preferences from those in power.

Since 2010 there has been a national movement to limit voting rights, which has resulted in twenty-one states enacting new voting restrictions (Why is it so hard to vote in America? And what can we do to fix it?, 2016). Before the 2012 presidential election, conservatives eliminated laws such as early voting on Sundays in Ohio, voting on the Sunday before Election Day in Florida, and “day of” registration in Maine. And they passed laws requiring government-issued photo IDs in Wisconsin, Kansas, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas. All of these measures limited the voting ability of African Americans, Latinos, the poor, and college students---groups typically not supportive of conservative candidates (Lieberman, 2012). Conservatives benefitted by making it harder for vulnerable, more liberal groups to vote and were rewarded with gains in congressional seats.

The landmark Supreme Court decision of *Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder*, No. 1:10-cv-00651 (D.D.C.) ruled that the coverage formula in section five of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 reauthorized by Congress is unconstitutional and was reversed on June 25, 2013. As a result, the nine states previously identified as having voter registration and voter turnout less than 50 % were no longer required to seek federal approval to change their voting laws. This gives these nine states the ability to move a polling place, change voter identification laws, and redistrict without federal approval. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said in her dissent, “Congress said up front: We know that the registration is fine. That is no longer the

problem. But the discrimination continues in other forms” (The Formula Behind the Voting Rights Act, 2013). These “other forms” are the calculated changes to voter laws that impede voting. These types of political strategies and policies not only restrict voting by imposing legal barriers but also by perpetuating apathy and lack of political skills, which are internal barriers to voting (Piven & Cloward, 2000).

More recently in 2016 prior to the presidential election, fourteen states adopted new voting restrictions including added strict photo identification requirements, elimination of early voting opportunities, and registration restrictions. This prompted lawsuits to overturn these laws and many courts did block them. Most notably a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit overturned North Carolina’s stricter voter identification requirements and its reduction of the number of early-voting days as well as overturned proposed changes to registration procedures. They determined the “new provisions target African Americans with almost surgical precision” (Engstrom & Roberts, 2016). This decision was appealed to the Supreme Court, which deadlocked, meaning the 4th Circuit’s decision was upheld for 2016 election. However, the 4th Circuit did not strike down the removal of the straight-ticket which is used particularly in counties with larger African American populations” (Engstrom & Roberts, 2016). Despite recent court rulings that overturned stricter voting laws, as in the case of North Carolina, the remaining laws are still more restrictive than they were in the 2012 Presidential election.

The enactment of strict voting laws is not random. Consider,

- Eight of the twelve states with the largest Hispanic population growth between 2000 and 2010 passed laws making it harder to vote.
- Seven of the eleven states with the highest African American turnout in 2008 have new voting restrictions in place.

- Sixteen-million registered voters do not have a government-issued photo ID: Senior citizens who no longer drive; college students with no permanent address; low-income families or individuals who do not have a permanent address; people who only use public transit, and do not drive; trans people whose gender identity does not match their ID.
- Six times more Hispanic than white non-Hispanic voters report a thirty plus minute voting wait time.
- Four times more African American than white voters report a thirty-plus minute wait time.
- Voters in precincts with higher percentages of minority voters in Florida, Maryland, and South Carolina tended to have fewer voting machines.
(Why is it so hard to vote in America? And what can we do to fix it?, 2016).

As a result, large numbers of less-advantaged citizens are left out of the democratic process: In 2012, 26 million eligible voters of color did not vote, and among eligible voters earning less than \$50,000, 47 million did not vote. In 2014, 44 million eligible voters of color did not vote, and 66 million eligible voters earning less than \$50,000 did not vote (Why is it so hard to vote in America?

Summary

There is a common theme in factors related to voting. Demographic characteristics, socio-psychological traits, environmental social contexts, nature of government assistance received, and voting laws associated with alienation, powerlessness, and/or lower socioeconomic status all reduce voting. Conversely, those factors associated with privilege, power, and higher socioeconomic status promote voting. As discussed in Chapter One, elected officials represent the latter group because they are elected by them. The system maintains itself. Yet

many marginalized citizens overcome alienation and vote. Statistical data and analysis have not discerned within group differences between those recipients of means-tested assistance who vote and those who do not vote. More importantly, there is no definitive theory on how to promote voting (Rolfe, 2013). The voices of recipients are needed to understand why and how they make voting decisions. The next section will discuss the theoretical and conceptual framework used to understand the qualitative data gained in this research.

Theoretical Conceptual Framework

This dissertation uses critical constructionism and political framing/discourse as a framework to analyze macro social structural forces related to voting and welfare policy. Critical constructionism provides a broad lens to deconstruct structural barriers to voting, power dynamics, social meaning-making related to means-tested government assistance and the problem of low voter turnout by recipients. Internalized oppression, alienation, and empowerment theory (including related concepts of ecological perspective, critical consciousness, group identity, group consciousness, and self and collective efficacy) are commonly used in social work literature to analyze interactions between person:environment. Internalized oppression, alienation, and empowerment theory are used in this dissertation to unpack individual decision-making about voting, within the broader social context. The remainder of this section will define each theory and concept, and outline its relevance to understanding how recipients of means-tested government assistance, who are enrolled in community college, make decisions about voting, and the structural barriers that influences those decisions.

Critical Constructionism

Critical constructionism is a synthesis of conflict theory and symbolic interactionism and is useful for dissecting social problems (Heiner, 2013). It overlaps the critical lens of conflict theory to understand power relationships and inequality with the constructionist lens of symbolic interactionism to unpack the process of meaning-making and interpretation of the social environment (Heiner, 2013). Theoretical symmetry is created when social conflict theory and social constructionist theory are used together; the critical lens focuses on the power dynamics and causes of a social problem, and the constructionist lens addresses the why and how a social problem is maintained through cultural assumptions and perceptions of reality (Wagner & Gilman, 2012).

From a critical constructionist perspective, social problems are defined and presented from the standpoint and interests of the powerful, not the standpoint and interests of the general public, and are frequently defined and presented at the expense of those with the least power (Blau, 2014; Heiner, 2013). This definition and understanding of social problems is messaged to the public through political frames and discourse, and is ultimately embedded in culture, social institutions, and policy. Those without power accept the existence of certain problems because they believe the messaging and accept the cultural norms, beliefs, and values (Heiner, 2013). The dominant/powerful group enforces their social order on vulnerable groups through politics, law, policy, media and social institutions to promote the status quo, which maintains their privileged status (Anderson & Taylor 2013). Internalized oppression is the ultimate saturation of these hegemonic frames. (The concepts of political frames and internalized oppression will be discussed in further depth below.)

Critical constructionism provides this research a theoretical lens to deconstruct (a) how

marginalized groups understand power, social problems, social norms, policy construction, and their own self-interest in relationship to their decision to vote or not to vote, and (b) why the problem of low voter turnout by certain groups is not addressed and remedied. From this perspective, the low voting rate of the poor, less educated, young, and alienated is not random but systematic, as it protects the status-quo and interests of those in power. Additionally, vulnerable populations choose not to vote (a choice not in their self-interest because they abdicate power to protect their policy) as a result of the meaning they ascribe to voting, their perception of themselves and their welfare status, and the experiences which have shaped their reality and outlook.

Political Frames and Discourse

Political discourse and frames are powerful tools in influencing behavior. Frames influence attitude formations by emphasizing a particular dynamic, triggering a schema or consideration most accessible or salient that receives and interprets the framing message (Feldman, 1995). Predispositions of individuals influence the interpretation and acceptance of the frame; those with supporting predispositions are more impacted by the frame (Converse 1964; Zaller 2011). Political elites promote one understanding of an issue over another to promote a particular policy position “by framing---the process by which political leaders communicate about issues emphasizing certain features of an issue, downplaying others, and assembling those features into a coherent narrative with clear implications for policy actions” (Winter, 2008, p.6). Political discourse surrounding social welfare policy and elections has the power to encourage or hinder voting.

Some frames are dangerous. Elites use framing to shape public opinion about what policy or which political candidate represents the self-interest of “every” American. This is

powerful because people think in frames and when confronted with facts disproving them, they dismiss the facts in favor of their own frames and predispositions (Lakeoff, 2004). In this way frames become accepted “truths” that are resistant to reinterpretation even in the face of disproving evidence. Ultimately, frames permeate culture, institutions, and policy.

Americans accept the idea of “the American dream” as a reality, despite evidence to the contrary. The American dream promises equal opportunity, that hard work will lead to prosperity, and it promotes eternal hope and optimism (Rank, Hirschl, & Foster, 2014). The American dream frames success as achievement gained through efforts of an individual, not factors related to the social-environment such as the economic market, job growth, opportunity for higher education, and social policy. It magnifies the value of individualism and trivializes hardship and poverty (Wise, 2015). Because it is universally accepted that everyone has equal opportunity for success, when success is not achieved, the individual or their parents are blamed (Rose, 1990; Ryan, 1971). American core beliefs and values such as rugged individualism, “pulling oneself up by their bootstraps,” the American work ethic, America as the “land of opportunity,” and the American dream are social “truths” that frame poverty as an individual failing, not a structural failing (Edlin & Schefer, 2015; Luhrmann, 2010; Rank, Hirschl, & Foster, 2014; Ryan, 1971). These beliefs and values are internalized by low-income individuals, causing them to blame themselves for their position (Edlin & Schefer, 2015; Luhrmann, 2010; Rank, Hirschl, & Foster, 2014; Ryan, 1971). Rank, Hirshl & Foster (2012) describe this acceptance of the “American dream” as being the opiate of the people because it stops them from blaming the social structure and rebelling against the elite.

Frames portray welfare recipients as lazy, immoral, and trying to take advantage of the system on the backs of hard-working Americans (Edlin & Shaefer, 2015; Wise, 2015). Welfare

recipients have a marginalized status in society (Ryan, 1971; Young, 2008). Images of recipients spending SNAP benefits on crab-legs, mothers having more babies just to collect more welfare benefits, and the “pink- Cadillac-driving welfare queen” are frames used to shame and discredit recipients (Clawson & Trice, 2000). Furthermore, evoking the image of “welfare queen” to characterize a “typical” welfare recipient links welfare policy with implicit racial stereotypes of laziness and dependency (Winter, 2008) while framing of Social Security is associated with whiteness (Winter, 2008). These frames shape public opinion about welfare policy, reinforce elite interests over the interests of the majority (Clawson & Trice, 2000), and cause middle and working class citizens to view their interests as the same as that of wealthy and elite citizens (Lakeoff, 2004).

Social welfare policy is based on the paradigm of individual failure and blaming the victim (Edlin & Schaefer, 2015; Rank, Hirschl, & Foster, 2014; Rose 1990; Ryan, 1971; Young, 2008; Wise 2015). Political narrative propagates the false policy myth that poverty is the exception and the design of welfare leads to dependency, laziness, and a culture of poverty (Winter, 2008; Wise, 2015). This contradicts the reality that America has the highest poverty rate amongst western industrialized countries, and that most Americans will experience poverty in their lifetime (Rank, 2012). The high risk of poverty is caused by the failure of the labor market to provide enough well-paying jobs, not the personal failings of individuals (Rank, 2012). The experience of poverty is common in America; over one third (36.4%) of the population will experience five years of poverty between the ages of 25-60, prime ages for working (Rank, Hirschl, & Foster, 2014). Most families have just one month of assets to sustain them in times of illness, job loss, or any other unexpected life event, and no government safety net exists to provide support during these times (Rank, 2012). Poverty and welfare are “as American as apple

pie,” yet recipients are made to feel deviant and marginalized (Rank, 2012).

Internalized Oppression

Internalized oppression is the acceptance of the dominant group’s beliefs, attitudes, values, and goals, in part, as a result of political frames and discourse. According to the Social Work Dictionary, internalization is defined as, “The process of incorporating the norms of one’s culture; taking in and accepting as one’s own the values, attitudes, style, and social responses of one’s primary group or other reference groups” (Barker, 2014, p.221). Oppression is actually injustice caused by structural forces and transmitted through social institutions, media, schools, welfare offices, and average citizens in everyday situations until it is internalized in our collective consciousness (Rose, 1990; Young, 2008). Using terminology from conflict theory, internalized oppression is the acceptance of a “false consciousness” that defines reality in such a way to further the oppression of the oppressed (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda 2012). According to Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire (2012) known to have developed the concept of conscientization, oppressed populations accept the status quo of their existence because they accept the “truths” of the elite and internalize their own oppression, which stop the masses from acting in their self-interest. In this way, elite framing and political discourse are used as social control.

Recipients of means-tested assistance suffer from the self-imposed shame of getting government assistance (Edlin & Shaefer, 2015). They have “disdain” for welfare, lack sympathy for other recipients, and suffer from the stigma of others (Hirschl, Rank, & Kussi-Appouch, 2011; Rank, 1994). Recipients’ internalization of “American” values and elite framing of poverty and governmental assistance prohibits their ability to share a collective group identity with similar others and take action to protect their interests. Their understanding of their own

identities and interpretation of social norms, values, and truths have been hard-wired into their brains by hegemonic frames. The media reinforces what is socially taken for granted and accepted as normal. Recipients are ashamed of their situations and do not want to be considered “similar” to other recipients. This internalization affects how recipients interpret policy positions of elected leaders and make decisions about voting. As Lakeoff makes clear, “voters vote their identity and their values, which need not coincide with their self-interest” (Lakeoff, 2004, p.33). For recipients of means-tested assistance, voting becomes a decision based on feelings, not critical thinking. In short, they not only internalize their own oppression but also potentially may contribute to it through their voting behavior and choices. It is important to this research to understand the participants’ internalized construction of reality, both in their concrete thinking and emotional reactions to their reality (Rose, 1990).

Alienation

Alienation is defined by the Social Work Dictionary (2014) as “the feeling of apartness or strangeness experienced in cultural or social settings that seem unfamiliar, unacceptable, or unpredictable” (Barker, 2014, p.15). For Marx, competition and exploitation are the byproducts of a capitalist system and lead to feelings of alienation by workers and those unable to work. Alienation is associated with the loss of control over their situation and shapes their identity, life experiences, and the development of consciousness (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004). Additionally, those without access to work are further controlled by the policing of welfare agencies and presence of stigma (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004). Melvin Seeman, who wrote the seminal article “On the Meaning of Alienation” in 1959, thought alienation “bridged the social and the psychological” (Anderson, Turner, Heath & Payne, 2016, p.200). In this way alienation is conceptualized as a psychological state and result of the social structure, which affects individuals according to their social location (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004).

In terms of how a citizen feels in relation to a political system, alienation is a sense of being outside and forgotten by the system which surfaces as hostility towards politics/government, feelings of betrayal by leaders, and/or conviction that politicians are liars (Henslin, 2011). Alienation from politics stems from the consensus that average Americans “don’t have much say in what the government does” and that “government is run by a few big interests” (Blau, 2014, p.126). For example, low-income citizens favor redistributive policies and feel alienated when political leaders do not make policy decisions that consider their economic needs (Leighley & Nagler, 2014).

The concept of social trust is embedded in the process leading to alienation. Social trust connects people and encourages cooperation (Putnam, 2000). Social trust is an important concept related to voting because in order to believe in democracy, individuals need to trust one another. In youth ages 15-25, valuing voting is associated with general social trust, and the association is higher for minority youth than white youth (Kelly, 2009). Furthermore, social trust combats divisive political frames and stereotypes of welfare recipients and welfare programs. Those with more social trust have more support for government policies that support education and aid to the poor (Uslaner & Brown, 2005).

Social-trust or lack of trust exists within different contexts such as government, elected officials, media, and other people. When income inequality is high, less trust exists between citizens: those at the top and bottom of the economic ladder feel alienated from one another and do not perceive a shared linked fate (Uslaner & Brown, 2005). Data illustrates that citizens with the least amount of social trust live in states with the highest levels of income inequality (Uslaner & Brown, 2005). As competition for jobs and government assistance has increased in the last fifty years, social trust between people has dropped more than 20% (Uslaner & Brown, 2005).

As Putnam (2000) describes it, “The causal arrows among civic involvement, reciprocity, honesty, and social trust are as tangled as well-tossed spaghetti” (p.137).

Powerlessness includes alienation and is linked with internalized oppression. Capitalist systems separate individuals both from similar others (with whom they are in competition) and from control over their own potential, leaving them powerless (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2012). Groups that are powerless “lack authority, status, and sense of self” (Young, 2008, p.280). Those dependent on government assistance feel especially powerless and lack avenues for positive recognition, autonomy, and respectability (Young, 2008). Those who feel powerless perceive they lack resources or ability to be independent and influence others in their environment (Barker, 2014), and they are less likely to vote.

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment is the process of gaining power and influence, in other words, the process of overcoming internalized oppression, alienation, and powerlessness. Specifically, the profession of social work views empowerment as a “means to address the problems of powerless populations and mediate the role powerlessness plays in creating and perpetuating social problems” (Gutierrez, 1995, p.229). In this dissertation, empowerment theory is used to understand how some means-tested recipients overcome internalization of oppressive frames and take action by voting.

The profession of social work is guided by an empowerment perspective to improve individual and community functioning and promote “social justice and a reduction of social inequality” (Gutierrez, 1994, p.4). Within empowerment theory is a critical lens highlighting structural barriers that limit oppressed groups’ access to power and resources (Gutierrez, 1994).

Empowerment uses an ethno-conscious framework that acknowledges the centrality of culture in relationship to an individual's ability to access power, political influence, and voting. It rejects the individual fallacy assumption that individuals are to blame for their circumstances, and it adopts the ecological perspective (Lee, 1996), the unifying paradigm for social work (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2012).

The ecological perspective stresses the relationship of person:environment---how environmental factors impact an individual and generate hardship for those of lesser status and power (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). Reciprocity between person:environment is demonstrated in the connection of personal troubles to public issues, the personal to the political. The connectedness between voting (or not), social policy and legislation, public resources for individuals and communities, and day-to-day lives of individuals (voters) is an example of this reciprocity.

This research adopts the conceptualization of empowerment as delineated by Gutierrez (1994 & 1995). Empowerment is “the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations” (Gutierrez, 1995, p.229). It is a “psychological process that can contribute to political empowerment” (Gutierrez, 1995, p.229). An individual's development of critical consciousness is necessary to achieve political empowerment (Gutierrez, 1995).

Freire's development of critical consciousness is the foundation for empowerment theories. According to Freire, in order for the oppressed to become liberated they must change how they see the world by “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 2012, p.35). Critical

consciousness is ignited by critical dialogue that reveals social, political, and economic contradictions (Freire, 2012). Thus, critical consciousness is the opposite of false consciousness, a rejection of hegemonic frames and the converse of internalized oppression.

Gutierrez (1995) identifies three components mutually reinforcing and necessary for critical consciousness and thus empowerment: (a) *Group Identification*: including areas of common experience, a sense of a shared-fate, and central to one's self-concept (p.230); (b) *Group Consciousness*: "understanding of the differential status and power of groups in society. For members of oppressed groups, this leads to feelings of relative deprivation, power discontent, and tendency to blame the system for problems related to group membership. This understanding can draw connections between personal problems and social structure" (p.230); and (c) *Self and Collective Efficacy*: belief that one is capable of effecting change and capable of working to change the social order. Components of critical consciousness are mutually reinforcing and therefore are both a process and a cognitive state.

According to Gutierrez (1994), at least four sub-processes are needed for empowerment to occur (Gutierrez, 1994). Some of these overlap with the psychological components of critical consciousness, which underscores that empowerment is not a linear process but reciprocal, organic, mutually reinforcing, and messy. The four sub-processes need for empowerment are (a) *increasing self-efficacy*: referring to developing a sense of personal power, mastery, initiative, or ability to act. Gutierrez (1994) describes it according to Bandura (1982) as "beliefs about one's ability 'to produce and to regulate events in [one's] life'" (p. 204); (b) *developing a critical consciousness*: "increasing an awareness of how political structures affect individual and group experience. Critical consciousness can result in a perspective on society which redefines individual, group, or community problems as emerging from a lack of power" (Gutierrez, 1994,

p.204); (c) *developing skills*: allowing individuals to develop the resources and competence needed to act more powerfully on the individual, interpersonal, or political levels. In order to vote, individuals need to know requirements for voting, how to register to vote, where and how to vote, information about candidates and their policy positions, and have the ability to fit voting into their schedule; (d) *involvement with similar others*: “contact with others sharing a similar status or problem situation” (Gutierrez, 1994, p.205). The concepts described above in the three psychological components of critical consciousness and four sub-processes of empowerment are used in this dissertation as markers to recognize and operationalize empowerment and analyze data. By doing so, this dissertation answers Gutierrez’s (1994) call for future research “to look at the differential impact of the sub-processes of empowerment...on one particular problem area and one particular group” (p.216).

The definition of empowerment includes three levels: individual, interpersonal, and political levels, which “together work toward assisting individuals to develop a sense of personal power, an ability to influence others, and an ability to work with others to change social institutions” (Gutiérrez, 1994, p.204). Analysis of each level is essential to understanding the nature of how recipients of means-tested government assistance make voting decisions and decide to vote or not. The individual (intrapersonal) level of empowerment involves perceived control; self-efficacy; motivations to control (i.e. civic duty, concern for common good, and sense of connectedness); and perceived competence or skill to take action (Gutierrez, 1994; Zimmerman, 1995). Perceptions of social isolation, powerlessness, normlessness, helplessness, and alienation are thought to be negatively associated with intrapersonal elements of empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995). The focus of the interpersonal/interactional level of empowerment is understanding one’s relationship and position in the social environment,

understanding the nature of social-political issues, and understanding power structures (Gutierrez, 1994; Zimmerman, 1995). Lastly, the political component involves interest, motivations, and behaviors of an individual to influence political structural change to improve conditions for the group they identify with (Gutierrez, 1995). Collective consciousness and critical awareness are central to this component. For example, voting behaviors made out of consideration of the power in voting as a bloc demonstrate the political component of empowerment.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how recipients of means-tested social welfare programs make decisions about voting. Five research questions were used to guide inquiry to unpack the psychological/individual, social/environmental, and structural/legal factors related to this decision making process.

1. How do recipients of means-tested social welfare programs make decisions about voting?
 - a. How do their experiences of being recipients of means-tested social welfare programs impact their decision making about voting?
 - b. How do they navigate or become discouraged by structural obstacles to voting and how do they understand the existence of such obstacles?
 - c. Do their voting decisions reflect their self-interest to maintain and/or improve means-tested benefits?
 - d. How do the demographic characteristics (race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion) of a candidate affect their voting decisions?
 - e. What mobilization messages (from local community leaders, interest groups, political parties) do they receive, and how do they influence their voting decisions, if at all?

- f. How do social networks influence their decision to vote?
 - g. Do they feel a sense of having the knowledge and skills to participate in voting?
2. What were their past voting experiences?
 3. What are their perceptions of the political process, and to what extent do they feel politicians care about their needs?
 4. How do they understand the relationship between electoral politics, policy, and their lives?
 5. How do they evaluate what is in their political self and group interests? To what extent do they feel a sense of linked fate with others who are like them?

Summary

The problem of lower voter turnout by recipients of means-tested government assistance involves both the social structure and the individual. This dissertation relies on critical constructionism and political frames and discourse to provide understanding of political power and structural forces that affect the voting decision making of recipients of means-tested government assistance. These concepts are important to illuminate the nature of structural barriers related to voting and how recipients of means-tested government assistance perceive voting. This includes how American frames and political discourse are internalized (or not) by recipients of means- tested government assistance. In addition to theories that focus on the macro structural forces that impact voting, others are used to illuminate how individuals react, navigate, adapt, succumb and/or overcome social structural forces. Internalized oppression, powerlessness, alienation, empowerment, and critical consciousness are used to understand the individual's perceptions of voting, politics, and government, which contribute to their decision making in casting a ballot. In addition, they are used to understand the nature of decision making related to voting or not voting. For example, how might the decision to vote or not vote

be an empowered action? Because these theories and concepts are foundational to social work research and practice, they also have the potential to inform the approach of interventions to increase voting.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

This chapter will describe the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, sampling methods, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations. In addition, it will detail the process of co-coding using the NVivo10 coding comparison query to investigate inter-rater reliability.

Research Design and Rationale

The overall objective of this dissertation was to explore how recipients of means-tested government assistance programs, who are enrolled in community colleges, make decisions about voting and how, if at all, structural factors affect their decision to vote. The primary research questions lent themselves to a qualitative approach to unpack complex issues, use theory as a sensitizing function, promote social work values, and include the voices and experiences of recipients of means-tested assistance to inform social work strategies to increase voting (Gilgun & Abrams, 2002). Recipients of means-tested government assistance, enrolled in community college, are a specific population, often stigmatized, hard to access, and not included in large quantitative studies. Their voting behaviors are intentional, shaped by their own reality and positionality, but not understood, captured, nor prioritized in other research. Holistic understanding of factors related to their decision to vote or not vote is important to create meaningful opportunities for change. One-on-one interviews provide the framework to gain a nuanced look into their decision making not possible in survey research. Additionally, the interviews elevated the participant to an “expert” status, less possible in focus groups. One-on-one interviews provided an outlet for the voices of participants to be heard, congruent with the

ethical basis of social work to promote social justice and empower vulnerable populations.

Researcher's Role

Positionality and Reflexivity

Unlike quantitative research, the researcher is the “instrument” of data collection, analysis, and interpretation in qualitative research (Padgett, 2008). Therefore, it was essential for the researcher to remain reflective about her positionality and biases and purposeful in her efforts to minimize their effects on the study. Particular attention was given to the researcher's privileged demographic status, power differential to community college students, and strong political opinions. This section will delineate the mindful and deliberate ways the researcher entered the field, interacted with participants, and attended to potential intrusions of bias.

The demographic characteristics and background of the researcher are very different from those of participants in this study. They garner unearned privilege and mirror the traits of those groups most likely to vote: higher income, higher education, race (white), age (middle-age), and citizenship (native born U.S. citizen/ English speaking). The researcher's professional statuses of social worker, professor, and Ph.D. candidate also are associated with increased power and privilege. By contrast, the status of being a recipient of means-tested government assistance is stigmatized. The researcher remained vigilant to these power differentials throughout the study in order to reduce their effects and was strategic in her presentation of self.

The researcher used her insider status as a community college professor and Ph.D. student at The University of Connecticut (UConn) to appeal to gatekeepers (department chairs, and professors) to allow her access to community college classrooms to recruit students for the study. However, when recruiting students or meeting with student-participants, the researcher

emphasized her “student” status, asking for their help one student to another. On these occasions, the researcher dressed like a student and not a professor---wearing jeans, having her hair in a ponytail, and not wearing jewelry---and maintained an informal demeanor. To establish rapport with student-participants, she engaged in conversation highlighting their common experiences and struggles being a student. The researcher used colloquial language and avoided political jargon when explaining the purpose of the study and in asking interview questions. If a student-participant seemed awkward verbalizing an issue related to a demographic trait different from the researcher, the researcher would acknowledge it saying, “It’s all right you will not hurt my feelings, I know I am old and white.” This would elicit a laugh and relieve uneasiness. The researcher took an unknowing, curious stance and deferred to the participant’s knowledge and experience, made them the expert, and expressed gratitude for their time and input.

The researcher was attentive and aware of her political opinions and biases and took measures to reduce their effects and maintain a neutral stance. The researcher “bracketed” her political positions and viewpoints. “Bracketing refers to a conscientious effort to suspend assumptions, beliefs, and feelings in order to better understand the experiences of respondents” (Padgett, 2008, p.75). In addition, the dissertation chair worked with the researcher to anticipate participant comments that had potential to elicit in her a negative or enthusiastic facial expression, comment, or other reaction, and together they planned her response to such comments. Also, the researcher transcribed the first four interviews with added notes critiquing her interviewing skills, and writing what she was thinking and feeling during the interviews. These were reviewed one at a time by the dissertation chair, who coached the researcher on her interview skills so she could improve and adjust her style. Lastly, the researcher regularly met with her dissertation chair to debrief and wrote field notes and memos about her reactions to the

interviews.

Sample

As with qualitative data, the sources of the data are the voices of participants. This dissertation used a purposive sampling method to recruit voters and nonvoters from introductory-level psychology, sociology, and human services community college classes, who receive means-tested government assistance.

Setting for Recruitment of Participants

Community colleges provide opportunities for low-income students to receive secondary educations. The American Association of Community Colleges (2014) reported that during the 2012-2013 academic year, 45 % of all U.S. undergraduates were enrolled in community colleges. The U.S. Department of Education reported that in the 2011-2012 academic year 19.1 % of dependent student income was \$20,000 or below, and 48 % of independent student income was \$20,000 or below (p.77). These incomes meet eligibility for means-tested programs. Additionally, education is identified as being a primary variable correlated with voting (Beaumont, 2011; Hillygus, 2003; Ozymy, 2012; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2003). Both of these facts made community colleges well-suited to recruit TANF (welfare), SNAP (food-assistance), WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) recipients and control for education. Three Connecticut community colleges---Capitol, Three Rivers, and Naugatuck Valley---were selected to sample English speaking citizens who are recipients of means-tested programs. The three colleges reflect urban, rural, and suburban campuses (respectively), and each has a thriving human services department. Upon UConn IRB approval Protocol #H15-235, in August 2015 the student investigator contacted in writing Capitol, Three Rivers, Naugatuck Valley Community Colleges to get their permission to conduct

this research (Appendix A). Three Rivers was the first to grant approval and then Capitol. Naugatuck Valley declined approval. It was decided to replace Naugatuck Valley with Tunxis Community College because each is located in a suburban area and has a strong human services department. After submitting an amendment to the IRB, Tunxis Community College was approached and granted approval.

Ethical Concerns

Protection of Human Subjects

Prior to any data collection, approval by University of Connecticut's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and by each community college's IRB was obtained. Each participant was provided an information sheet (Appendix B) explaining the purpose of the study, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality, rights of participants, and contact information for the Student Investigator, the Primary Investigator, and UConn's IRB, which were all verbally explained by the researcher. Participants were advised they may withdraw from the study at any time and were told of the protocol used to protect their identities. Lastly, participants were asked for their permission to audiotape interviews. Each participant signed and dated informed consent of their knowledge of their rights and willingness to participate in the study, which are stored in a locked filing cabinet, in a locked office, at UConn's School of Social Work.

Privacy/Confidentiality

No identifying information is used in reporting the study's findings. To promote confidentiality, a unique identification number and pseudonym was assigned to each participant, the master chart linking participant with their unique identification numbers and pseudonyms was destroyed, and identifying remarks redacted from transcriptions. Participants will only be referred to by their pseudonyms in any written material resulting from the research. All

electronic data collected including digital recordings, transcripts, and contact information was stored in the researcher's lap-top which is password protected and backed up to the cloud.

Digital recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Risks and Inconveniences

No risks to participants were anticipated. The main inconvenience associated with this study was the time it took to meet with the researcher. Likewise, there were no direct benefits to participants. At the completion of the semi-structured interview, participants were given their choice of a \$15 gift card to Big Y, Stop and Shop, Shop-Rite or Target.

Participant Eligibility

To be eligible for the study, participants (or someone living in their household) had to have been enrolled in either TANF, SNAP, or WIC in the past twelve months; been eligible to vote on November 8, 2012; and be a current part-time or full time student enrolled in either Capitol Community College (CCC), Three Rivers Community College (TRCC), or Tunxis Community College (TCC). Additionally, participants had to be English speaking because the researcher is not proficient in any other language and lacked funds to hire another researcher.

Recruitment

Upon approval from both UConn's and each of the community college's IRB process, the researcher sought approval from the Behavioral and Social Science Department Chairs at each college. This process varied in ease and speediness depending on the college. Once each department chair approved, this researcher contacted professors (using the outreach scripts/Appendix C) who taught introductory level psychology, sociology, and human services classes to make classroom recruitment presentations and distribute and collect eligibility/interest

forms. Using gatekeepers to gain access to and recruit hard-to-reach populations is a practicality of this kind of research but may limit a pure purposeful selection process (Abrams, 2011).

Between October 13, 2015 and February 9, 2016 twenty recruitment presentations were made. During these presentations, the researcher used her status as a community college professor, humor, and passion for voting to connect with students and convey the study's importance. Additionally, the researcher appealed to the students' sense of camaraderie to help a fellow student complete a requirement necessary to graduate. The classroom recruitment presentations gave the researcher an opportunity to establish trust with future participants and gain familiarity with each community college setting. Field notes were made about all recruitment presentations.

At TRCC, the researcher made presentations to three sociology classes, two psychology classes, and two human services classes. At CCC, the researcher presented to six sociology classes, and at TCC, six sociology and one human services class. During presentations the researcher explained the study and eligibility requirements, (using the classroom presentation script/Appendix D) and that as a thank-you participants would receive a \$15 gift certificate to their choice of either: Target, Big Y, Stop and Shop, or Shop Rite after the completion of the semi-structured interview.

All students were given a screening/interest survey (Appendix E) and an empty file folder to protect others from seeing their responses. All students were asked to complete the screening/interest form even if they were not interested in participating to protect the privacy of those students who were interested. Students not interested simply checked they were not interested. The form took approximately one to two minutes to complete. Students placed completed forms in folders and handed them directly to the researcher. Completed screening forms of eligible and interested students were stored in a locked filing cabinet at UConn. Phone

numbers given on screening forms were used to contact interested and eligible students and then were destroyed. Ultimately, twenty-eight student participants were recruited. The community college setting proved to be a good setting for recruitment. As indicated in Table 2.1, many more students were interested in volunteering for the study than met the eligibility criteria. Thirty-one total students were interested and eligible, and twenty-eight students participated, resulting in a 90% response rate.

Table 2.01 Participant Recruitment Summary

| Community College | Recruitment Presentations | Screening Forms Collected | Not Interested | Interested | Interested and Eligible | Recruited |
|-------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------------|------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| TRCC | 7 | 131 | 92 | 39 | 10 | 10 |
| CCC | 6 | 73 | 47 | 26 | 8 | 8 |
| TCC | 7 | 169 | 120 | 49 | 13 | 10 |
| <i>Totals</i> | 20 | 373 | 259 | 114 | 31 | 28 |

Instruments

Interview Guide

The primary instrument for this dissertation was the interview guide (Appendix F) for the semi-structured interview. It was developed to answer the dissertation's research questions in collaboration between the researcher and the dissertation chairperson, an expert in the area of voting. There were six open-ended questions with multiple follow-up questions and probes for each. Each question was designed to gain information related to the research questions in regards to the sub-processes of empowerment.

The first question asked about general attitude about voting: What is your general attitude about voting in any election? There were many follow-up questions to this including: important to vote, do election outcomes impact you or your community? These questions were designed to

gain information about the participants' overall opinions about the nature of elections and their effects, and elicit responses related to how participants understood voting and elections related to individual empowerment.

The second question examined participant feeling about politics and government: In what ways do you consider politics or government to be relevant to you? Subsequent follow-ups were designed to gather insight related to the critical awareness of participants about how government impacts their lives. It was focused on gaining insight around interactional empowerment.

The third question focused on the voting process: Talk about your impressions and experiences around the requirements for and process of going to the polls to vote. This question was meant to gain insight about how the voting process affected their decision to vote or not to vote and the structural barriers participants may have experienced. Additionally, follow-up questions probed participant understanding of the nature of voting laws and gathered information about ways the voting process could be improved to make voting easier for them.

The fourth question was about participant knowledge, which is an important component to all levels of empowerment: Talk in general about how much attention you pay to news and politics? Of particular interest was a follow-up question regarding the effect of mobilization messages on their decision to vote.

The fifth question focused on factors and considerations that participants based their voting decisions on, especially about how they consider their self-interests in their voting decisions. One of the follow-up questions especially pertinent was: Does your past/current enrollment in government programs like welfare or SNAP affect your view of politics or voting? This question proved to be invaluable to gain insight about how participants understood the

relationship between politics and government assistance. Additionally, it illuminated how participants perceive their collective interests with other means-tested recipients. The last question was a catch all: Is there anything else that we have not discussed that you think is important for me to know that influences your decision to vote?

In 2013, the researcher created a similar interview guide used in an assignment for a required doctoral course, Qualitative Methods (SSW 6414). For this assignment the researcher conducted two qualitative interviews with a community college student about her feelings related to voting and her decision not to vote in the 2012 Presidential election. This experience gave the researcher insight into important themes and effective questions, which informed the development of the interview guide used in this dissertation. Additionally, contingency questions and probes were developed specifically for participants who had voted in the past and those who had never voted. The researcher practiced with her dissertation chair the delivery of questions and responses to participants' comments. Additionally, the interview guide was piloted by asking the questions to fellow UConn students to ensure the clarity of question wording.

Survey

An electronic Voting History/Demographics survey (Appendix G) was developed to collect data on participant characteristics and allow for a contextual breakdown of their traits and experiences. Like the interview guide, this survey was first developed in Survey Methods and Design (SSW 411), a required class for the doctoral program. On average, the survey took ten minutes to complete. It was created in Qualtrics, a web-based survey system, through the University of Connecticut's portal. Surveys were administered using an iPad provided by the researcher and were password protected. Surveys asked for the last four digits of each

participant's phone number which became a unique identifier, linking survey data and transcripts. Following data collection and coding, survey data was uploaded to an excel spreadsheet on a password protected computer. The electronic survey used for this dissertation included questions about participants' past voting history, which were developed and pre-tested in the Survey Methods course; perceptions of the role of government, which were taken from a 2014 Pew Research Poll; and general demographic information. It also asked participants to pick from which store they wanted their gift-card, so the researcher could procure it for the semi-structured interview.

Past Voting History: There were four questions that asked about past voting history and were created for the purpose of this dissertation. They included questions about if the participant was registered to vote, the frequency with which they voted in presidential elections, the frequency with which they voted in other elections (local, state, Congressional), and if they voted in the 2012 presidential election. All questions were close-ended questions with mutually exclusive and exhaustive answer sets.

Reasons for Voting or Not Voting: Questions five and six were contingency responses to the fourth question that asked if they voted in the 2012 presidential elections to isolate respondents by their voting behavior. Those that answered they did not vote were given question five which asked:

In any election, some people do not vote. Thinking about your decision not to vote in the 2012 Presidential Election indicate the importance for each of the following possible reasons that some people have for not voting in any election.

In order to address systematic errors like social desirability, this question was asked in a non-threatening tone so that respondents felt comfortable to answer honestly. Therefore the question

was worded to contextualize that threat by saying, “In any election, some people are not able to vote.” Participants were asked to rate the importance (not important, somewhat important, and very important) of twenty-six reasons related to structural barriers and attitudes about voting.

Those that responded that they did vote answered question six which asked:

Thinking about your decision **to vote** in the 2012 Presidential Election, indicate the importance for each of the following possible reasons that some people have for voting in any election.

Participants were asked to rate the importance (not important, somewhat important, and very important) of fifteen reasons related to attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of voters. These two questions were constructed using relevant academic literature in order to ensure content and face validity for the purpose of this dissertation.

Perceptions of the Role of Government: There were two questions related to the participants’ perception of the role of government. These questions were taken from a 2014 Pew Research Poll. They are as follows:

7.) What is your opinion about government? (*Please choose one.*)

- ☐ Is all most always wasteful and inefficient
- ☐ Often does a better job than people give it credit for
- ☐ Don’t know

8.) How would you complete the following sentence? Government aid to the poor... (*Please choose one.*)

- ☐ Does more harm than good
- ☐ Does more good than harm
- ☐ Don’t know

Demographic Information: The last eleven questions were related to demographic variables and wording was taken from the Census. Questions regarding which college they attend, their full-time or part-time student status, if they ever had a student loan, their employment status, and their gender, race, ethnicity, and marital status were all closed-ended questions with mutually exclusive and exhaustive answer sets. Questions related to the number of semesters they have been enrolled in community college, their major, their age, and the city they reside in were open-ended questions and required that they write in the appropriate response.

Data Collection/Context

Two in-person contacts (pre-interview contact and semi-structured interview) were made with each participant at their community college. All contacts were conducted between October 26, 2015 and February 25, 2016 during two in-person contacts with each of the twenty-eight participants at their college, at a time convenient for them. Meeting locations were designated by each college and reserved by the student investigator in advance. Meetings at TRCC took place in a prearranged empty office or study room in the library. All meetings at CCC and TCC were conducted in study rooms at the libraries.

Appointments for the first meeting were made during the initial telephone call following up on each participant's written interest to participate in the research. At this time the researcher explained the parameters of the study to the student, answered questions, and confirmed eligibility. First contacts were scheduled at the participant's convenience. Participants were asked if they wanted a text or phone call reminder the day before their meeting. All participants requested a text reminder.

Pre-Interview Contact

The purpose of the pre-interview contact was to confirm participant eligibility, explain and complete informed consent (Appendix B), set a meeting time for a semi-structured interview, and administer the electronic voting and demographic survey. During this contact and the semi-structured interview, participants were told the researcher is not interested in, and will not ask questions about whom participants voted for, opinions about candidates, or their political views. It was emphasized that the focus of the study was only how they made the decision to vote or not vote, and that all opinions and positions were vital.

The pre-contact interview provided an opportunity for the researcher to begin establishing rapport and trust with each participant. The researcher engaged in “small talk” to connect with participants about their shared experiences. This was important as many participants were nervous about being in a research study and/or speaking to a “professor type,” and this gave them familiarity with the researcher prior to the semi-structured interview. The entire meeting lasted between 20-30 minutes. Field notes were made after all contacts with participants.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The purpose of the second contact was to conduct a semi-structured interview, the main source of data collection. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and uploaded into NVivo 10 to assist in data analysis.

The researcher greeted all participants in a friendly manner, following up on conversations from pre-interview contacts. The researcher took a neutral stance, wanting to understand each participant's unique perspective. To reduce the threat of social desirability bias affecting the responses of participants, questions were asked in a non-threatening tone and contextualized so all attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors were normalized. The researcher

continually reiterated that the purpose of the study was to gain understanding of the thought processes related to deciding to vote or not, and therefore the insights of both voters and nonvoters were needed.

In addition to the interview guide, spontaneous probes were used to obtain more in-depth answers and encourage more natural responses (Padgett, 2008). Often the researcher summarized and clarified participant statements during the interview to clarify the meaning of responses. This provided “on-the-spot confirmation or disconfirmation of the interviewer’s interpretations” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p.195). Saturation was achieved in this study. Before completion of twenty-eight semi-structured interviews, distinct patterns of voting behaviors and types had emerged, and no new codes, sub-themes, or themes were developing (Padgett, 2008).

Transcripts

Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and uploaded into NVivo 10. In order to get feedback from the dissertation chair, the researcher transcribed the first four interviews with her commentary on her interviewing skills. The next four interviews were sent to a third party, with a signed confidentiality statement and approved by the IRB, for transcription. The quality of the transcription was so poor that the researcher had to re-transcribe these four transcripts and decided to transcribe the remaining transcriptions herself. All transcripts were stored in the researcher’s laptop which is password protected and backed up to the cloud.

Field Notes

Field notes were taken after classroom recruitment presentations, pre-interview contacts, and semi-structured interviews. They included the researcher’s personal reactions, observations, descriptions, and issues needing future clarification. The researcher documented her feelings and

thoughts about the process as well as the content of the interview, and critiqued her demeanor and interviewing skills. All field notes were entered into NVivo 10 to create an audit trail.

Challenges

Several challenges presented themselves throughout the data collection process. Perhaps the biggest obstacle was getting interested students to return initial phone calls and show up to interviews. There was a fine line between the researcher diligently following up with students and with her harassing them. In the recruitment phase, if students did not respond after three phone calls, it was assumed they did not want to participate in the study. In cases of students not showing up for a meeting, appointments were rescheduled multiple times until they were able to attend. Community college students, who receive means-tested government assistance, have multiple life stressors and are a hard-to-reach population. They juggle school, work, and families, and amongst other issues struggle with ever changing job schedules, transportation, and childcare. Winter weather conditions created greater challenges for them, affecting their access to transportation and childcare as their children's schools were delayed or closed when their college was not, and/or informal childcare arrangements fell through. Students typically scheduled their classes so they only had to be on campus one or two days a week. These were long days for them. Student-participants would meet me before, between, or after their classes, typically while eating a meal they had brought from home.

In one case, a participant brought her child to an interview scheduled before her evening class, and a relative met them in the parking lot to pick up the child before her class started. During the interview, the child twirled in a spinning library chair squealing "wee." In four other cases, after numerous times rescheduling appointments, both the pre-contact and semi-structured interview were made the same day but at different times, in order to accommodate the students'

harried schedules. The pre-contact meeting took place before their first class of the day and the interview immediately following their last class. In other cases, many weeks passed between these contacts. The longest time period between a pre-contact meeting and semi-structured interview was ten weeks. Most meetings were conducted exactly one week apart as students' class schedules were the same every week. No length of time between meetings was specified in the approved IRB application. It merely stated "Eligible student-participants will meet with the student investigator two times at their community college, in a private location, at a mutually agreed upon time." Therefore, these scheduling challenges and accommodations did not require an amendment to the IRB.

The researcher's flexibility was critical to the success of the study (Padgett, 2008). The challenges faced by student-participants to attend scheduled meeting times are the same ones they face on Election Day to cast a ballot. These challenges did not represent a reluctance to participate in the study. Rather, student-participants were eager to share their experiences, opinions, and attitudes. They expressed gratitude for being included in the study and many hugged the researcher good-bye.

Data Analysis

Method of Analysis of Interviews

This study used grounded theory to guide inquiry and generate knowledge about factors affecting a recipient's decision to cast a ballot or not. Grounded theory uses comparative analysis to examine data in order to describe and interpret participant behavior (Padgett, 2014). Hallmarks of grounded theory include a sample size of between twenty and thirty participants, inductive coding that may use sensitizing concepts from literature as codes, use of theory without letting it drive the findings, and memo-writing to document analysis, all of which were employed

in this research (Padgett, 2014). Additionally, because the study's sample was composed of both participants who had voted in past elections and those that had never voted, negative case analysis was used to compare these groups.

In this way the logic and method of case study analysis was adopted. It allowed for the discernment of patterns that promote and discourage voting (Eisenhardt, 2002). Data from each case (individual) was unpacked and examined but viewed as a whole in relation to others in their same voting category of "voter" or "nonvoter" (Padgett, 2008). Data from "voter" and "nonvoter" categories were viewed in comparison to each other, voting literature, statistics, and theory. This was an ongoing iterative process, which provided "contextually rich and meaningful interpretation" (Padgett, 2008, p.33), from which new, more nuanced categories of voting behaviors/voting identities emerged not anticipated by the researcher.

Development of Codebook

An initial codebook to identify themes was created by coding fourteen transcripts on paper. Additionally, constructs developed in the conceptual framework to operationalize empowerment were developed as provisional codes (Miles, Huberman, Saladana, 2014) when transcripts supported their inclusion. The researcher took detailed notes on the paper copies of the transcripts and wrote a summary page for every transcript that included a description of the interview, key quotes, and major themes. Once Dr. Nancy A. Humphreys, dissertation committee chair, and Dr. Cristina Wilson, methodologist on the dissertation committee, approved of the initial codebook, transcripts were uploaded to NVivo10. A node tree, reflecting the codebook, was created in NVivo10.

To ensure rigor, a second coder, Maureen Dimock, a fellow Ph.D. student from the UConn School of Social Work, co-coded twelve of the twenty-eight interviews. Each of these

coded transcripts was compared to the researcher's coded transcripts by using the NVivo10 coding comparison query, which generated a kappa score used to establish "inter-coder agreement." Before "official" coding started, the researcher and co-coder spent two-weeks discussing transcripts, the initial codebook, and coding together. As the researcher and co-coder began to review transcripts and code, and compare and discuss their coding, they revised the codebook as part of the iterative quality of qualitative research. Each change made to the initial codebook was discussed and agreed to by both the researcher and the co-coder. A journal was kept in NVivo10 detailing the changes and the reasons for making them. In addition, revisions to the codebook were uploaded to NVivo10 and the node tree was changed to reflect the changes. The final version of the codebook's themes and codes are as follows:

1. Voting: Importance or lack of, one vote matters or not, reasons for voting or not, process of voting, laws, candidates, specific candidates, campaign, local elections, suggestions, feelings about coding
2. Family Influence on Voting: follows family of origin, ignores family of origin, compliant with family of origin, follows current family, ignores current family, compliant with current family
3. Social Issues and Voting: community/community resources, violence, higher education/tuition, education (general), poverty/homelessness, identity politics related to race/ethnicity, immigration, identity politics related to gender, economy, children, health care, environment, protest movements, issues that affect me (non-specific), issues that affect entire nation/community, issues related to values, other
4. Social Trust/Lack of Trust: government, bureaucracy, leaders, democracy, media, others like me
5. Empowerment: political knowledge/awareness, attention to influence of government, critical awareness, voting and social change, sense of agency, schooling, social capital/network, group identification, self-efficacy, elections matter/relevant, reciprocal connectedness, social programs positive
6. Internalized Oppression: alienation, resignation, external locus of control, apathy, social programs negative, learned helplessness, shame and stigma related to social programs, lack of resources, elections do not matter, lack of awareness

Co-coding

In order for the researcher and co-coder to become synthesized in their coding, they practiced coding in different ways to refine their individual and collective thinking. For instance, at their first meeting they each coded the same line of a portion of a transcript using the codebook and then compared and discussed the coding. Next, the co-coder free-coded (not using the codebook) two transcripts by hand because she wanted the opportunity to discover themes naturally. (The researcher had already free-coded these transcripts as part of the process to create the initial codebook.) Then they reviewed each other's codes line-by-line, and compared them to their own. They found their coding to be similar in meaning, but found they used different words to describe concepts. This was an invaluable exercise to gain insight into each other's thought process and was part of the iterative process involved in formulating the final codebook. As they gained confidence in their agreement on the overall meanings of passages, they focused their attention to using the same vocabulary/code to describe it.

The researcher and co-coder continued to code portions of transcripts and to discuss their impressions of transcripts, their understanding of the nuances of themes and codes, and how and where each theme and code was applicable in the transcripts. Their discussions focused on coming to agreement about the use of a specific code to describe a specific concept. These in-depth conversations were invaluable not only to gain inter-rater reliability, but also to thoroughly unpack the meaning of voting on many levels to recipients of means-tested government assistance. The researcher and co-coder each brought a different perspective and knowledge set to the coding process, which made their overall analysis richer and deeper. The researcher has a background in macro practice and a focus on the social structure, and the co-coder has a background in micro practice and a focus on the individual.

During these conversations, researcher and co-coder noticed and agreed on emerging patterns. Both the researcher and co-coder took notes/memos on these conversations, which are included in a journal stored in NVivo10. Several of these patterns remained important throughout the data analysis. First, many participants did not take elections seriously but still voted, and others took voting very seriously but did not vote. Also, some participants who voted were extremely committed and would overcome any obstacle to vote, and others were only marginally committed to voting and only voted if it were convenient. Lastly, some participants seemed to have given up on anything related to government, policy, or politics, which the co-coder strongly felt went beyond the concept of alienation. Therefore, the concept of resignation was added to the codebook to express this higher level of alienation, under the theme of internalized oppression. These discussions and shared observations of patterns affected the coding of both the researcher and the co-coder.

Once the researcher and the co-coder felt unified in their understanding of the codebook and how to apply codes, they began to independently code transcripts (different from the ones they had discussed and practiced coding). Their goal was not to co-code every transcript, but to co-code until they could demonstrate consistent inter-coder reliability and make a strong case for the study's trustworthiness.

They coded all the transcripts of the six voters and then the six nonvoters. Each set of voters and nonvoters included participants from each of the three colleges and included participants with different genders, race/ethnicities, and ages. They each coded the same transcript, then combined each transcript in the master NVivo10 file on the researcher's computer and ran the "comparison query," which produced a kappa score for every node in the node tree. This means the query compared where each researcher coded each node and

generated a kappa score for the coding of each node. The kappa score measures inter-coder agreement, and a score of 0.80 or above is the benchmark for rigor. The researcher averaged all the kappa scores for all the nodes to generate a total kappa score for each comparison of a transcript.

The plan was that after the first coding comparison, presumed to be below the 0.80 benchmark, the researchers would discuss their rationale for coding, recode these transcripts, and run the comparison again. The goal was for the second kappa score to be near 0.80. This was achieved in the first set of transcripts coded of six voters (see Table 2.2). The average of the first kappa scores was 0.6199, and the average of the second kappa scores was 0.8332.

Table 2.02 Kappa Score for Co-coding of Six Voters

| Voters | Kappa 1 | Kappa 2 |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| Raven | 0.6341 | 0.7968 |
| Melanie | 0.6771 | 0.8607 |
| Brittany | 0.5584 | 0.8411 |
| Tyra | 0.6761 | 0.8704 |
| Winter | 0.6838 | 0.8526 |
| Carlie | 0.4901 | 0.7774 |
| Average | 0.61993 | 0.83317 |

Note: All names are pseudonyms.

In the second set of participants coded of six nonvoters, the .80 benchmark was achieved after just one comparison in the last four transcripts. The average first kappa score for these was .8044. The four transcripts that achieved the .80 benchmark during the first comparison were not recoded and compared because they had already achieved the benchmark. The average of the

second kappa scores of the two transcripts that were compared a second time was .8121, which achieved the benchmark for the second comparisons. The average of the second kappa scores with the four first scores that achieved the benchmark was 0.86572.

Table 2.03 Kappa Score for Co-coding of Six Nonvoters

| Voters | Kappa 1 | Kappa 2 |
|---|----------------|----------------|
| Pat | 0.5897 | 0.8066 |
| Joy | 0.6666 | 0.8175 |
| Sam | 0.8365* | * |
| Alexus | 0.9243* | * |
| Franklin | 0.8696* | * |
| Brandy | 0.9398* | * |
| <i>Average</i> | 0.8044 | 0.8121 |
| <i>Average with first scores included</i> | | 0.86572 |

Note: 1) All names are pseudonyms.
 2) * signifies the first score was sufficient to satisfy the kappa benchmark of .80.

The overall kappa score for the coding of this study should be the average of all twelve second comparisons, including the four comparisons of the four transcripts, which achieved kappa scores over 0.80 after the first comparison. Thus, the overall inter-rater reliability score is 0.8494, which represents high inter-rater reliability (Table 2.4). The increase in kappa scores between the coding comparisons of the researcher and co-coder demonstrates the inter-coder reliability increased as they coded more transcripts, which demonstrates the success of the co-

coding. Additionally, it can be concluded that because the kappa scores of the coding comparisons reached a repeatedly high inter-coder reliability, their thinking and analysis were in agreement. Therefore, transcripts coded by just the researcher after this high level of reliability was achieved should be presumed to be reliable. Additionally, although the co-coding of twelve transcripts has been reported and compared using the comparison query, six other transcripts were coded together by the researcher and co-coder. Each of these transcripts was analyzed thoroughly by both researchers and coded together. Thus eighteen of the twenty-eight transcripts were coded by two coders, and ten transcripts were coded by just the researcher.

Table 2.04 Average Kappa Score for Study

| | |
|---|----------------|
| Average kappa scores of co-coding six transcripts of voters | 0.83317 |
| Average kappa scores of co-coding six transcripts of nonvoters | 0.86572 |
| <i>Total Average for Study</i> | <i>0.84944</i> |

This high level of inter-rater reliability was achieved because of the in-depth discussions between the researcher and co-coder throughout the process of co-coding, which spanned three months (July-September 2016). Throughout this time, they discussed their personal reactions to each transcript, which helped reduce researcher bias. Additionally, they continued to develop codes as well as refine definitions and applications of each code. This was a collaborative process based on mutual respect, which allowed each researcher to evolve her thinking and interpret passages more deeply. It was an iterative process: reading transcripts, coding, having lengthy critical dialogue, consulting literature to confirm meanings of concepts, having more discussion about meanings of concepts, changing the codebook when appropriate, and then

separately recoding. Each researcher kept their own memos about their analysis of codes and emerging themes and about their discussions with each other. Below is an excerpt from the “journal of memos” documenting this process:

We looked at “Melanie” comparison report and examined every node with 0 or negative kappa score. Came to agreement. We added the feelings code, lack of agency, lack of critical awareness, and lack of self-efficacy. Big discussion about difference between agency and self-efficacy and when to use the “law” code. Examination of the “connectedness” code leading to our decision to add “reciprocal connectedness” (defined as feeling of social exchange between self and larger community) under the theme of empowerment. This resulted in our changing the name of the code “connectedness” to “social network” but leaving the definition the same. We came to agreement on each node’s meaning and application. Later and separately we will each made changes to our original coding. We will re-compare this. This took 2.5 hours. Helpful to parse out meaning. Helpful to come to agreement on nuances of the differences. We could discuss and debate each node but have to make a decision and continue so do not get bogged down.

This excerpt demonstrates how the researchers used the comparison query. The comparison report pinpointed specific passages for them to focus on, which guided discussion, resulting in refinement of codes as the researchers gained more in-depth understanding of how recipients of means-tested government make decisions about voting.

In this example, after the researchers made the changes to the codebook and node tree, they each recoded the “Melanie” (pseudonym) transcript and ran the second comparison query. As a result of this process, the kappa score representing inter-coder reliability improved from a 0.6771 to a 0.8607. The improved score provides confirmation of the co-coders advancement in thinking, understanding, and interpretation. This level of analysis would not have been possible without the focus provided by the comparison query, the meticulous scrutiny of the researchers, and the differing insights of each researcher based on their different knowledge and experiences of micro and macro social work. The analysis of this data would not be as in-depth had they

each come from a micro or a macro background. The success of the co-coding process resulted because the scores generated from the comparison query precisely focused the researchers' attention to precisely where they differed. Had the comparison query not been used, the researchers would have assumed their coding decisions were close enough. The results of the comparison query directed the co-analysis and extreme detail of parsing out the meanings of codes.

NVivo10 Matrix Coding Query

The Matrix coding query was used to confirm patterns noticed by the researchers. It was used to compare voter and nonvoter attitudes about voting, which ultimately confirmed the emergence of four different voting types noticed and developed by the researchers. It provided the tool to distinguish and report differences between each group, which the researchers had agreed were present.

Electronic Survey

Data from the electronic surveys was retrieved from Qualtrics. Qualtrics' reports of frequencies were used to compute averages.

Summary

This chapter described the qualitative research design used to unpack how recipients of means-tested government assistance, enrolled in community colleges, make decisions about whether or not they cast a ballot on Election Day. A purposive sampling method was used to recruit community college students attending either Three Rivers, Capitol, or Tunxis Community Colleges from introductory psychology, sociology, and human services classes. The researcher met twice with each participant. The purpose of the first contact was to explain the study,

complete the informed consent process, and administer an electronic survey to collect demographic data and voting histories. The second contact was a one-on-one semi-structured interview using an interview guide. Each interview was audiotaped, transcribed, and uploaded to NVivo10 for coding and analysis.

Together the researcher and a co-coder developed a codebook and reviewed transcripts to come to an understanding about themes and subthemes. A co-coding strategy was developed that added to the trustworthiness of the study. By using NVivo's coding comparison feature, kappa scores were generated to indicate inter-coder reliability. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze data from which knowledge emerged about how recipients make decisions about voting. The researcher employed strategies to minimize the effects of her privileged status and power differential with community college students including emphasizing her status as a student when interacting with participants, bracketing her political viewpoints, keeping field notes, and debriefing about interviews with her dissertation chair. Ethical considerations were discussed.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS/RESULTS

Twenty-eight participants were eligible and recruited for this study and interviewed. This is an appropriate sample size for grounded theory research, which is typically between twenty to thirty participants (Padgett, 2008). The goal of the purposive sampling strategy was to generate a diverse sample to capture a rich and thick description of how recipients of means-tested government programs, enrolled in a community college, make decisions to vote or not to vote (Padgett, 2008). This was accomplished. This chapter will report the demographic characteristics of the participants and discuss the findings using data from the electronic survey and the semi-structured interviews.

Findings Related to Quantitative Electronic Survey

The electronic survey included questions about participants' demographic information, past voting history, and perceptions of the role of government. A summary of these findings are presented and used to support the findings from data generated from the semi-structured interviews.

Participant Demographics

The demographic characteristics of the twenty-eight participants were diverse and provided a plentiful and robust opportunity to explore “why” and “how” citizens with so much at stake in elections decide to vote or not. The sample was almost evenly distributed between the three community colleges where recruitment took place. Ten participants (35.71 %) were students at Three Rivers Community College (TRCC) in southeastern Connecticut, ten (35.71 %) at Tunxis Community College (TCC) in a suburb of Hartford, and eight participants (28.57 %) were students at Capital Community College (CCC) in Hartford.

The most critical characteristic for this study was the status of voter or nonvoter (see

Table 3.01). Classroom recruitment presentations stressed that both voter and nonvoter voices were crucial for the success of the study. There were slightly more participants who previously voted in any election than those who had never voted in any election: sixteen previously voted (53.57 %) while twelve had never voted (46.43 %). The sample was closely divided between those who voted in the 2012 presidential election and those who did not vote in 2012: thirteen voted, fifteen did not vote.

Of the three means-tested government programs (SNAP, WIC, and TANF) used in the study's inclusion criteria, most participants received SNAP. All but one participant (96.42 %) received SNAP benefits. Of those who received SNAP, two participants also received WIC benefits, and one received TANF and WIC benefits. One participant (3.57 %) received only WIC benefits.

The ages of participants ranged from twenty-one to forty-six years-old, and the average age was twenty-eight years old. This age dispersion makes sense based on the study's inclusion criteria of having been eligible to vote in the 2012 election, which meant participants could not be younger than twenty-one years of age at the time of the study. Likewise younger adults were more likely to be recipients of TANF, SNAP, or WIC and/or enrolled in a community college. It makes sense that thirteen (46.43 %) participants were parents.

The sample included almost twice as many women than men. Of the twenty-eight participants, nineteen (67.86 %) identified as female, eight (28.50 %) identified as male, and one (3.57 %) as transgender. This ratio is not surprising since recruitment was targeted to pre-social work/human services classes and classes required for pre-social work/human services (sociology and psychology), and the profession of social work is known to be predominately female.

Over one-third (39.29 %) of the sample, eleven participants, were pre-social work/human

services majors. The majors of the seventeen other participants included general studies/liberal arts/undecided (4 participants), medical assisting/pre-nursing (4 participants), criminal justice (3 participants), bimolecular engineering, business administration, computer science, physical therapy, music, and teaching. The number of semesters participants had been enrolled in community college at the time they were interviewed ranged from being in their first to their seventh semester, with the average being 5.44 semesters. Three participants previously had been enrolled in other colleges. Sixteen participants were full-time students (57.14 %), eleven were part-time (39.29 %) students, and one did not specify their student status. Eight (28.5 %) student-participants were not employed, nine (32.14 %) were employed full-time, and eleven (39.29 %) were employed part-time.

The sample reflected diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Just less than half (46.43%) of the sample, thirteen participants, identified as Non-Hispanic white. Eight participants (28.57 %) identified themselves as being Black/African American, five participants (17.86 %) as Puerto Rican, five (17.86 %) as Hispanic/Latino, and two participants (7.14 %) as Bi-racial or Multiracial. (Note: Five participants identified themselves with multiple demographic categories.)

Table 3.01 Summary of Primary Demographic Characteristics of Participants

| Pseudonym | Voted | Assistance | Age | Gender | Major | Ethnicity/Race |
|-----------|-------|------------|-----|--------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Daniel | Yes | SNAP | 29 | M | Business Administration | Non-Hispanic white |
| Raven | Yes | SNAP | 37 | F | Nursing | Black |
| Jason | Yes | SNAP | 22 | M | General Studies | Puerto Rican |
| Jasmine | Yes | SNAP | 28 | F | Nursing | Black |
| Tyra | Yes | SNAP | 34 | F | Human Services | Black |
| Peyton | Yes | SNAP | 27 | F | Human Services | Black |
| Carlie | Yes | SNAP | 32 | F | Human Services | Non-Hispanic white |
| Bradley | Yes | SNAP | 25 | M | Music | Black |
| Brittany | Yes | SNAP | 28 | F | Teaching | Non-Hispanic white |
| Mike | Yes | SNAP | 39 | M | Medical Assisting | Non-Hispanic white |
| Jada | Yes | SNAP/WIC | 27 | F | Human Services | Bi/black |
| Suzie | Yes | SNAP | 28 | F | Human Services | Non-Hispanic white |
| Melanie | Yes | SNAP | 46 | F | Nursing | Non-Hispanic white |
| Shanice | Yes* | SNAP | 23 | F | Human Services | Black |
| Jose | Yes* | WIC | 27 | M | General Studies | Hispanic/Puerto Rican |
| Winter | Yes* | ALL | 26 | F | Human Services | Hispanic/Puerto Rican |
| Donna | Never | SNAP | 21 | F | Criminal Justice | Hispanic/Puerto Rican |
| Christine | Never | SNAP | 22 | F | Physical Therapy | Non-Hispanic white |
| Brandy | Never | SNAP | 28 | F | Liberal Arts | Non-Hispanic white |
| Stacy | Never | SNAP | 35 | F | Human Services | Non-Hispanic white |
| Sandy | Never | SNAP | 21 | F | Criminal Justice | Non-Hispanic white |
| Pat | Never | SNAP | 23 | T | Undecided | Puerto Rican |
| Daryl | Never | SNAP | 23 | M | Human Services | Black |
| Sam | Never | SNAP | 29 | M | Computer Science | Non-Hispanic white |
| Joy | Never | SNAP | 28 | F | Criminal Justice | Hispanic/white |
| Alexus | Never | SNAP | 22 | F | Human Services | Hispanic/black |
| Sarah | Never | SNAP/WIC | 24 | F | Human Services | Non-Hispanic white |
| Franklin | Never | SNAP | 25 | M | Bio. Engineering | Hispanic/Bi |

Note:

Data linking community colleges to participants is not included to protect the identities of participants.

Yes: Voted in any past election

*Indicates that the participant did not vote in the 2012 election.

Never: Never Voted in any election

In addition to these demographics, other participant characteristics are relevant to provide

a contextual understanding of participant backgrounds. This data is not discussed in reference to other traits of participants so that their identities are protected. Three (10.71 %) participants were veterans of the War in Afghanistan. Two participants self-disclosed being homeless for several months in the past two years. Eighteen (65.26 %) of the participants reported being single or never married. Seven (25 %) participants identified as being married or living together; two of these participants are married to each other. Three participants (10.71 %) were divorced or separated, one of whom disclosed getting married just to get health insurance in order to have surgery and then divorced immediately after. Sixteen participants (57.14 %) had a student loan. Lastly, participants resided in urban, suburban, and rural communities in Connecticut: Hartford (4), New Britain (4), Groton (3), New London (3), Bristol (2), Killingly (2), Norwich (2), Avon, Danielson, Farmington, Plainville, Salem, Southington, Windsor, and an unspecified town in Connecticut.

Voting History

One section of the survey asked participants to rate a list of reasons why they might have voted or not voted in 2012 and rate each on a Likert scale: agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree. Participants expressed confusion about the wording of the question for “not voting.” Early in the data collection process participants asked the researcher to explain the wording of the question for nonvoters. They were confused if they were supposed to answer why they thought people in general do not vote, or why they personally did not vote. The data collected from these two questions are presented (see Tables 3.01 and 3.02) with a warning that the question wording was confusing and could be a threat to the internal validity of this question. Question wording for participants who did not vote in 2012 was as follows:

In any election, some people do not vote. Thinking about your decision not to vote in the

2012 Presidential Election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, indicate the importance for each of the following possible reasons for not voting. Mark in ONE box.

(Note, one participant skipped this question. Therefore, fourteen participants answered this question, even though fifteen participants did not vote in 2012.)

Table 3.02 Results of Survey Question about Not Voting in 2012

| # | Question | Not Important | n | Somewhat Important | n | Very Important | n |
|----|---|---------------|----|--------------------|---|----------------|---|
| 1 | I was either ill/disabled or caring for a family member, who was ill/disabled. | 50.00% | 7 | 21.43% | 3 | 28.57% | 4 |
| 2 | I lacked transportation. | 50.00% | 7 | 28.57% | 4 | 21.43% | 3 |
| 3 | I was out of town. | 64.29% | 9 | 0.00% | 0 | 35.71% | 5 |
| 4 | I did not know where to vote. | 35.71% | 5 | 28.57% | 4 | 35.71% | 5 |
| 5 | I did not understand how to get an absentee ballot; the process was too complicated. | 21.43% | 3 | 28.57% | 4 | 50.00% | 7 |
| 6 | I did not register in time. | 57.14% | 8 | 14.29% | 2 | 28.57% | 4 |
| 7 | The hours the polls were open were too inconvenient. | 50.00% | 7 | 21.43% | 3 | 28.57% | 4 |
| 8 | The hours the polls were open conflicted with work responsibilities. | 35.71% | 5 | 21.43% | 3 | 42.86% | 6 |
| 9 | The hours polls were open conflicted with family responsibilities. | 57.14% | 8 | 21.43% | 3 | 21.43% | 3 |
| 10 | I could not take time off from work. | 64.29% | 9 | 7.14% | 1 | 28.57% | 4 |
| 11 | I could not take time off from school. | 42.86% | 6 | 14.29% | 2 | 42.86% | 6 |
| 12 | Too difficult for me because of lack of child-care. | 57.14% | 8 | 35.71% | 5 | 7.14% | 1 |
| 13 | I went to vote and the line was too long for me to wait. | 85.71% | 12 | 0.00% | 0 | 14.29% | 2 |
| 14 | I went to vote and was told that I was longer registered. | 71.43% | 10 | 7.14% | 1 | 21.43% | 3 |
| 15 | I went to vote and was told that I was in the wrong polling location. | 71.43% | 10 | 21.43% | 3 | 7.14% | 1 |
| 16 | I went to vote and I did not have the correct ID. | 71.43% | 10 | 7.14% | 1 | 21.43% | 3 |
| 17 | I forgot to vote or send in absentee ballot. | 50.00% | 7 | 14.29% | 2 | 35.71% | 5 |
| 18 | I was not able to make an informed decision. | 42.86% | 6 | 14.29% | 2 | 42.86% | 6 |
| 19 | I did not have enough information about the candidates. | 42.86% | 6 | 7.14% | 1 | 50.00% | 7 |
| 20 | I did not think there was a difference between the candidates. | 57.14% | 8 | 7.14% | 1 | 35.71% | 5 |
| 21 | I did not like either of the candidates. | 35.71% | 5 | 14.29% | 2 | 50.00% | 7 |
| 22 | I do not care about politics. | 28.57% | 4 | 50.00% | 7 | 21.43% | 3 |
| 23 | I think one vote does not matter. | 21.43% | 3 | 57.14% | 8 | 21.43% | 3 |
| 24 | I think the results of the election will not make a difference in the lives of real people. | 35.71% | 5 | 50.00% | 7 | 14.29% | 2 |
| 25 | I think the outcome of the election will not affect my family or myself. | 57.14% | 8 | 28.57% | 4 | 14.29% | 2 |
| 26 | I chose not to vote to send a message to powers that be. | 85.71% | 12 | 14.29% | 2 | 0.00% | 0 |

The survey results demonstrate that participants who did not vote in 2012 made this decision for many reasons. There are three primary themes represented in the most frequently selected reasons for not voting: (a) beliefs that voting is not important, (b) structural barriers to voting, and (c) lack of knowledge about who to vote for.

The first theme, belief that voting is not important, includes reason numbers 22, 23, and 24: I do not care about politics; I think one vote does not matter; and I think the results of the election will not make a difference in the lives of real people. Each reason was selected by at least 9 out of 14 participants that they were either somewhat important or very important to their decision not to vote. This was found to be an important factor to understand why voters decide not to vote and will be elaborated on in the qualitative section regarding perceptions of political process.

The second theme, structural barriers to voting, includes reason numbers 4, 5, and 8: I did not know where to vote; I did not understand how to get an absentee ballot; and the hours the polls were open conflicted with work responsibilities. Again, each reason was selected by at least 9 out of 14 participants that they were either somewhat important or very important to their decision not to vote. The impact of structural barriers will be further explained in the qualitative section on the voting process.

The third theme, lack of knowledge about who to vote for, includes reasons 18 and 19: I was not able to make an informed decision, and I did not have enough information about the candidates. Each reason was selected by 8 out of the 14 participants as being somewhat important or very important to their decision not to vote. The political knowledge of all nonvoters is discussed throughout the qualitative findings and discussion.

Question wording for participants who did vote in 2012:

Thinking about your decision to vote in the 2012 Presidential Election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, mark if you agree or disagree with each of the following reasons that might have affected your decision to vote?

Table 3.03 Results of Survey Question about Not Voting In 2012

| # | Question | Not Important | n | Somewhat important | n | Very Important | n |
|----|---|---------------|----|--------------------|---|----------------|----|
| 1 | I always vote. | 7.69% | 1 | 15.38% | 2 | 76.92% | 10 |
| 2 | I wanted to protect my self-interest. | 7.69% | 1 | 15.38% | 2 | 76.92% | 10 |
| 3 | I was concerned for the welfare of others. | 7.69% | 1 | 0.00% | 0 | 92.31% | 12 |
| 4 | I was excited about the election. | 7.69% | 1 | 38.46% | 5 | 53.85% | 7 |
| 5 | I was encouraged to vote by someone or an organization important to me. | 38.46% | 5 | 30.77% | 4 | 30.77% | 4 |
| 6 | I voted with a friend or family member. | 46.15% | 6 | 23.08% | 3 | 30.77% | 4 |
| 7 | I wanted to be part of the process. | 0.00% | 0 | 15.38% | 2 | 84.62% | 11 |
| 8 | I have loyalty to a political party. | 61.54% | 8 | 30.77% | 4 | 7.69% | 1 |
| 9 | I was impacted by a television commercial. | 69.23% | 9 | 23.08% | 3 | 7.69% | 1 |
| 10 | I have strong opinions about issues. | 7.69% | 1 | 15.38% | 2 | 76.92% | 10 |
| 11 | I received a phone call or a knock on my door by a candidate or their representative. | 84.62% | 11 | 15.38% | 2 | 0.00% | 0 |
| 12 | I strongly supported a candidate. | 30.77% | 4 | 23.08% | 3 | 46.15% | 6 |
| 13 | I believe it is part of my civic duty. | 7.69% | 1 | 7.69% | 1 | 84.62% | 11 |
| 14 | I wanted to honor those who fought for my right to vote. | 15.38% | 2 | 7.69% | 1 | 76.92% | 10 |
| 15 | I wanted to represent others like me (i.e. my gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, social class, etc.) | 15.38% | 2 | 7.69% | 1 | 76.92% | 10 |

Participants who voted in the 2012 election were in agreement about factors related to why they voted. Reasons selected as most important in determining why participants voted in 2012 include two themes: (a) values related to having a voter identity and (b) concern about the impact of policies. Values related to having a voter identity include reason numbers 1, 7, 13, and

14: I always vote; I wanted to be part of the process; I believe it is part of my civic duty; and, I wanted to honor those who fought for my right to vote. Every participant selected that wanting to be part of the process was somewhat or very important to explaining why they decided to vote. Twelve of the thirteen selected they always vote and believe it is part of their civic duty. And eleven out of thirteen selected that they wanted to honor those who fought for their right to vote. These reasons all suggest that participants view themselves as voters and value voting and democracy. This is an important factor in understanding the difference between voters and nonvoters.

Concern about the impact of policies included reason numbers: 2, 3, 10, and 14: I wanted to protect my self-interest; I was concerned for the welfare of others; I have strong opinions about issues; and I wanted to represent others like me (i.e. my gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, social class, etc.). Twelve participants selected the first three of these reasons, and eleven participants selected the last reason regarding identity. These reasons demonstrate critical understanding of the connection between voting, policy, and private lives. It is noteworthy that both themes represent the opposite of why participants choose not to vote--because they think voting is not important. This suggests a philosophical chasm between participants who voted and those who did not vote, which will be discussed further in the findings of the research questions.

Participants reported voting less in non-presidential elections (local, state, congressional elections) than in presidential ones. Sixteen out of the twenty-eight participants never vote in these elections. This reflects national trends and highlights the need for social workers to focus their attention on increasing voter turnout in local and midterm elections.

Table 3.04 Frequency of Voting in Local, State, and Congressional Elections

| Frequency of voting in local, state, and congressional elections | Participants | % |
|---|---------------------|----------|
| Never | 16 | 57.14% |
| Some of the time | 7 | 25.00% |
| Always/Nearly Always | 5 | 17.86% |
| Total | 28 | 100% |

Perceptions of the Role of Government

In order to gain insight about how participants perceive the role of government and the value of government aid, two questions were included on the electronic survey which had been asked in a Pew Research survey: Q7 -What is your opinion about government? (Please choose one.), and Q8 - How would you complete the following sentence? Government aid to the poor... (Please choose one.).

Table 3.05 Results of Survey Question #7: What is your Opinion about Government?

| # | Answer | Voted 2012 | Did Not Vote 2012 | Not Sure | Total | Count |
|----------|--|-------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1 | Is almost always wasteful and inefficient | 4 | 5 | | 9 | 32.14% |
| 2 | Often does a better job than people give it credit for | 7 | 6 | 1 | 14 | 50.00% |
| 3 | Don't know | 2 | 3 | | 5 | 17.86% |
| | Total | 13 | 14 | 1 | 28 | 100% |

Table 3.06 Results of Survey Question # 8: How Would You Complete the Following Sentence? Government Aid to the Poor...

| # | Answer | Voted 2012 | Did Not Vote 2012 | Not Sure | Total | % |
|---|--------------------------|---------------|----------------------|-------------|-------|--------|
| 1 | Does more harm than good | 3 | 3 | | 6 | 21.43% |
| 2 | Does more good than harm | 9 | 9 | 1 | 19 | 67.86% |
| 3 | Don't know | 1 | 2 | | 3 | 10.71% |
| | Total | 13 | 14 | 1 | 28 | 100% |

One thing interesting about these results is there was little difference between the distribution of answers between those who voted in 2012 and those who did not vote in 2012. In both questions the majority of the participants answered affirmatively about the government and government aid to the poor. Fourteen of the twenty-eight participants believe that the government often does a better job than people give it credit for, and nineteen of twenty-eight participants believe that the government does more good than harm. However, it is significant that eight participants (almost one third of the sample) answered that they did not know or have an opinion. This is startling considering all participants are part of a household dependent on these benefits.

Findings Related to Qualitative Interviews

This study involved two distinct groups of participants: “voters” and “nonvoters.” It was natural to look at each group and analyze it in terms of the other group, the negative case: for example, analyzing voters in terms of how they are different from nonvoters and how they might be different from each other and visa-versa. Like a case study analysis, this allowed exploration and analysis of “with-in group similarities coupled with intergroup differences” (Eisenhardt, 2002, p.18). As a result of this analysis, four distinct voter types emerged. Two emerged within

the “voter” group: the “dedicated voter” and the “voter”, and two emerged within the “nonvoter” group: the “dedicated nonvoter” and the “nonvoter.” The identification of these four voter types was not based on quantitative measures of voting frequency, often used in voting literature to describe voters. Instead, it was based on some general patterns and commonalties of how recipients of means-tested government assistance make voting decisions. In general, dedicated voters perceived that voting is important because it is a means for them to exert control on the political system, and they are critically aware of how government affects their lives. Voters are less sure if voting is important and not as critically aware. Dedicated nonvoters do not think voting is a means to exert control on the political system and are alienated from government and elected leaders, but they are critically aware of how their lives are impacted by government. Lastly, nonvoters do not care about voting, and they do not think about politics or how government impacts their lives.

The identification of voter types is not meant to suggest that the traits of each group are exclusive to each group. Voter decision making is a complex psychological process influenced by structural political factors. Findings are discussed in relationship to these four voting types, acknowledging that within these types are individual differences. Each voter type will be discussed in relationship to a conceptual framework. The themes associated within each voting type should not be understood as absolutes, but as generalities.

Analysis of these four voter types allowed discovery of differentiation between the impact of the sub-processes related to empowerment, which Gutierrez (1994) suggested is useful. The nature of empowerment will be discussed in light of how, if at all, each sub-process affected the decision making of each voter type. The following section will provide an overview of each of the four voter types and provide specific demographic information about each group.

Four Voter Types

Dedicated Voters

Dedicated voters always vote in presidential elections. They are passionate in their belief that voting matters and have confidence in the democratic process. They vote because they fundamentally believe voting is important and have a strong sense of civic duty. They feel empowered when they cast a ballot on Election Day and feel like they are making a difference:

It makes me feel happy because to know that my opinion matters. *Bradley, dedicated voter, 25 years-old, African American, male*

I'm proud because I did my job, you know my part. *Melanie, dedicated voter, 46 years-old non-Hispanic/white, female*

It makes me feel like I'm doing something to change for the better. Change the world or the community for the better. Um, I feel good. I would say "good" cause I feel like I'm contributing. *Peyton, dedicated voter, 27 years-old, African American, female, human services major*

Dedicated voters have a strong voter schema, meaning they see being a "voter" as part of their identity (Bedolla & Michelson 2012). Voting for them is routine; they do not consider not voting.

Seven participants are identified as being dedicated voters. They represent the three community colleges; two participants were from TRCC and CCC, and three were from TCC. The average age of this group was thirty-two years old, slightly older than the overall average age (twenty-eight years old) of the sample. Most were female (five out of six) and African American (five out of seven), and one also identified as being biracial. No Hispanics were represented in this group.

Table 3.07 Traits of Participants Considered to be Dedicated Voters

| Participant | Age | Gender | Race | Major | Voted in 2012 |
|--------------------|------------|---------------|---------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Bradley | 25 | M | African American | Music | Yes |
| Brittany | 28 | F | Non-Hispanic/white | Teaching | Yes |
| Jada | 27 | F | Bi/African American | Human Services | Yes |
| Melanie | 46 | F | Non-Hispanic/white | Nursing | Yes |
| Peyton | 27 | F | African American | Human Services | Yes |
| Raven | 37 | F | African American | Nursing | Yes |
| Tyra | 34 | F | African American | Human Services | Yes |

Voters

Voters do not vote with the same intensity, thoughtfulness, or intention of the dedicated voter. Voters are not defined by the frequency of their voting. Some of the participants in this type always vote, and others just vote sometimes. What connects them are their shared perceptions about the meaning and significance of voting, and similar patterns in how they make voting decisions. Voters decide to vote not because they believe in the importance of voting, or that their vote matters, or because they understand the affects the election outcomes might have on their lives. Codes associated with why voters decided to vote included: “if you do not vote, then you cannot complain,” “wanted to be part of the process,” “right to vote,” “civic duty,” “like a candidate,” and “got the day off.” If they do not like any candidate they may decide not to vote. This makes sense because dislike or indifference to candidates is known to impede voting (Adams, Dow, & Merrill III, 2006). Voters have a voter-schema; they think of themselves as being voters. But their sense of identity as a voter does not have the same perceived importance to them as it does for the dedicated voters.

Over one third of the sample (nine participants) was identified as being a voter. Three were from TRCC, four from CCC, and two from TCC. The average age of this voter type was twenty-eight, the same as the sample. Five were female and four were male. Additionally, characteristics of race and ethnicity were more evenly distributed: four non-Hispanic/white, three Hispanic and/or Puerto Rican, and two Black.

Table 3.08 Traits of Participants Considered to be Voters

| Participant | Age | Gender | Race | Major | Voted in 2012 |
|--------------------|------------|---------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Carlie | 32 | F | Non-Hispanic/white | Human Services | Yes |
| Daniel | 29 | M | Non-Hispanic/white | Business Administration | Yes |
| Jasmine | 28 | F | African American | Nursing | Yes |
| Jason | 22 | M | Puerto-Rican | General Studies | Yes |
| Jose | 27 | M | Hispanic/Puerto Rican | General Studies | No |
| Mike | 39 | M | Non-Hispanic/white | Medical Assisting | Yes |
| Shanice | 23 | F | African American | Human Services | No |
| Suzie | 28 | F | Non-Hispanic/white | Human Services | Yes |
| Winter | 26 | F | Hispanic/Puerto Rican | Human Services | No |

Dedicated Nonvoter

Dedicated nonvoters are especially unique. They share traits of both the dedicated voters and nonvoters. They decide not to vote because they philosophically believe voting does not matter. They have a strong nonvoter schema. They consciously make thoughtful and informed decisions not to vote, and are not unaware, uninformed, apathetic, or unregistered to vote:

I mean I don't respect the government. I don't think what they do is fair. I don't think it's even. I think I don't want to be part of whatever. *Sandy, dedicated nonvoter, 21 years-*

old, non-Hispanic/white, female

I do not feel like it [voting] is beneficial to me. *Daryl, dedicated nonvoter, 23 years-old, African American, male, human services major*

I just have chosen not to. *Brandy, dedicated nonvoter, 28 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

I know it's important to vote but I don't really care to put my opinion or my vote in. So, I understand that it is important but I don't [vote]. *Sam, dedicated nonvoter, 29 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

Like Sam expresses, dedicated nonvoters are aware of the importance of voting; they understand the connection between government and their lives; and they decide not to vote.

Five participants were identified as being a dedicated nonvoter. Three were female and two were male. Their average age was twenty-five years old. Three were non-Hispanic/white, one was Hispanic/Black, and one is Black.

Table 3.09 Traits of Participants Considered to be Dedicated Nonvoters

| Participant | Age | Gender | Race | Major | Registered |
|--------------------|------------|---------------|---------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Alexus | 22 | F | Hispanic/African American | Human Services | No |
| Brandy | 28 | F | Non-Hispanic/white | Liberal Arts | Not Sure |
| Daryl | 23 | M | African American | Human Services | Yes |
| Sam | 29 | M | Non-Hispanic/white | Computer Science | No |
| Sandy | 21 | F | Non-Hispanic/white | Criminal Justice | No |

Nonvoter

For the most part, nonvoters do not think about voting. Nonvoters have no sense of being

a voter or even a nonvoter; they just do not think about it. They are apathetic. Reasons given by nonvoters for not voting include: “not having enough time,” “a belief that voting does not benefit them,” “don’t care about politics,” and “not being informed enough to make a decision.”

The demographics of voters and nonvoters are similar. Three participants were from TRCC, three from TCC, and one from CCC. Their average age was twenty-five, three years younger than the average age of the sample. The majority (five) of these participants were female. In addition, one participant identified as male and one as transgender. Four participants identified as being Hispanic or Puerto Rican and three as non-Hispanic/white. Four of the seven nonvoters were registered to vote.

Table 3.10 Traits of Participants Considered to be Nonvoters

| Participant | Age | Gender | Race | Major | Registered |
|--------------------|------------|---------------|-----------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Christine | 22 | F | Non-Hispanic/white | Physical Therapy | No |
| Donna | 21 | F | Hispanic/Puerto Rican | Criminal Justice | No |
| Franklin | 25 | M | Hispanic/Bi | Bio-Engineering | No |
| Joy | 28 | F | Hispanic/white | Criminal Justice | Yes |
| Pat | 23 | T | Puerto Rican | Undecided | Yes |
| Sarah | 24 | F | Non-Hispanic/white | Human Services | Yes |
| Stacy | 35 | F | Non-Hispanic/white | Human Services | Yes |

An important shared concern among all participants---all voter types---was the belief that the social welfare system is a flawed system. They believed it traps recipients into a cycle of dependence. They also complained that the assistance they receive from SNAP, WIC, and/or TANF was not sufficient to cover their needs. Lastly, many felt their attendance in community

college should count towards the work requirements for SNAP benefits. Even though they were frustrated with the social welfare system and believed their government assistance was not enough, participants from the three voting types, other than dedicated nonvoters, voiced their appreciation for these programs and described the help it has provided them:

Well they help me. They help me live. If I did not have government assistance than I would not be able to support my children and plus if I did not have government assistance I would not be able to go to school. So obviously they really do help me. *Sarah, nonvoter, 24 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female, human services major, nonvoter*

Although participant experiences and beliefs about social welfare policies were very similar, how they interpreted these experiences and how they related them to their decision to vote or not to vote were different.

Perceptions about the Political Process and Elected Officials

This section will discuss findings related to the participants' perceptions about the political process and to what extent they feel politicians consider their needs. This line of inquiry focuses on the individual level of empowerment as delineated by Gutiérrez (1994): perception of having a capacity to influence political systems through voting and a motivation to vote in order to protect their interests. (For the purposes of this dissertation, their "interest" is defined as protecting their means-tested government assistance.) It is important to unpack how the different voter types perceive the political environment and how they view their ability to access it.

Dedicated Voters

Dedicated voters philosophically believe in democracy and believe that through their voting their voices will be heard. They believe their one vote makes a difference because it adds to the collective of votes, as described by Brittany in the following quote:

One vote matters in that it adds to the collective...I was talking with a friend of mine about political things recently and he said something like, feeling like his voice wasn't enough to be heard, wasn't enough to make a difference and he compared it to a feather weight...a feather on its own, isn't very powerful. But you organize those feathers and you connect them with bone and sinew and muscle and all of a sudden you've got something that can fly. Um so yeah one vote counts. Because you end up with a collective of votes. *Brittany, dedicated voter, 28 years old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

No other voter type had this unequivocal sense of the importance of voting. Dedicated voters trusted that democracy is possible and perceived their vote has the power to create change. This confidence gave them a sense of having self-efficacy to influence the political system. In addition, it drove their sense of responsibility to vote because they perceived the democratic process depends on it:

You have to do it. It is a must, you know. That's what I was taught when I was growing up. You have to vote, for things to go on, for things to work. They need your opinion. They need your vote. *Raven, dedicated voter, 37 years-old, African American, female*

It is your right. That is your duty actually to vote. To vote for your country, and since America is my country, I am a citizen of this country, so I vote because I wanna see a change. *Peyton, dedicated voter, 27 years-old, African American, female, human services major*

Not only did they trust the democratic process, but they also believed politicians care about their needs, to the extent that the nature of democracy requires it. To this end, they believed politicians will work to fix flaws in the system, if citizens draw their attention to them:

Because going out [in reference to voting] and making your voice heard is how you draw attention to the flaws that are in the system. It is how you reach the ears of those who are in power and those who can change what's wrong and you say 'hey, this is a problem'. And if lawmakers and politicians aren't understanding that this problem exists, then they can't do anything about it. *Brittany, dedicated voter, 28 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

This statement clearly demonstrates how dedicated voters envisioned that their votes could contribute to solving issues by which they are affected. This does not mean dedicated voters blindly trust what politicians say, nor are they unaware of the inefficiency of government and politics, as illustrated by the following two comments:

I feel like a lot of them say whatever they can to get in office. *Peyton, dedicated voter, 27 years-old, African American, female, human services major*

So I think that is my biggest problem with the government is just the constant back and forth between the two parties and then um so when things really need to get done, they are not getting done and obviously affects us, the citizens. *Jada, dedicated voter, 27 years-old, bi-racial/Black, female, human services major*

Still even with this knowledge, they remain hopeful in the political process because of their underlying trust in democracy. For example, in the previous quote Jada acknowledged the failure of Congress to pass legislation, which maintains the status quo and is harmful to people like her. But as illustrated in the following statement, she also believed without voting the responsiveness of government would be even worse:

But it would be worse if you are not going out and voting. Because then they are really not going to see your perspective or your point of view. *Jada, dedicated voter, 27 years-old, bi-racial/Black, female, human services major*

This is typical of how dedicated voters perceive the nature of the political process and how they react when politicians seem not to care about their needs. Even when they think politicians do not respond to their needs, they believe in the nature of the democratic political process. Although Raven thinks that government does not address her needs, she still decides to vote.

I will still vote because I still want to see change. I so um, hopefully that will help, my

vote will help and get somebody better in the office to help you know to change services, not all of them. If they could change everything that would be great, but I believe it has to be done little by little until everything is fixed. *Raven, 37 years-old, African American, female*

Her statement illustrates her confidence in the ability of her vote to create change, which indicates a sense of self-efficacy, critical to individual empowerment.

For dedicated voters, depending on means-tested government assistance provided them further motivation to vote in order to bring attention to problems within the social welfare system. For them voting is how the system gets changed and policies get reformed. Brittany explained voting can be used to change the welfare system regardless if the system is purposely designed to keep the poor, poor, or if it is an inherently flawed system:

If this is something by design it is this sort of, there is this group of people saying let's keep the poor at the bottom and let's design a welfare system that looks like it is helping but is really hurting. And it is really keeping them where we want them in their place. Then voting is important. Because voting is how you would get that group of people out of power and get a new group of people into power that would not hold that view. If it is by nature. If it is just this system was designed to help but there are flaws in the system and you know this is just the way that it ended up working out. Well then voting is equally important. Because going out and making your voice heard is how you draw attention to the flaws that are in the system it is how you reach the ears of those who are in power and those who can change what's wrong. So either way it is incredibly important that you go vote and that I go vote. *Brittany, dedicated voter, 28 year-old non-Hispanic/white, female*

This philosophy demonstrates their perception that voting is a resource for them to exert power on the system and illustrates how dedicated voters also have critical understanding of the relationship between voting and their policy interests. In this regard, their decision to vote reflects their self-interest to maintain and/or improve their means-tested benefits, because they fundamentally believe through voting it is possible to do so.

Lastly, because of their perception that control is possible through voting, dedicated voters think strategically about voting. The following comment by Melanie demonstrates her conviction that voting is important, not only to elect her preferred candidate, but to block others:

And if we aren't voting and somebody else is voting shame on us. You know because whoever gets in, we didn't do anything to try to change it. *Melanie, dedicated voter, 46 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

This one comment illustrates a lot about how dedicated voters think. It indicates a sense of their being able to influence the system through voting because of the assumed power of “whoever gets in.” Additionally, their perception of being able to exert control over a system represents self-efficacy, and is common to all dedicated voters. Melanie’s acknowledgement that who is in office is important suggests a critical awareness about the relationship between electoral politics and her life. Lastly, her recognition that individuals with differing interests are voting so voting is important to counteract their votes is consistent with political empowerment: to take action to protect the interests of a collective. All of this is predicated on her assumption that democracy works.

Dedicated voters respect that democracy is possible and believe that people can influence the direction of politics, government, and policy. They perceive that elected officials do care about their needs because of their trust in the nature of democracy. Dedicated voters perceived their one vote matters, beyond its potential to be the deciding vote in any election. They acquired knowledge about skills needed to cast a ballot because they perceived their one vote is the “capacity” for them to exert control on the political process. This supports literature that the perception that voting is important is associated with increased voting (Beaumont, 2011; Condon & Holleque, 2013; Ozymy, 2012; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Being a recipient of means-tested government assistance did not discourage dedicated voters from voting as literature suggests of welfare recipients (Edin & Schaeffer, 2015; Soss & Schram, 2007; Swartz, Blackstone, Uggen, & McLaughlin, 2009). Instead, it motivated them to vote in order to put a leader in office who will work to reform policy in a way that benefits their lives. Dedicated voters demonstrated markers for individual empowerment: they perceived they had the capacity to influence political systems through voting and were motivated to vote in order to impact policies that affect their lives.

Voters

Voters were motivated to vote “in case” their vote matters in influencing politics and government and because they believed, “If you do not vote you cannot complain about the system.” Voters were either unsure if voting is important or thought it is not important. Those who seemed unsure in their belief that voting is important to promote democracy were “hopeful” that their votes would result in representation, but not as convinced as dedicated voters:

Hopefully they look at all of our votes. *Jason, voter, 22 years-old, Puerto Rican, male*

Uh, it's almost like going to play the power ball...kind of a weird way to think about it...So you go, you go you try to, you're hoping to hit the lotto, cause you know, if you play the number and get the lotto, things will change for you. So you feel that by voting for the right person, you know, you're taking a gamble. You're not sure that person's gonna get elected, but if they do get elected those are the numbers you picked. That's the person you picked, and if things go properly or, or the right way you'll be able to see, you know, positive outcomes from, uh, the gambling decision you made. *Jose, voter, 27 years-old, Hispanic/Puerto Rican, male*

In this way, voting is like “gambling” for Jose. His vote represents his “hope” in democracy and that his vote will matter, but he is not sure. Many other voters, like Daniel, said they just vote in the “spirit of voting,” to be part of the process:

I voted in every one of the Presidentials that I have been allowed to but I just basically do that in the spirit of voting... That whole thing about one voice matters, it really does not. When it comes to voting. That whole thing about one voice matters, it really does not when it comes to voting. *Daniel, voter, 29 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

Regardless of whether voters are “unsure” if voting is important or “convinced” voting is not important, it makes sense that voting is not their highest priority on Election Day. If something else comes up during that day, it might cause them to not vote, as Carlie notes:

It’s just another day where, you know, you take a few moments out of your life and get yourself a sticker that says I voted... And it maybe would, I’d be more inclined to make it [voting] fit for me personally, if I cared more about it [voting], um. But in the list of things that are important to me on a, you know, daily basis, politics is really at the bottom of my totem pole. *Carlie, voter, 32 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female, human services major*

Because voters lack a strong conviction about the importance of voting, their decision to vote does not reflect the same sense of self-efficacy that it does for dedicated voters. Voters seem to have less individual empowerment, meaning they have less of a perception that their vote has the capacity to influence political systems (Zimmerman, 1995). This is interesting because research suggests that perceptions that voting is not important are associated with being an impediment to voting (Blais & St. Vincent, 2001; Page, 2012). Yet, voters with these perceptions still voted.

Dedicated Nonvoters

In sharp contrast, dedicated nonvoters did not perceive that democracy is possible. Every dedicated nonvoter thought the political process is broken and had no trust that electoral politics would lead to democracy. Sam discussed voting in terms of being something that makes America “feel good” and refers to it as a “false consciousness”:

I think elections are important because it makes America “feel” that we are in charge of the government: We are in charge of something. We have a share, we have you know an

outcome on how the United States is run. But it's just a false. It's a false security. It makes them feel like they are secure, in my opinion, makes them feel like we are free America. And you know we put our opinion on how the governments run, but we have no choice. We have no opinion. At the end of the day we can say what we want to say, but they are going to do what they want to do. *Sam, dedicated nonvoter, 29 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

Clearly, Sam thinks voting has neither an effect on governance nor potential to create change.

Similarly, Daryl perceived that elected officials have no real power or ability to create change:

But I felt like even with him [President Obama] making it...He is a puppet. He is not running the show anyway. We all know President's do not run the show. So it is really like, it is really just to show. I mean it gives kids hope, you know? We had an African American president. But um yea, I am not really big on politics. *Daryl, dedicated nonvoter, 23 years-old, African American, male, human services major*

Both these statements illustrate how dedicated nonvoters made no assumptions congruent to a perception that voting matters or has the potential to create any change. In this way, they lack a sense of self-efficacy and/or individual empowerment.

Additionally, they strongly believed politicians do not care about their needs and never will care, which further diminishes their sense of having capacity to exert control on the political system. Alexis explained that no one in politics could ever understand her struggle; therefore, no one would ever be able to represent her needs. Her perceptions are shared by all the other dedicated nonvoters. From the following quote, the reader can sense Alexis' hopelessness, anger, and alienation as she juxtaposes the realities of her life to those of a politician:

Because a lot of people in, uh, politics and in the government already are set, like um financially, economically, they have great healthcare coverage, they have money that they get so they can buy food. They don't have to struggle with paying rent or like, um, like buying necessary things like clothes, um, things for school. I have to...every semester I'm just like struggling just to get five books, not books, um, notebooks for me to just go to class, so it's like they don't think about those things because they don't have

to have them, like they don't go through that. So I don't think they necessarily know what I go through, at all because they don't have to think about those things. They're really set and they're really good in the economic way versus me who is like no. (Laughs) I can barely do anything...I don't understand how a person that doesn't know the struggle can make a decision for the whole country or like the whole state or like city? That just makes me really upset, like how would you know what I'm going through if you have never been through it? Like people that come from generations of politicians and they're like yeah I want to be a politician cause my dad was a politician, but do you know what the constituents are going through or not? *Alexus, dedicated nonvoter, 22 years-old, Hispanic/Black, female, human services major*

Dedicated nonvoters were critical of the social welfare system, but unlike dedicated voters, they did not see voting as a means to reform the system. Instead their experiences related to how receiving government assistance fueled their sense of alienation and conviction that no one in government prioritized their needs, so voting is “useless.” Alexis said that if her benefits were sufficient she would vote because she would know elected officials consider her needs:

Because it [enough benefits] would show me, that the politicians or the governor or the mayor care about needs that me and people that are related, or similar to me go through...It's just you see in general they don't care about a lot of needs that people like myself are going through. *Alexus, dedicated nonvoter, 22 years-old, Hispanic/Black, female, human services major*

The voices of dedicated nonvoters presented in this section express the main perceptions of this group: (a) Once politicians get into office, they do what they want; (b) elected officials are controlled by other powerful entities, and are just puppets; (c) the lives of politicians and recipients are so different that recipients can never be represented. Politicians have no context in which to understand their needs; (d) the fact that their means-tested assistance (TANF, SNAP, WIC) is not adequate to keep their families fed proves to them that politicians do not care. All of these beliefs extinguish the sub-processes needed for individual empowerment.

Instead, dedicated nonvoters demonstrated “learned helplessness,” defined in the

codebook as “not recognizing the opportunity to gain control over forces that control your life.”

They are “resigned,” meaning “they accept something unpleasant that one cannot do anything about,” as defined in the codebook. Learned helplessness and resignation are reflected in how Sam and Brandy think about their votes:

I feel that even if I do vote for him, he might just be talking or he thinks he can do something but then at the end of the day, like I said before, he’s not the one that makes the decisions inside the government. So, I feel like even if he is voted in or let’s say that I vote, I don’t think that’s going to make difference so, I don’t. *Sam, dedicated nonvoter, 29 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

If our votes counted it would make a world of difference, but obviously we know that it doesn’t. Um it is pointless. *Brandy, dedicated nonvoter, 28 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

Dedicated nonvoters did not think elections affected them because they thought democracy is not possible.

Dedicated nonvoters have no sense of self-efficacy, which is not to be confused with having a little sense of self-efficacy. Their decision not to vote is based on their feelings. Their profound sense of powerlessness, helplessness, and alienation is known to block self-efficacy and therefore individual empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995). The findings suggest the alienation felt by dedicated nonvoters went beyond feeling “separate from” or “not a part of something”; it included their acceptance of government’s negative impact on their lives because they had no sense of self-efficacy. The alienation felt by dedicated nonvoters was so strong the researcher and co-coder named it “resignation,” and it is critical to understanding the difference between dedicated nonvoters and all other voter types.

Nonvoters

Nonvoters were disinterested in the political process. They literally described not caring

at all about politics or elections. Joy's statement below is typical of nonvoters:

I don't care. Since it's not an interest, I'm not really seeking information or questioning. I just, I'm not interested. *Joy, nonvoter, twenty-eight years-old, Hispanic/white, female*

Christine does not care because of her perception that unless you live on your own, you do not have to pay attention to politics or voting:

I just don't really pay attention to it because I do not live on my own yet and I don't have to know. *Christine, nonvoter, 22 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

For the most part, nonvoters do not think about voting or think of themselves as being voters:

I was not really thinking of it [voting]. *Donna, nonvoter, 21 years-old, Hispanic/Puerto Rican, female*

These sentiments represent the strong role apathy plays in their decision making about voting.

Some nonvoters expressed distrust in the political process and a sense that politicians do not understand their situations. But nonvoters were hesitant in their beliefs. Their statements were uncertain and less strong than those made by dedicated nonvoters. For example, as seen in the following excerpts, they used words like "could be" and "maybe" to describe their perceptions:

The way that I see how our government is run I feel like even if we vote I don't know if it really matters or not. I feel like there could be like um what's it called like...political scandal. *Sarah, nonvoter, 24 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female, human services major*

Like all the politicians are like you know rich white people, well not white, but you know uh just rich, and they have all had the opportunity to get somewhere high. You know maybe they do not really understand um the lower class or the middle class you know so? *Pat, nonvoter, 23 years-old, Puerto-Rican, trans*

The apathy of nonvoters sheds light on literature linking apathy as the primary internal barrier to voting (Piven & Cloward, 2000). These findings suggests that the role of apathy is relevant to just this type of nonvoter. They lacked a sense of individual empowerment because they primarily do not consider their ability to influence the socio-political environment. In this way, nonvoters have passively adopted a nonvoter schema.

Findings from the electronic survey indicated the primary reason participants did not vote in 2012 was because they believed voting is not important. These findings from the semi-structured interviews suggest there are two reasons for the belief that voting is not important: (a) lack of trust in democracy, as in the case of dedicated voters; and (b) apathy, as in the case of voters. These reasons are relevant and have different implications for how social work can effectively address the problem of nonvoting.

Clearly, dedicated voters and dedicated nonvoters had different perceptions about the political process, government, elected officials, and voting. A coding matrix (see Table 3.11) of numbers of passages coded to perceptions about the political process by all four voter types make clear the differences and similarities of each. It captures the differences in their perceptions of the political process and their relationship to it. Dedicated voters trusted democracy, government, and elected officials; believed elections matter; believed voting can lead to social change; and had a sense of self-efficacy. They did not feel a strong sense of distrust, learned helplessness, alienation, or resignation. On the other hand, dedicated nonvoters did not trust democracy, government, or elected officials; believed elections did not matter; and believed voting cannot lead to social change. Lastly, they had a strong sense of learned helplessness, alienation, resignation, and a lack of sense of self-efficacy.

Voters and nonvoters are similar in how they understand the meaning of voting. They are more apathetic and less resolved in their beliefs about the political process and government in general. This reflects their overall passivity in regards to how they think about voting. The coding matrix (see Table 3.11) shows that voters and nonvoters have more codes related to apathy than dedicated voters and dedicated nonvoters. Voters might decide not to vote, and nonvoters might be persuaded to vote. This is in sharp contrast to the dedicated voter, who will always vote, and the dedicated nonvoter, who will not vote on principle.

Neither voters nor nonvoters were affected by their experiences of being on government assistance in their decision making to vote or not to vote, because neither understood how they were connected. When asked by the researcher, “How does your past or present enrollment in government programs like SNAP change your view about politics or affect your view about politics and voting?” Most voters and nonvoters reported it had no effect. Many seemed confused by the premise of the question and saw no connection between them, as in the following two examples:

I do pay attention to the news about, you know, changes and things like that, um, because it could have a negative effect on me. Um, but I have not, I have not really ever put the correlation of those two things together. *Carlie, voter, 32 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, human services major, female*

I do not see how those two things would influence me in voting. I do not see the connection. *Franklin, nonvoter, 25 years-old, Hispanic/Bi-racial, male*

Because voters and nonvoters did not understand the connection between voting and their benefits, they had no sense of the possibility of being able to affect positive change in the social welfare system through voting. Additionally, because they did not consider that elected officials had influence on their benefits, they did not relate their frustrations of being a recipient to them.

Because of this, they had less to feel alienated and resigned about (see Table 3.11).

Table 3.11 Codes Related to Perceptions of the Political Process for all Four Voter Types

| Code | Voters | Nonvoters | Dedicated Voters | Dedicated Nonvoters |
|---|---------------|------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Trust in Democracy | 11 | 1 | 18 | 0 |
| Lack of Trust in Democracy | 3 | 11 | 0 | 15 |
| Trust in Government/Bureaucracy | 1 | 0 | 13 | 0 |
| Lack of Trust in Government/Bureaucracy | 4 | 17 | 9 | 36 |
| Trust in Elected Officials | 5 | 0 | 11 | 5 |
| Lack of trust in Elected Officials | 10 | 8 | 4 | 10 |
| Voting Can Lead to Social Change | 17 | 6 | 28 | 0 |
| Elections Matter | 15 | 9 | 20 | 8 |
| Elections Do Not Matter | 2 | 10 | 0 | 12 |
| Apathy | 0 | 16 | 26 | 28 |
| Resignation | 0 | 30 | 4 | 12 |
| Alienation | 5 | 19 | 5 | 75 |

The coding matrix of codes related to perceptions of the political process by all four voter types highlights several patterns and distinctions between them. First, voters and nonvoters have less amounts of coding associated with each concept than do dedicated voters and dedicated nonvoters. This demonstrates their passive thinking about the nature of politics and voting. Secondly, the patterns of codes for nonvoters and dedicated nonvoters mirror one another, meaning that what codes each has more of and less of are the same.

But patterns of coding between dedicated voters and voters differ. Voters have more codes than dedicated voters, related more to a lack of trust in government and elected leaders than trust in either one. This suggests dedicated voters have more trust than any other voter type. Social trust is a distinct trait of dedicated voters. Literature has found social trust to be an important factor in promoting voting, and lack of social trust leads to alienation (Kelly, 2009; Putnam, 2000; Uslaner & Brown, 2005). In this way, social trust acts as a protective factor against alienation and resignation. The social trust of dedicated voters may explain their voting decisions and consequently the nature of their voter type. Lastly, these coding patterns highlight the general lack of social trust by all participants.

Critical Awareness

The previous section discussed how participants' perceptions about the political process and elected officials informed their evaluation of whether or not they thought voting was important. For some participants, the importance they placed on voting determined whether or not they voted. This section will discuss how participants' critical awareness informed their voting or why they did not vote. It will address how participants understand the relationship between electoral politics and policy and how this impacted their voting decisions. For this study, participants who understood the relationship between electoral politics, policy, and their lives are considered critically aware.

Dedicated Voters

Dedicated voters understood the relationship between electoral politics, policy, and their lives and thus had critical awareness. They were able to see how their self-interests are tied to electoral politics, which encouraged them to make informed decisions about voting, including

assessments of how the policies of each candidate could affect them. The following two quotes illustrate their awareness of this relationship on the local level and how it affects their communities:

The decisions that they make and the policies that they're going for affects everybody in the community. Like it could be policies for like school, I have a son. It could be things that have to do with education. It could be the roads or the streets. *Peyton, 27 years-old, African American, female, human services major*

When budgets cuts, education, um the community I live in. It's all important to me....The decisions that the politicians make and the laws that they make up could potentially have a great impact especially on my kids. *Tyra, 34 years-old, African American, female, Human Services major*

Dedicated voters specifically understood that their government assistance is tied to electoral politics. Melanie succinctly explained this connection between who is in office and her livelihood:

Whoever we have in office, whichever office, we are dealing with has to do with my livelihood. My children's livelihood. My family's livelihood. Everybody around us, and I just think it is really important because it controls our lives. *Melanie, dedicated voter, 46 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

They use this knowledge in their evaluation of which candidate would represent them best:

I feel like we need somebody in office that has everybody in mind when they're making these policies....*Peyton, dedicated voter, 27 years-old, African American, female, human services major*

Their critical awareness led dedicated voters to take the responsibility of voting seriously and motivated them to be knowledgeable about politics and government. They sought information about specific elections, candidates, and issues because they wanted to know how their one vote

could impact policies that affect them.

Dedicated voters understood the transactional relationship between person:environment and recognized the causal agents related to their personal struggles. From this awareness, they made voting decisions in their self-interests to protect and improve their assistance. Dedicated voters demonstrated attributes consistent with interactional empowerment, especially in their critical awareness of how the political process impacts them and their recognition that their right to vote is a resource for them to impact the political process (Gutiérrez, 1994; Zimmerman, 1995).

Voters

Voters had a continuum of perspectives, beliefs, and levels of understanding about how, if at all, electoral politics affects them. Voters had a general and emerging understanding of the relationship between electoral politics, policy, and their lives. Some had a critical awareness in the broad context that voting is important to determine who is in office because that person will have the power to change government policy:

That's where politics in general becomes very important is when you have these drastic policy changes. When no matter who gets voted in this [election]... There's going to be massive policy changes. You know? First day in the White House things are going to change in a pretty big way, one way or the other. Um, so I think that that's very important for me. *Mike, voter, 39 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

Several referenced gas prices to articulate their understanding of how electoral politics might impact their lives:

Let's say gas, gas has been a good price lately, you know, so it's been okay, but let's say another president comes and gas goes up then I'm like, 'oh crap' now I'm, now I'm gonna feel the impact. *Winter, voter, 26 years-old, Hispanic/Puerto Rican, female, human services major*

But these same voters did not understand the connections between electoral politics and their government assistance. When asked by the researcher, “How does your past or present enrollment in government programs like SNAP change your view about politics or affect your view about politics and voting?” Winter (who made the statement above) responded:

It don't affect my voting, cause my voting's just my voting, you know? Winter, voter, 26 years-old, Hispanic/Puerto Rican, female, human services major

Most voters lacked critical awareness to understand how their means-tested government benefits are related to voting or politics. Without this awareness, they could not determine if it is in their self-interest to vote or not to vote, or even for whom to vote.

As illustrated in the following excerpts, voters went to the polls and cast ballots with little political knowledge or critical awareness:

I do not follow all that, I'm not a government fan. Like I just go with the flow. Winter, voter, 26 years-old, Hispanic/Puerto Rican, female, human services major

In the past Suzi voted how her parents told her to, without any awareness about politics or voting. Recently she decided to become more informed, so she can understand her own voting:

And now, I can actually read the names on the ballots and be like, 'oh, ok I know this person and I really do not like their position or their stance on this issue' so now I am taking a little more active role in my voting. Suzi, voter, 28 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female, human services major

Carlie never voted until she got married. She is not interested in politics and does not think elections are important, but she votes to comply with her husband:

I really only voted because I was forced to, not because I wanted to. Carlie, voter, 32

years-old, non-Hispanic/white, human services major

Jasmine voted to please her family and friends. She spoke about not understanding the importance of voting:

They just gave me a sticker and I just felt important like I did something that mattered to most people around me. But I really didn't see how it would affect me at the time or how it would help me. *Jasmine, voter, 28 years-old, African American, female*

Several discussed that even though they voted, they never thought voting was important because they never considered there was a connection between electoral policies and their lives. Shanice explained that her human services class gave her knowledge about this connection and referred to her past voting as being "random:"

Honestly, before I took this class [human services] I had no idea about any of this and how much the government has done and anything. This class has opened my eyes to so much, say the child welfare, the social welfare, the Social Security act, the Medicaid, Medicare everything all the programs the government has on... Say if I voted next year knowing all the information I know this year, I would choose specifically more carefully than just say randomly selecting just a person and a party that I feel would do a good job. *Shanice, voter, 23 years-old, African American, female, human services major*

Likewise, Jasmine, who previously voted to please her friends and family, also said her enrollment in community college changed her thinking about voting and increased her critical awareness:

Taking a sociology class helps me to understand more, about what is the importance [of voting]. *Jasmine, voter, 28 years-old, African American, female*

The previous five examples are important because they demonstrate that voters cast ballots without basic political knowledge or critical awareness.

This is interesting because a lack of political knowledge or interest as well as apathy about politics are factors known to impede voting (Blais & St. Vincent, 2011; Piven & Cloward, 2000). Yet, in these five cases, lack of political interest did not impede voting; it instead impeded their informed voting decision making and interactional empowerment. Without critical awareness, voters cannot discern how election outcomes affect their lives and therefore cannot make voting decisions in their self-interest.

Dedicated Nonvoter

Similar to dedicated voters, dedicated nonvoters understood the relationship between electoral politics, policy, and their lives. They were critically aware of how their personal troubles are directly affected by social policy enacted by elected officials in government. but unlike dedicated voters, they decided not to vote. Each dedicated nonvoter felt let down by the government and ignored by politicians.

For example, notice how Brandy conveyed critical awareness about how the social structure impacts her life and perceived that politicians lacked this awareness and instead they assumed poverty is the result of individual failures, not structural ones. (Note: She is responding to the questions, “Does being a recipient of SNAP affect your views about politics or voting?”)

I think a lot of politicians...are saying minimum wage jobs are starting points and they are for like teenagers, or for you know people who still live at home. And it is like, that is not the case. I graduated from high school, I don't have a record and I worked a minimum wage job for three years. Just because I couldn't find anything better... I wanted to come here [community college]. I always wanted to come here but it was a matter of my schedule. I had my older son when I was 16, so I needed a babysitter, so these people have this attitude like (*makes a face*)... It's like politicians in general, think like people, who work at minimum wage jobs are there because they want to be there, or they don't have goals, or they don't do anything or they abuse the system. So it's like yea...everybody has this idea of the American dream and that anything is possible but it is really not that easy. A lot of things are easier said than done. People have different

circumstances and when you *(pause)* it's easy to tell somebody what to do when you grow up in a middle or upper-class family and they have your schooling paid for and you can live at home with them. But like I come from a low-class single mother in low-income housing and I put myself back even more having my son young and that's why I am where I am here [community college] now...I wanted to come right after high school...I did not have a car, I did not have anybody to bring me. I needed to work. So yea. *Brandy, dedicated nonvoter, 28 years-old non-Hispanic/white, female*

Dedicated nonvoters have critical awareness about how they are impacted by politicians and government policy. In the following passage, consider how Alexis explained that electoral politics directly affects her SNAP benefits, college costs, and healthcare, but even so she decided not to vote:

I receive food stamps so I know it does affect somehow, not all the time, but it does affect how much I receive and that affects my family and how much I can eat and how much my family can eat. So I understand that aspect to it. It can affect how much I receive in financial aid, um, from, to go to school, to go to college, how much I can receive in grants or, scholarships. So I know it affects that aspect of my life and it affects my community, cause people I know, my best friends we all go to college, we're all trying to get an education and it's really expensive. So I know the voting can change things, because different candidates can have different views on the way money for education can be distributed which is logical to think about. Um, and the money for food stamps and for governmental programs also are affected. Like I receive state health care, it's free for me to have healthcare, but it can always change. So I understand that aspect of it, I just don't care enough to do something or like say that my opinion matters to change it. *Alexis, dedicated nonvoter, 22 years-old, Hispanic/Black, female, human services major*

Clearly, Alexis is not apathetic and exhibited critical awareness about the government's influence on her life. Lastly, Sam was angry that as a veteran he gets little support from the government. Sam connects this anger to why he no longer wants to vote:

Before I went into the military, I actually wanted to vote. I wanted to pay attention to you know. For the most part I was more interested. Now that I have been in the military and I see how the government really works. I'm not interested *(pause)* anymore. So, the military played a huge part in how I see voting. *Sam, dedicated nonvoter, 29 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

Dedicated voters and nonvoters each made decisions about voting based on critical awareness of how government influences their lives. Critical awareness is the psychological trait most essential to empowerment and/or praxis. For dedicated voters their voting behavior is consistent critical awareness, praxis, and interactional empowerment. But for dedicated nonvoters, their voting behavior is not.

The two primary psychological perceptions of dedicated nonvoters, (a) alienation and (b) critical consciousness, typically are not associated with one another. Alienation is known to impede voting (Adams, Dow, & Merrill III, 2006). But alienation is typically not understood in the context of those who are highly critically conscious. In fact, Freire (2000) thought critical consciousness would lead to praxis, an action resulting from critical reflection and leading to systematic change.

In the context of this dissertation, which presumes voting is in the self-interest of means-tested recipients, the decisions made by dedicated nonvoters not to vote does not reflect their self-interest to maintain and/or improve their means-tested assistance. However, from the standpoint of dedicated nonvoters, alienated from government and resigned in their belief that democracy is *not* possible, it is a rational decision based on critical thinking. As such, the “inaction” of dedicated nonvoters challenges thinking about empowerment and praxis.

Nonvoters

Nonvoters had no understanding of how electoral politics affected their lives and did not care that it might. When the researcher asked Franklin how he considered politics or government to be relevant to his life, he could not think of anything:

I am not sure, I have never really thought of that.... I just don't see a connection between politics and a regular citizen. *Franklin, nonvoter, 25 years-old, Hispanic/Bi-racial, male*

Therefore, not only did he not understand the connection between elections and his government assistance, as in the case of some voters, he also did not understand the connection of how government affects his life. Franklin was not alone in this lack of understanding:

I think for now it is irrelevant. I am just a student. *Donna, nonvoter, 21 years-old, Hispanic/Puerto Rican, female*

I don't vote because I just go about my day and I don't think that it matters. *Joy, nonvoter, twenty-eight years-old, Hispanic/white, female*

Christine spoke directly about choosing not to vote because of her lack of critical awareness and knowledge:

I think that's [reason does not vote] because I feel like I don't put myself, like I don't research enough about like different candidates and stuff like that. So, I feel like not that there is no point for me to vote but I wouldn't feel like making a decision when I don't really look enough into the background of candidates and stuff like that. So that's I guess why I never have, but I mean. *Christine, non-voter, 22 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

This lack of critical awareness was in sharp contrast to dedicated nonvoters, who paid close attention to how government impacts their daily lives, and were angry and resentful about its negative control on them.

Social networks were important to understanding how nonvoters are influenced to vote for the first time. Pat, Franklin, and Sarah had never voted before, but were planning on voting in 2016. Each spoke about how social influences had increased their awareness about the importance of politics and elections, which caused them to want to vote. Pat explained that he

never thought about voting or political issues until recently when he started associating with a new group of people who spoke about it. His family never discussed politics or the news, but some members did vote. He gave a detailed account of how this change occurred:

Um I guess nobody ever really stressed the importance to me. So it just felt like something else to do that I did not see the benefit of that I had to find time in my schedule for....The whole concept, it just never really occurred to me...But now I'm surrounding myself with people who are a lot more involved. So I am being faced with a lot of information about this election. All most every single day it's come up. Policies come up when I am discussing with people so I now have sort of the space to form my own opinions and so I am feeling much more determined to get out and do that this year. *Pat, nonvoter, 23 years-old, Puerto-Rican, trans*

On the other hand, Franklin's parents were regular voters and paid attention to mainstream media. He had no interest in voting until he and a friend started talking about the 2016 Election:

One person is encouraging me [to vote] and it is because um we share the same point of view...we connect and we are always sharing stuff. So it is like back and forth so if I missed out on some bit of information about the election they will give it to me and if they miss out, I will give them something. And we will exchange information, so it is like we are informing each other on stuff. *Franklin, nonvoter, 25 years-old, Hispanic/Bi-racial, male*

Lastly, Sarah talked about not wanting to vote in the past because she did not think elections affected her:

I do not think I realized how much like it would affect me because I was so young back then too. You know what I mean? It was just life experience and conversations with people and realizing that I am a part of these programs that they are talking about. You know? *Sarah, nonvoter, 24 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female, human services major*

Note it was Sarah's "conversation" with others that caused her to realize the importance of elections and made her conscious that her government assistance was related to electoral politics.

These three nonvoters began to think about voting as a result of contact with different social

networks, which enabled them to gain critical awareness and become better able to make voting decisions based on their self-interests.

Within and between the voter type and the nonvoter type there was varied understanding about the connection between electoral politics, policy, and their lives. However, two patterns were consistent: (a) Voters and nonvoters had less critical awareness than dedicated voters and dedicated nonvoters, and (b) when voters and nonvoters gained critical awareness, they either planned on becoming more informed the next time they voted, or thought about voting for the first time in the 2016 election.

This suggests there is a dynamic between perceptions related to individual empowerment and interactional empowerment, and that intensity levels within each level of empowerment are important. When voters and nonvoters who had some small sense of individual empowerment gained interactional empowerment, as in the case of voters and nonvoters, they reported thoughts of wanting to become more informed voters. However, dedicated nonvoters, with a strong sense of interactional empowerment and no sense of individual empowerment, felt resignation and decided not to vote because in their eyes, there was no practical reason to vote. These analyses provided a more in-depth understanding of how individual empowerment stopped dedicated nonvoters from voting, and how interactional empowerment triggered voters to want to become informed in their voting and also caused nonvoters to want to start voting. This important finding illuminates which of the psychological sub-processes of empowerment are necessary for voting and informed voting. This knowledge can guide how social workers approach voter engagement projects and begins to differentiate the impact of sub-processes of empowerment (Gutiérrez, 1994).

Political Context of an Election

Candidate Traits

Dedicated Voters

Dedicated voters are die-hard voters. They are hard-wired to vote and be part of democracy. They vote regardless of whether or not they like the candidates and whether or not an election has a historical significance. They make decisions about whom to vote for based on their policy positions. Both dedicated voters and voters said the demographic characteristics of any candidate would not influence their voting decisions. Several mentioned their excitement to vote for President Obama because of the historic nature of the election, but said they would have voted even if it had not been a historic election. Both dedicated voters and voters were influenced by the character traits of a candidate. Traits important to them included trustworthiness, sincerity, knowledgeability, likeability, and a focus on people like them. For dedicated voters, these character traits only determined whom they voted for, not if they would vote.

Voters

For voters, character traits could determine if they voted at all. If there were no candidates a voter liked, they might not vote:

I think it's disrespectful not to vote because it's like we have people fighting for your freedom, you have the freedom to vote for your country, why wouldn't you do it? Unless it's really bad...and there's nobody you want to vote for (*pause*) which is kind of next year. *Jason, voter, 22 years-old, Puerto Rican, male*

Both candidates suck, so if I get there, I get there, I vote. If I don't, it doesn't matter. *Mike, voter, 39 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

Dedicated Nonvoters

Some dedicated nonvoters spoke about how they were inspired by Obama's candidacy, but this excitement was not enough to cause them to vote. For example, Daryl discussed how the only positive thing to come out of government was Obama being elected to the office of president because it gave children hope:

Obama was the only one I was interested in, because I could relate. That's the only one that comes to mind. So I could say that, but I still did not vote (*laughs*) even for him.
Daryl, dedicated nonvoter, 23 years-old, African American, male, human services major

His decision not to vote, even for Obama, demonstrated the intensity traits related to his dedicated nonvoter, voter type. Likewise, Alexis was resolute that she did not base her decision not to vote on the traits of a particular candidate:

I don't feel the need to vote. Um, not because I don't like the candidates. *Alexis, dedicated nonvoter, 22 years-old, Hispanic/Black, female, human services major*

The only demographic characteristic mentioned that might affect someone's decision to vote would be if a candidate were a Muslim; then Sandy would vote against the candidate:

I guess the only one I will be a little uncomfortable with if someone like Muslim only because of everything that's going on. *Sandy, dedicated nonvoter, 21 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

Sandy objects to voting because of her immense dislike of government. But if there were a candidate who also disliked the government and wanted to eliminate the laws that she felt limited her freedoms, then she would vote:

If it's somebody who's like really for like the Constitution and like is trying to get rid of rules that previous people did that are fringing on rights, then I'd probably vote for them.
Sandy, dedicated nonvoter, 21 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female

Nonvoters

Unlike dedicated nonvoters, character traits could inspire a nonvoter to want to vote:

Now I found a reason to vote, because I found a candidate who I actually agree with so.
Franklin, nonvoter, 25 years-old, Hispanic/Bi-racial, male

And so we just also happen to have a candidate that I have a lot of faith in. So hopefully this particular time of change and this particular candidate, that combination could make some difference. *Pat, nonvoter, 23 years-old, Puerto-Rican, trans*

Campaign Messaging and News

Most participants did not trust campaign messaging and believed candidates tell you what they want you to think. They had a universal dislike for mudslinging, commercials, or any literature or information produced by the candidate:

Dedicated Voter

And um I have no use for a lot of the bashing commercials, I can't stand them. I know a lot of the republicans try to cut down their opponents and I think it is wrong. What does that show about the United States? You know? *Melanie, dedicated voter, 46 years-old non-Hispanic/white, female*

Voter

I find them disgusting [commercials]. I think it is really disgusting. I think the whole media process, when it comes to you know, how much money they spend, candidates put in. You know they just put trash in your mind, they really do, I really hate it; I really do. You know the mudslinging they do is not really a positive. *Daniel, voter, 29 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

Dedicated Nonvoter

I fast-forward [commercials]. *Sandy, dedicated nonvoter, 21 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

Nonvoter

I absolutely hate how they run their elections like bashing one candidate and then bashing the other candidate makes me not want to be a part of it. You know what I mean? Like how can you chose the worse or the worser? *Sarah, nonvoter, 24 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female, human services major*

Many participants spoke of their distrust of mainstream media, and others relied on cable news.

Many participants received mobilization messages from social media.

Dedicated Voter

In general dedicated voters paid more attention to news, campaigns, and debates:

I have read quite a few articles on the debates and I have watched quite a few clips of the debates. Not having television it is very difficult to do that. But when I can, I do try to be on the internet and stay as informed as possible on pretty much everything. *Brittany, dedicated voter, 28 years-old non-Hispanic/white, female*

Voters

Some voters followed campaigns and watched the debates, others avoided both, and still others got their information about campaigns if it came on during a program they were watching:

I watch different media outlets. You know, so I'll be watching uh, one day I will turn on Hannity, until I am tired of him and one day I'll turn on you know Copper, until I am tired of him. But you know, uh, I take little pieces of this and that. And I try to make an informed decision. *Daniel, voter, 29 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

I think that the debate system in the United States needs to be drastically changed. I will avoid the debates on purpose and I follow politics. I will avoid the debates because it's nothing but a bunch of rhetoric...*Mike, voter, 39 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

I just know the little things that I see on TV on the news whenever I get to sit down, you know, and those are like on the Spanish channel. They had like, they had a big thing over it [Donald Trump building a wall] so that's how I know. I usually watch some like Spanish channels. *Winter, voter 26 years-old, Hispanic/Puerto Rican, female, human services major*

Dedicated Nonvoters

Dedicated nonvoters actively tried to avoid main media news and campaign messaging.

Dedicated nonvoters had little trust in mainstream media outlets:

I don't pay attention. I don't watch the news, I don't. I never watch the news. I've never put the news channel on my TV, ever. I just look everywhere on-line, I don't just look at just one. Like, I don't just, like my mom, she will look at the news and she'll just, she believes that because it's on the news. *Sam, dedicated nonvoter, 29 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

Um, the social media. Cause they put it on social media so I find out from that way, but I don't pay attention, it's like I scroll up or I scroll down. *Alexus, dedicated voter, 22 years-old, Hispanic/Black, female, human services major*

Nonvoters

Nonvoters in general had less interest in following the campaigns or keeping up with news.

Additionally, they also did not trust the campaign rhetoric:

I really do not cause I feel like it's a bunch of bashing and I'm not sure what the truth is in the campaigns. I feel like it's a lot of filling of air cause you don't see the, um, candidates ever follow through on what they say they're going to just to get elected. *Stacy, nonvoter, 35 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female, human services major*

Voters and nonvoters had less trust of the mainstream media than did dedicated voters and relied more on social media, but had more trust than dedicated nonvoters.

Lastly, no participant mentioned being contacted by a political party or candidate. It is common practice that campaigns do not reach out to nonvoters or voters who rarely vote, because it would waste their resources on citizens who probably will not cast a ballot. However, voters also did not mention being contacted. Three main reasons could explain this: (a) Campaigns could not contact them because they had moved or were unavailable when a contact was attempted; (b) campaigns deliberately decided not to reach out to voters in their

neighborhoods; (c) voters did not mention being contacted because the researcher did not specifically ask them. Either way, it seems that a direct contact was not influential in their decision making.

Voting Process

Voter Registration

Voter registration was not an obstacle to voting for any of the voter types. As a result of the National Voter Registration Act, most participants said the process was easy, and they registered at the Department of Motor Vehicles or when they filed or recertified for welfare benefits:

I registered because I got um. Every time you have to recertify for any state services, they will send you the paper-work in the mail. So I did it eventually. But I have never ever gone and voted or anything. *Brandy, dedicated nonvoter, 28 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

The ease of the registration process explains why so many nonvoters are registered despite their lack of desire to vote. Two dedicated nonvoters were deliberately not registered to vote, because they do not want to be, even though they were given the chance. Three nonvoters are not registered because they did not know they had to be registered.

Knowledge about the Voting Process

Dedicated Voters and Nonvoters

Dedicated voters are very knowledgeable about the process of voting and are able to overcome structural barriers. On the other hand, dedicated nonvoters have no intention of ever voting so they never had a need to get knowledge about voting. Knowledge about voting is

pertinent to voters and nonvoters making decisions about voting.

Voters

Most voters were knowledgeable about the voting process and found it to be easy. Some voters spoke about how their lack of knowledge about elections caused them to miss an election or not be prepared to vote on everything that was on a ballot. In addition, there was confusion about when, where, and what issues were on the ballot in local elections:

I think if there's difficulty, for me at least, it's, it's that. It's like, 'aw crap I missed it' or, or you know, I didn't know where I was supposed to be or when it was gonna be or, you know, I, I show up and I'm like oh crap we're voting on that too? I mean, you know? I didn't even think about that particular subject, I don't even know who wants what. So, um, for me a lot of it is just I think public, getting the information should be easier. *Mike, voter, 39 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

In Carlie's case, her lack of knowledge about how to cast a ballot caused her to wonder if she actually voted for the candidate who she intended to vote for:

I went in knowing who I was gonna vote for but walked out thinking, 'Did I vote for that person?' cause I just couldn't understand and, you know, you have to reset it before you leave so it's not like you can have someone come check your work. You know what I mean? So I remember walking out and my husband said to me, 'Who did you vote for?' and I said, 'Well this is who I wanted to vote for' but to this day I still don't really know because I just don't get it. *Carlie, voter, 32 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, human services major*

Nonvoters

Nonvoters who planned to vote in 2016 perceived they have the ability to pick a candidate but are less sure of how to vote. Since they have never been inside a polling station, nor seen a ballot, they were unsure of what the process involved, but said that would not stop them from voting, if they decided to vote:

I have a general idea of where I should be going and I know and I should probably be bringing my ID with me but I have no idea what's going to happen when I step into that

building. So there is a lot of anxiety around that because I just don't know. I have no clue. It's a big question mark. So though I feel very strongly about the presidential election or I should say because I feel strongly about the presidential election, I'm willing to face that uncertainty to sort it out. *Pat, nonvoter, 23 years-old, Puerto-Rican, trans*

I have a good idea of how it works. But I do have a lot of questions because I have never done it before. So how would you go about signing up to be a voter? Or you know I do not know actually how to do it, I am pretty sure I can get it done but I have never done it before so I have never experienced it. *Franklin, nonvoter, 25 years-old, Hispanic/bi-racial, male*

Experiences Casting a Ballot

Dedicated voters and voters had similar voting experiences. Most reported ease in casting a ballot. Time, convenience, and transportation were the primary reasons related to the process of voting that some participants were not able vote. Those who had difficulty with and confusion about the voting process faced similar issues. The difference between dedicated voters and voters was how they addressed these obstacles. The most common issue was confusion about knowing where to vote because polling locations change depending on the type of elections---local, state, or national---or redistricting. As a result, a few dedicated voters and voters went to the wrong polling locations and were turned away and/or redirected.

Dedicated Voters

Dedicated voters overcame challenges to voting by planning ahead and not getting discouraged by obstacles. They scheduled their day around voting. If they were faced with a structural barrier to voting, they found a way to overcome it because of their perception of the importance of the election. In this way their assessment of the “benefits” of voting outweighed the “costs” of having to overcome structural obstacles:

I just vote. If I don't vote then I have no reason to complain, if I don't like the way something is done or happen is just I have to take it, because I didn't take that time off to

go vote because maybe if I did go vote, things would have been different. *Tyra, dedicated voter, 34 years-old, African American, female, human services major*

Tyra was not stopped from voting because of the inconvenient polling hours. To her, the benefits of voting outweighed the costs of taking time off from work.

No matter what I still go vote, vote for the right candidate that would protect me and my country. *Bradley, dedicated voter, 25 years- old African American*

Bradley's comment was given in a response to the researcher asking him if he would be discouraged from voting by long lines. He was willing to vote "no matter what" because he wants the right candidate to get elected. He defined the right candidate as the one who will protect him and his country, and for him this is worth having to stand in a long line. A perception that the benefits of voting outweigh its costs is associated with increased voting (Blais, 2010; Driscoll & Krook, 2012; Duncan & Stewart, 2007; Edin, Gelman, & Kaplan, 2007).

Despite Tyra's dedication to voting, she faced a challenge when she went to cast a ballot for the 2015 gubernatorial election, which left her unsure if her vote would be counted. The problem occurred because she had moved and did not change her voter registration, so her address did not match the address on her driver's license. Thus, she was at the wrong polling place. However, poll workers allowed her complete a ballot, but after she completed it, she was told her ballot would not be counted:

I went to go vote and my name wasn't on it and they still allowed me to vote. And then [after she voted] when I got in there they said well it's not going to count, because you are not registered. And I still don't understand how they could do that. And my husband said, don't worry about it, it did count. But the fact that they told me that, I kept wondering (*laughs*)... Because what was my license was the address where I was supposed to be at, but I wasn't registered through the town to vote, to go to that poll.

Tyra, dedicated voter, 34 years-old, African American, female, human services major

By the time of the interview, Tyra had registered to vote in her town.

Challenges related to local elections were harder for dedicated voters to overcome. They believed local elections were important, but were less likely to vote because they were less informed about the election and it was harder for them to get to the polls:

My attitude is the same, I think it is incredibly important to do that [vote in local elections]. Especially since that's what's going to affect your personal life the most. It is just, like I said, it is a little hypocritical because I don't actually go out and do it as much as I would like to. *Brittany, dedicated voter, 28 years-old non-Hispanic/white, female*

Mostly, mostly, mostly presidential because I don't know anything about the other ones [local]. But if I knew more and studied more then I probably would. *Bradley, dedicated voter, 25 years-old, African American, male*

Dedicated voters voted strategically even in local elections; they did not vote just “in the spirit” of voting. Melanie's comment below really illustrates this:

If I don't vote for the local ones, it might be because I don't know enough about what's going on at the moment. And how do I vote for somebody I'm not quite sure of? I don't want to vote for the wrong person. There is no sense in that. If there is somebody I know I really don't want in there then I will make sure I will march down there and try to find someone else [to vote for]. *Melanie, dedicated voter, 46 years-old non-Hispanic/white, female*

Transportation to polls in local elections is harder because fewer people vote, and thus there are fewer drivers to take someone without a car with them when they vote. Additionally, there are less mobilization resources that provide transportation. As Brittany explained, in presidential elections, she gets rides to the polls with her parents, but they do not vote in local elections. (They had never voted in a presidential election until their daughter, Brittany encouraged them to vote.) Therefore, she does not vote in local elections:

I don't vote as frequently for them [local] because it is more difficult for me to get out and vote for them. Presidential elections, generally I can get my parents to agree and I don't have a car, I don't drive. So generally I can get my parents to agree to go out and vote for Presidential elections and I have a ride to the polls. And if I couldn't, for Presidential elections, there are actually, you know, places that you can call and they will send a car around and come pick you up and bring you to the polls. *Brittany, dedicated voter, 28 years-old non-Hispanic/white, female*

Voters

Voters were less willing to take time off from work or wait in long lines to vote. For them, the benefits do not outweigh the costs:

So if I have time that day, then I go and I vote. But it's usually like a hassle. *Winter, voter, 26 years-old, Hispanic/Puerto Rican, female, human services major*

Some of the times I didn't vote it was usually because, you know, like I was on the bus system, and you know, it was going to cost me money to go there and at the time I was riding the bus system we didn't have the money to just be going random places, you know? *Mike, voter, 39 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

Common obstacles related to why voters might not vote include time, long-lines, and transportation. In the 2012 presidential election, one voter did not vote because they arrived at the polling location too late, and another was serving in the military and was confused about how to get an absentee ballot. Winter did not vote because she went to two different polling locations with her children and was told both times she was at the wrong location. She became discouraged and did not go to a third polling location. Afterwards, she became concerned that perhaps she was no longer even registered. At the time of the interview, she still was unsure of whether she was registered to vote and of where she is supposed to vote.

Voters were less interested in local elections. Overall, the only elections they considered voting in were presidential elections, and they did not understand what local, state, or

congressional elections were about:

Like in state and local elections again I don't, I don't get into those. *Carlie, voter, 32 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, human services major*

With the President [election], you know why you are voting. You are voting for the President. But for the smaller ones, you do not always get the message. *Suzie, voter*

The inconvenience of structural barriers discouraged some participants from going to the polls. This is consistent with literature (Edin & Schaeffer, 2015; Soss & Schram, 2007) that means-tested recipients are less likely to vote for practical reasons.

Dedicated Nonvoters

Some dedicated nonvoters spoke about their perception that the overall design of the voting system is flawed, which added to their reasons for not voting. The Electoral College discouraged them from voting because the popular vote does not matter, especially when Connecticut is a small democratic state:

Because the popular vote does not decide the winner. Well I guess in local elections they do, but in Presidential...I know that does not decide. Bush was not supposed to win his second term, if that's what it goes by. *Brandy, dedicated nonvoter, 28 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

Like being from where I am, which is usually like a democratic area, so like being a small state, there was no benefit of me voting because for a majority of a time it would be for a democratic person any way. *Daryl, dedicated nonvoter, 23 years-old, African American, male, human services major*

This again illustrates the critical understanding that dedicated nonvoters have about elections, and also how this knowledge supports their lack of trust in democracy, which stops them from voting.

Nonvoters

Some nonvoters mentioned that structural barriers to voting influenced their decision not to vote, but they were not the sole reason why they did not vote:

To me it seems as though it can be time consuming and the hours are not as convenient probably as I would like. Cause I know that they have like set times and set days, you know people may not have the, um, opportunity to be able to, to go out and vote, like for me personally I don't find the time. *Stacy, nonvoter, 35 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female, human services major*

Interestingly, Stacy is knowledgeable and involved with local issues but did not vote in local elections:

I do get very involved with the politics in just the Board of Ed cause I feel like it affects me on a grander scale because it's closer to home. I go to all their meetings... I've gone and I've voiced my opinions. I've spoken before the Board of Ed. (*laughs*). Even, so I still don't vote [in local elections]. So, no I don't vote. *Stacy, nonvoter, 35 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female, human services major*

Unlike dedicated nonvoters, she is not alienated and does have a sense of self-efficacy, as indicated by her speaking before the Board of Education meetings. As she said in the first quote, she does not vote in any election because she “does not find the time.” In other words, speaking to the Board of Education was worth her time and voting was not.

Perceptions about Voting Laws

Most participants believed structural barriers to voting were to stop voter-fraud and keep voting fair and organized. Those who spoke about the need to keep voting fair seemed to accept the political narrative about widespread voter fraud used to justify the enactment of stricter voting laws. Several participants spoke about the need for voting restrictions in terms of making sure immigrants do not vote and keeping others from voting multiple times at different locations. These sentiments reflect participants' general lack of social trust in other people. Others focused

on voting laws being related to the general nature of our government and society. As illustrated by the excerpts below, dedicated voters and dedicated nonvoters demonstrate greater critical thinking about why voting laws are the way they are.

Dedicated Voters

Jada linked capitalism to why the United States does not make Election Day a national holiday and surmised that maybe those in power do not really want to make it easier for workers to vote:

We live in capitalism. You know it makes it hard for people to get out of work to go vote. You know what I mean? You know if you want people to go out and vote and be a part of the process then yea, make it easier for them, make it more accessible for them.
Jada, dedicated voter, 27 years-old, bi-racial/Black, female, human services major

Voters

Winter thought about voting restrictions in the same way she described the social welfare system: controls are needed to stop voter fraud, which takes away from the convenience of her voting:

I get how [only allowed to vote at assigned polling locations during small windows of time] that's best because people will take advantage of the government if they make it a little easier to vote. Um, but at the same time it's like for people that actually do have a busy life and stuff going on it also makes it very difficult for us to just go to one specific place [to vote]. *Winter, voter, 26 years-old, Hispanic/Puerto Rican, female, human services major*

Dedicated nonvoters

Some dedicated nonvoters suggested that they felt that voting laws were intended to keep certain people, like them, from voting:

But if it was just open [polling places] at any time and you do not need to register, it definitely will be more votes, more voters, which means it is less likely to push certain

ones [candidates] to win. So maybe they are trying to keep it like that. *Daryl, dedicated nonvoter, 23 years-old, African American, male, human services major*

Nonvoters

Nonvoters had not really thought about voting laws and gave general answers about what they surmised:

I mean maybe it is just people in America are crazy, so maybe it's just the way to make it, I don't know make it so its everyone is in the same area and it just kind of make things a little bit organized. *Christine, non-voter, 22 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female*

Clearly, dedicated voters and dedicated nonvoters were more thoughtful about the nature of voting laws. Most voters and nonvoters had never thought about why the laws are the way they are. Or, like Winter, they thought strict laws are needed to stop voter fraud.

Suggestions about How to Improve the Voting Process

Participants made suggestions about how to improve the voting process. The nature of their suggestions was related to their familiarity with the voting process.

Dedicated Voters

Dedicated voters made practical suggestions about how to make voting easier such as adding polling stations to reduce long lines, extending voting hours, making Election Day a national holiday, and letting voters go to any polling place in their district to vote in order to avoid confusion about where to vote. But unlike voters, dedicated voters also made suggestions related to the need for the public to gain awareness about the importance of voting and to focus more attention on how the government affects the lives of individuals all year long:

I do not know what programs they have out for people to learn how to vote, I mean I am sure they do have programs that teach citizens how to go about voting, but I think it should be something that is more accessible to the public and like through the media, because like everybody watches tv and it should not only be during election time. You

know, like that is saying that voting is only important during election time. No, you should be thinking about these things all the time because government happens all the time. You know? So I think frequency and the way it is being presented to you, to people. *Jada, dedicated voter, 27 years-old, bi-racial/Black, female, human services major*

Voters

Suggestions by voters about improving the voting process had three themes. First, they suggested reducing confusion around where to vote. Participants had different ideas about how to accomplish this. Some thought voters should be allowed to vote at any polling location in their district; others thought notifications should be sent telling registered voters where to vote, while a few suggested not changing the polling location for national, state, and local elections:

I have driven to two different [polling] places, twice, in xxxxx, which has annoyed me. But to me, because uh, I have an ID I should be allowed to vote, you know? We have an internet.... The town of xxxxx can have a tablet and say that Daniel xxxxx came to vote, and um just go in and vote. *Daniel, voter, 29 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

Secondly, they suggested polling hours be extended to make voting easier for all workers. Some thought the polling locations should be open for twenty-four hours or longer, and others suggested making Election Day a national holiday.

Lastly, many voters felt more information about voting was needed. They suggested that civics be taught in schools, and community colleges provide more voter engagement resources:

Considering they [community colleges] help us register to vote, uh (*pause*) they register us to vote so we can vote, but when it comes around that time they don't tell us or help us, if we want to...say we need help on who choose for, they don't do that...Basically helping us research why we would want to vote for them and it's like about us making a choice, like they help us make a choice for anything else, like say our major. Like why couldn't you help us make a voting choice that would change the world? *Shanice, voter, 23 years-old, African American, female, human services major*

Other suggestions included allowing remote on-line voting, using better technology at the polls to make the process of voting less confusing, providing summaries of candidate views at the polls, and letting immigrants vote if they are law abiding, work, and pay taxes.

Dedicated nonvoters and Nonvoters

Neither the nonvoter nor voter types had specific suggestions about how to improve the voting process because, as they both said, since they never voted they were not sure. However, they both spoke in general about making voting more convenient for people.

Political Empowerment

The previous sections have discussed voter decision making in terms of individual and interactional empowerment. They also have considered how the political context and the voting process affect voter decision making. These findings suggest that each of the four voter types makes decisions about voting for varying reasons, and each displays different components of empowerment. Political empowerment involves having the power, ability, critical awareness, and sense of group identity to take action in order to create change in a political system. Having a sense of group identity and collective group interest is a critical component of political empowerment. The processes of individual and interactional empowerment are each essential to the development of political empowerment. Politically empowered actions reflect critical awareness and are intended to effect change. This section will focus on how, if at all, each voter type made voting decisions with respect to the collective group interests of recipients of means-tested government assistance. It will review findings in consideration of which voting decisions represent political empowerment.

Dedicated Voters

Dedicated voters always vote because they believe the action of casting a ballot is in their self-interest. In thinking about the four necessary sub-processes of empowerment as delineated by Gutiérrez (1995), dedicated voters have self-efficacy, critical consciousness, and skills needed to vote. They have a collective sense of “we,” but not necessarily a sense of linked fate with other recipients of means-tested assistance:

I think it is very important because we need to take control as much control as we can, of who is running the government. *Melanie, dedicated voter, 46 years-old non-Hispanic/white, female*

Some dedicated voters had suspicions about others who receive means-tested government assistance and accepted stereotypes of welfare recipients being “cheaters.” Tyra is misinformed about federal limits on cash assistance and believed recipients prefer to stay home rather than go to work. From this belief, she connected that she is adversely impacted because others are cheating the system:

Just the government can impact a lot for like SNAPs, food stamps, um the welfare, like I wish they would do something about that. Because Connecticut you get the two years, and then they make you go off and work. But there are some states where you could stay on cash assistance for the rest of your life. And that do not help us or the country by doing that. Because they are comfortable with their situation. They pay \$2, \$50 for rent. They get cash assistance. They would never leave their houses and go to work. And that impacts us a lot. *Tyra, dedicated voter, 34 years-old, African American, female, human services major*

Raven also referred to others cheating the system:

There is a lot of people that are on SNAP who do not need it. They do not need to be on SNAP. They are really cheating the system. *Raven, dedicated voter, 37 years-old, African American, female*

Even though Tyra and Raven were critically aware about the relationship between electoral

politics and their lives, they were not immune from the pervasive hegemonic narratives about welfare recipients, which kept them from identifying with other recipients. They blamed other recipients, whom they perceived to be less “needy” or “worthy” of benefits, for taking benefits away from them. In light of perceived social norms related to capitalism such as the promise of the American dream, competition, and a focus on the individual not the collective, their opinions are understandable. Their desire to limit the eligibility for social welfare programs stems from the inherent competition between recipients, which alienates them from one another. In consideration of political empowerment, the inability of some dedicated voters to identify with other means-tested recipients limited their ability to be fully politically empowered. While they made voting decisions based on their self-interests, they did not make voting decisions based on the interests of the collective because they did not recognize their shared group identity with other recipients.

Other dedicated voters did not accept these frames. Brittany had a sense of linked fate with other recipients, whom she described as “not having fun” living on government assistance. She also suggested the voting habits of recipients contribute to the continued flawed social welfare system:

When you look at the numbers there are actually very few people taking advantage of the welfare system. They are very few people who are you know living off this [welfare benefits] for funzies, and most of the time it is out of necessity. It’s out of, this is a smart decision to actually support myself and my family. I don’t have any other options. And like I said you have this cyclical thing that keeps happening...the system is keeping people trapped. And often times the way that they [recipients] are voting and the candidates that they are voting for, are contributing to that system design and the way that it is keeping people trapped. *Brittany, dedicated voter, 28 years-old non-Hispanic/white, female*

Likewise, Jada voted to represent the underdog, demonstrating her strong connection to others

like her. Her description was in response to the question: Does your past or current enrollment in governmental programs like welfare or SNAP or WIC affect your views on politics or voting?

Yes...Because it goes back to the government taking care of their citizens. You know? Some people are not fortunate, we do not live in a perfect society where everyone can just get up and be on their feet. You know? Or if they have not inherited wealth or class, they are kind of stuck you know? So that makes me want to vote, because I feel like um I am representing them you know, the under-dog. *Jada, dedicated voter, 27 years-old, bi-racial/Black, female, human services major*

Dedicated voters, like Brittany and Jada, who have solidarity with other recipients and recognized their shared interests are politically empowered. Their opinions and nature were in sharp contrast to other voters.

Voters

Voters had less critical awareness about the impact of socio-political factors on their lives and less recognition about how politics affects social welfare policy than did dedicated voters. Most did not make decisions about voting based on their self-interest of being means-tested recipients because they did not see the connection between the two.

Some identified having a class-interest, which demonstrated having connection with similar others. This is consistent with the undefined collective sense of “we” felt by dedicated nonvoters. For example, Mike associated the importance of how he votes with his socioeconomic status:.

I think it’s extremely important, um, especially...well at least for me maybe it’s just because of where I stand socioeconomically. *Mike, voter, 39 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

Still, despite this connection to his socioeconomic status, Mike does not feel linked to other recipients of means-tested assistance. Notice how he refers to himself as using government

assistance “how it is supposed to be used,” which assumes other recipients do not use it in this way:

I rely on that [SNAP] right now. I’ve been on it. I’ve come off of it. I use it how it’s supposed to be used. *Mike, voter, 39 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

He, like other voters, did not have a sense of group-identity with other means-tested recipients because of his acceptance of hegemonic frames related to means-tested government assistance.

Nonvoters

As previously discussed, nonvoters are disinterested in politics, apathetic about voting, and believe elections do not affect them. These core beliefs hinder their ability to recognize how their group and self-interests are related to voting. They lack a sense of individual or interactional empowerment necessary for political empowerment. If they are aware of these things, they still do not vote but are not sure why they do not vote. Stacy explained she does not know why she does not vote:

It’s not like I’m bitter or...I just don’t vote. (*laughs*) As I’m talking to you I’m realizing that I probably should [vote] but I just don’t. Like I never have and I’m not sure why. *Stacy, 35 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, female, human services major*

The decision making of nonvoters is not politically empowered.

Dedicated Nonvoter

As opposed to nonvoters, dedicated nonvoters were not apathetic. They paid close attention to how government impacted their daily lives and were angry and resentful about its negative control over them. They strongly felt politicians do not care about their needs and never will care about them. They lacked trust in democracy, elected officials, and the government. This is their truth based on their lived-experiences, including those of being a recipient of means-

tested assistance. Their overwhelming sense of powerlessness, helplessness, and alienation blocked them from having self or collective efficacy and therefore individual empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995).

These strong feelings suggest that objectors have internalized their own oppression. Yet objectors also understood the transactional nature of the person:environment relationship and how electoral politics and government policy influences their lives, which suggested they have interactional empowerment. Additionally, dedicated nonvoters demonstrated a shared sense of group-identity with other recipients, and did not feel alienated from them nor in competition with them. Instead, they blamed their problems on the government, not other recipients. Daryl, described this competition as being like “crabs in a bucket:”

And where I am from, I feel like it is like crabs in a bucket. Like, I gotta push you down for me to come up and not really build it together to like make a goal. It's like push, push, push. I gotta get out for me. *Daryl, dedicated nonvoter, 23 years-old, African American, male, human services major*

Consider the following two excerpts about participants' perceptions regarding social welfare policy. Notice where each participant places blame for not receiving enough SNAP benefits to feed their families:

It's like 'dag' that's the only help you're giving me? Like you know like they're really trying to like, 'oh yeah live off of a hundred dollars, a hundred and fifty dollars of food stamps' like you know? Like that's literally not enough to feed a family but then again some people get it who do not need it. *Winter, voter, 26 years-old, Hispanic/Puerto Rican, female, human services major*

Versus:

I don't like the government. I don't want, I don't want them to have so much control over, um, how much aid I receive to go to school because I can't take as much classes as

I, as I want to. I feel like I, I don't get enough to feed the people in my household or myself. *Alexus, dedicated nonvoter, 22 years-old, Hispanic/Black, female, human services major*

The first statement by Winter, a voter, blames other recipients, who are not really “needy” of benefits, for her family not having enough food to eat. The second statement by Alexis, a dedicated nonvoter, blames the government for not giving her more SNAP benefits so her family can eat.

Additionally, dedicated nonvoters blamed themselves less for their situations and their need for government assistance. Jose and Sam thought about their benefits. Jose is grateful for WIC:

Like the past couple years we had, my wife and I had WIC since we had our son and in the military, as a low ranking person you don't really make much, uh, much money (*laughs*), and, uh, so that extra couple gallons of milk, cheese, and bread is a big difference. Um, you know, especially when you're working with two, three hundred bucks for groceries for your entire month, that can uh, that can help subsidize some of that lack of. *Jose, voter, 27 years-old, Hispanic/Puerto Rican, male*

Jose, a voter, accepted that his position in the military does not provide enough income to feed his family. He does expect a living income as a “low ranking person” in the military. On the other hand, Sam, a dedicated nonvoter also in the military, viewed his need for SNAP completely differently:

I kind of feel and this goes back to the military. I kind of feel that you know, like being in the military, now coming home, for me to have to resort to getting SNAP is kind of a proof, that you know a soldier that fights for this country and puts the time and effort in now has to result to getting help and not being able to survive and struggling every day when we shouldn't have to do that. *Sam, dedicated nonvoter, 29 years-old, non-Hispanic/white, male*

Clearly dedicated nonvoters demonstrated critical awareness and shared group identity, but they

had no sense of self-efficacy.

The coding matrix of codes related to shame, stigma and group identification (see Table 3.12) clearly shows that dedicated nonvoters have the most codes associated with a group identity and the least coding associated with shame and stigma. This is a defining feature of the dedicated nonvoter voter type. Dedicated voters and voters have more coding related to shame and stigma than dedicated nonvoters and nonvoters. It is important to note that dedicated nonvoters only had one code related to shame and stigma and the most codes related to group identification, despite the fact they are numerically the smallest voter type. This emphasizes the strength of connectedness felt by dedicated nonvoters to other recipients. It also distinguishes them from other voter types. This is a significant finding. Dedicated nonvoters were the only voter type to have no sense of individual empowerment, have a strong sense of resignation, and have the greatest sense of group identity.

These distinctions are important to consider in relationship to understanding the definition of political empowerment. Based on these findings, should the voting decisions of voters like Winter be considered politically empowered because they act by casting a ballot? Conversely, should the voting decisions of dedicated nonvoters like Alexis be considered politically empowered because they have critical awareness and a group identity with other recipients, or not empowered because they do not act and do not cast a ballot?

Table 3.12 Coding Matrix of Shame/Stigma & Group Identification by All Voter Types

| Codes | Dedicated Voters | Voters | Nonvoters | Dedicated Nonvoters |
|---|-----------------------------|---------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Shame/Stigma related to Government Assistance | 6 | 25 | 4 | 1 |
| Group Identification with other Recipients | 8 | 10 | 6 | 13 |

Summary

The qualitative approach provided the framework of this research to truly unpack motivations for voting behavior. Four distinct voter types emerged. Dedicated voters and dedicated nonvoters adopted strong voter or nonvoter schemas. Both dedicated voters and dedicated nonvoters conveyed critical awareness about how government and elections impact their lives and the direct relationship between politics and welfare policy. But dedicated nonvoters perceived democracy as not possible, and therefore government policy will never reflect their needs so they chose not to vote. Voters and nonvoters had less critical awareness about how elections impacted their lives, little political knowledge, and did not recognize the connection between politics and social welfare policy. Their decision to vote or not vote often was influenced by the connection they felt with a candidate, social networks, structural barriers, and convenience. Many voters lacked any critical awareness, all nonvoters lacked critical awareness, while both dedicated voters and dedicated nonvoters were very critically aware.

Not only did the qualitative approach create the opportunity to gain this kind of nuanced understanding about factors related to voting, but it also began to empower participants. For example, at the conclusion of interviews some participants wondered aloud if voting was important and/or maybe they should vote:

I think that it [this interview] raised awareness to me...I think that I should be more aware of what's going on and maybe my vote does make a difference. *Joy, nonvoter, twenty-eight year old, Hispanic/white, female*

As I'm talking to you I'm realizing that I probably should but I just don't. Like I never have and I'm not sure why. *Stacy, nonvoters, 35 year old, non-Hispanic/white, female, human services major*

Additionally, many participants thanked me for “picking them” and disclosed they had assumed I

would not want “people like them” in this study. Participants were eager to tell me their experiences of living in poverty, navigating governmental assistance programs, and impressions of politics. Participants were happy to have someone (with perceived power) to listen to them. At least one-third of the participants hugged the researcher good-bye.

CHAPTER 4: IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this research provide insight into voting literature, the profession of social work, and ways to increase voter turnout of marginalized citizens. The findings were based on interviews with recipients of means-tested government assistance, who were enrolled in community college. This is a specifically defined group and not necessarily typical of either recipients of means-tested government assistance or of community college students. In order to address the problem of low voter turnout, indirect interventions are needed to encourage recipients to gain understanding about the political process, think more critically about the importance of voting, acquire a sense of a group identity with other recipients, and consider voting decisions in strategic ways. This chapter will discuss the study's implications for potential strategies to promote informed voting by all voter types, empowerment theory, social work collaboration, and social work researchers. These implications will make a clear case for the profession of social work to prioritize helping vulnerable populations gain political power. It can be accomplished if macro social workers are at the forefront of efforts to make the voting process more accessible, take policy stances that address structural inequalities which cause alienation, and lobby for campaign finance reform to promote a political system more responsive to all voters, not just wealthy ones and corporations. Lastly, it will review the limitations of the study.

Four Voter Types

The four voter types provide a way to categorize voters and nonvoters that suggests appropriate voting interventions to increase voting participation amongst each voter type. Social work needs to meet each voter type where they are in terms of how they perceive voting and how they understand their positionality as a recipients of means-tested government assistance. Recommendations are given about strategies that may be useful for social work to more fully

engage each voter type. Social workers, who interact directly with recipients of means-tested assistance in social service agencies and other community settings, are in a position to encourage voter engagement. This is important because through greater voter participation, recipients of means-tested assistance can gain leverage to gain greater access to government resources.

It is important for social workers to be mindful of these differing strategies to gain insight into how to change nonvoters into voters over time. In the past, social work has approached voter engagement in a generic, cookie-cutter method. It was assumed that registering voters and providing them information about voting and rides to the polls would lead to greater voter participation. However, these findings suggest that some nonvoters (nonvoter voter type) do not vote because they do not understand that elections affect them; thus, indirect interventions are required to increase critical awareness. These findings also suggest that other nonvoters (dedicated nonvoter type) decide not to vote because, based on their positionality, they perceive that politicians do not care about them and that their voting is useless. An array of interventions is needed to encourage informed voting by all voter types.

Dedicated Voters

These findings about the voting habits of dedicated voters have implications for the political knowledge, critical awareness, and skills necessary for strategic voting. This is vital knowledge to inform interventions targeted at the three other voter types. Dedicated voters need to be encouraged in their voting practices, and their discouragement must be minimized when the political process does not meet their high expectations. Additionally, interventions are needed to increase the likelihood they vote in local elections.

Dedicated voters, like all voters, vote less frequently in local elections because they are less knowledgeable about the issues and the candidates. Literature highlights that increased voter

turnout in local elections by groups who historically vote less may lead to increased community resources and services which would better their lives (Hajnal, 2010). Social workers can make a significant impact in increasing voter turnout in local elections by providing dedicated voters the resources they need to vote in them. Dedicated voters already respect the idea of voting, have skills to vote, and are thoughtful consumers of political information. What they lack is time and energy to research information about local elections (Edin & Schaeffer, 2015; Soss & Schram, 2007). Social workers and community agencies can provide basic nonpartisan candidate information and facilitate candidate forums to help dedicated voters feel informed enough to participate in local elections. Community Agencies can partner with other civic organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, to provide this type of nonpartisan materials.

Additionally, dedicated voters should be used as experts to encourage other recipients of means-tested assistance to vote. Their voices are powerful for spreading the message to other recipients like them that strategic voting is important. They need to be tapped to work within agencies linked to means-tested government assistance and community colleges and be included on committees and taskforces that coordinate ongoing efforts to create a culture of voter engagement.

Voters

Most voters do not understand the relationship between the government assistance they receive (or lack of assistance and services they receive) and the voter turnout rates of recipients of means-tested assistance. They do not understand how elections affect them. This critical awareness is important for two reasons: (a) to increase their ability to make informed voting decisions that are reflective of their self-interest and (b) to shift their perceptions about the costs and benefits related to going to the polls to cast a ballot. Dedicated voters perceive the benefits

of voting outweigh the costs (inconvenience) of going to the polls, which is known to promote voting (Blais, 2010; Driscoll & Krook 2012; Duncan & Steward 2007). On the other hand, voters fundamentally lack this perception. They are not motivated to vote because they believe voting is important. This is a relevant finding to inform voter mobilization strategies. In the past it was assumed voters thought voting is important and non-voters did not. However these findings suggest this is not the case.

Indirect interventions that provide opportunities for voters to gain critical awareness and understanding that voting is important to gain political power, express a viewpoint, and protect a group interest may encourage voting. These three beliefs are identified in literature to promote voting (Blais, 2012; Driscoll & Krook 2012; Platt, 2008). Not only do they serve to encourage informed voting decisions, but also provide a foundational reasoning for how the potential benefits of voting outweigh the costs. This can motivate voters to vote even when it is a hassle. Social workers need to find ways to help recipients of means-tested assistance reframe the meaning of their vote from influencing which candidate is elected to the potential for political leverage by their group's interests. Lastly, it is imperative for voters to recognize their linked fate with other recipients in order to encourage the likelihood that they might strategically vote as a bloc and increase the power of all recipients of means-tested assistance.

In order for this to happen, negative frames about welfare recipients must be broken. Social workers in advocacy positions need to lead a public campaign to change the political frame that recipients of means-tested government assistance are lazy, immoral, and cheaters. This change needs to begin within the hearts and minds of recipients. Their lack of critical awareness about the structural failings that lead to poverty (predispositions) allows them to accept these dangerous political frames (welfare queen) designed by elites to support the political

interests of elites (Converse 1964; Zaller 2011). In this way recipients internalize their own oppression and adopt the interests of political elites instead of their own (Lakeoff, 2004). These frames should be considered by social work just as a dangerous as negative racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes (Winter, 2008). Dismantling them needs to be a priority of the profession in order to politically empower recipients of means-tested government assistance and promote social and economic justice.

Lastly, the study's findings about why voters decide to vote sometimes and other times decide not to vote illuminate the importance of voter mobilization efforts to get out the vote of this voter type. If the process of voting is more convenient for voters, they might be more likely to cast a ballot. Social workers in social service agencies can develop creative ways to mitigate factors that make voting inconvenient and thus encourage their voting. For example, by extending hours at community child care centers, organizing transportation to the polls, and providing resources for clients to find out where they go to vote, voters will be more likely to cast ballots. Likewise, social workers focused on policy practice and political social work can lobby for the voting process to be more convenient in the ways suggested by participants.

Dedicated Nonvoters

One of the most important findings of this study is the emergence of the dedicated nonvoter voter type. Past literature and conventional thinking by political elites have assumed that nonvoters are satisfied with the status quo and are generally apathetic (Piven & Cloward, 2000). Some have referred to them as being "slothful" and "uninformed" (Will, 2008). The findings of this study show that such assumptions and descriptions about all nonvoters are untrue. The identification of a dedicated nonvoter voter type may change how political campaigns target those registered to vote, but who do not vote or who vote infrequently. If

dedicated nonvoters are targeted by political candidates for support, they are likely to demand government overhaul just as some have suggested would occur if lower-income voters voted at higher rates (Gans, 1972).

These findings reveal how living in poverty and being a recipient of means-tested government assistance limits voting and helps explain literature in this area. Past research has found that living in a poor community creates a condition for individuals to feel helpless and trapped, which keeps them from voting because they perceive it as useless (Cohen & Dawson, 1993; Uslander & Brown, 2005). Additionally literature suggests that negative experiences related to being a recipient of means-tested government assistance undermines a recipient's trust in government, reinforces their belief that government does not care about them, and further alienates them from elected leaders, all of which reduces their likelihood of voting (Edin & Schaeffer, 2015; Soss & Schram, 2007; Swartz, Blackstone, Uggen, & McLaughlin, 2009). The findings of this study add to the knowledge of why and how recipients of means-tested assistance in one voter type (dedicated nonvoters) believe voting is useless while recipients in another voter type (dedicated voters) believe voting is very important, and still others are apathetic (voters and nonvoters).

Dedicated nonvoters who receive means-tested assistance are very thoughtful people. It is a mistake to believe they do not understand voting or receive political messages as postulated by Converse (1964). They are discerning and do not accept political frames related to social welfare policy, the American Dream, and poverty as an individual failing. For them, voter mobilization interventions centered on providing voter information are useless. In fact, it can be argued that the primary goal of social workers should not be to encourage them to vote but rather to ease their sense of alienation, which pains them. This includes working to change structural

causes of their alienation. Until and unless their sense of alienation and resignation is reduced, working to get dedicated nonvoters to vote is against their right to self-determination and thus counters social work ethics.

Dedicated nonvoters need opportunities that allow them to connect with elected officials and have an outlet for their voices to be heard. Interventions such as advocacy days at state legislatures, town-hall style forums with elected leaders, and meetings with elected officials all with the purpose of addressing the needs of dedicated nonvoters and the flawed social welfare system would begin to break down their deep sense of alienation.

Dedicated nonvoters spoke the longest during the semi-structured interviews and needed the least probes. They kept talking and venting, which is indicated by the length of their quotes included in this dissertation. They were rejuvenated after the interview and thanked me for including them. The interview gave them a chance to vent their frustrations to someone who wanted to know their opinions, which allowed them to feel important and heard. Their responses to being interviewed for this study is a valuable insight that further illustrates they are not apathetic.

Nonvoters

It is hard to motivate a nonvoter to vote when they fundamentally have not thought about voting and do not care about voting. Nonvoters exemplify being apathetic to voting in the way Piven and Cloward (2000) understood the role of apathy. This apathy is related to having a lack of interest in politics, policy, and not having a sense of being a voter. This is different from apathy related to a lack of a belief that voting or democracy makes a difference, as in the case of dedicated nonvoters. For those who primarily do not care, the findings of this study suggest participation in any dialogue about voting may be enough to generate their desire to vote for the

first time, which offers insight into the process needed to encourage their voting. It is noteworthy that in the process of being interviewed, nonvoters wondered aloud why they had not voted and began to surmise that voting might be important. This is a powerful finding that in the course of one interview with a student researcher, who was not asking or encouraging them to vote, their perceptions about voting began to change. In both cases, critical dialogue about voting was the catalyst for voters to desire to become more informed and for nonvoters to desire to vote for the first time.

Additionally, the study's findings are interesting in consideration of literature about the role of education and family voting in promoting voting (Verba & Scholzman, 2003). Education and family voting is thought to increase an individual's sense of self-efficacy to vote in that it increases their personal knowledge and ability about how to vote. However, education and family voting may promote neither a greater sense of self-efficacy to be able to effect social change through the democratic process, nor a critical understanding of the relationship between electoral politics and the lives of individuals. Rather, increased voting associated with education and a family history of voting may result from exposure to dialogue about voting, similar to how nonvoters became interested in voting by being interviewed for this study. Therefore, education and family may not increase informed voting if critical understanding is not gained during this dialogue. Clearly factors known to increase voting are multi-faceted and have varied effects on different voter types.

The findings of this study help explain how having a student loan increases voting by low-income students more than their more affluent counterparts (Oxymy, 2012). Whereas both groups had equal exposure to education, the condition of having a student loan may have generated critical understanding of the relationship between electoral politics and personal lives.

This critical understanding may be facilitated because a student-loan is not stigmatized and is associated with hard work and effort. In this way, low-income students are encourage to identify with this group because being a college student has a positive social status, unlike being a recipient of means-tested assistance. As a result, having a student loan may encourage informed voting congruent with dedicated voters, not just voting. This would explain why these students vote more than their counterparts because they might be dedicated voters and not discouraged by the inconveniences (costs) of voting.

Social workers in social service agencies and educational settings can promote voting just by discussing voting in nonpartisan ways, which for the nonvoter might encourage their awareness and interest in voting. (This probably will not have an effect with dedicated nonvoters, who have already done this thinking.) Once nonvoters have at least thought about voting, they may be better able to hear messages that encourage voters to vote. Otherwise, they might continue to block out this information because they believe it does not apply to them.

Implications for Social Service Providers and Educators

While it was beyond the scope of this dissertation to discuss results in terms of differences between human services majors and all other majors, it should be noted that human service majors were represented in all voter types. Some were very critically aware about the connections between electoral politics, policy, and their lives while others were not. Some had a strong sense of individual empowerment and interactional empowerment; some had a little sense of each of these; and some lacked any awareness. In other words, participants who were human service majors were not any different from participants with any other major. However, unlike other majors, it is critical for future social workers to understand the relationship between person:environment and to have a critical understanding of how government affects the lives of

individuals.

Additionally, this research confirmed the power of education to increase critical awareness and prepare students to be informed citizens, as many participants discussed:

Probably because I'm in a sociology course and so I've been thinking a lot... I am realizing that this election is going to have a big effect on me personally in terms of my potential for the future. *Pat, nonvoter, 23 years-old, Puerto-Rican, trans*

But I recently took an American government course here. So it kind of solidified, that yes you should go out and vote even though there are certain levels of politics that may be corrupt but you should still go out and vote because you can still make the change regardless. *Jada, dedicated voter, 27 years-old, bi-racial/Black, female, human services major*

Educational experiences were linked to nonvoters gaining interest in voting for the first time, voters becoming more informed about the importance of voting, and dedicated voters having their perceptions about voting reinforced and encouraged. Social work educators are in the position to fight the pervasive perception that because politicians do not seem to care about the needs of marginalized citizens, they should not vote. This becomes a self-fulfilling, circular prophecy that reinforces the status quo. Educators can play a powerful role in reducing this cycle by discussing this topic to trigger political interest and reframing the meaning of voting. They can also begin to break down the discrediting narrative about welfare recipients and causes of unemployment. This may encourage welfare recipients to be less alienated from one another and think of themselves as a collective. In regards to promoting informed voting, it is not a cliché to say that knowledge is power. For voter types, other than the dedicated nonvoter, increased knowledge about politics, how government works, governmental policies, and elections has the potential to contribute to informed voting decisions by community college students.

Implications for Social Work Policy Agenda and Advocacy Work

Suggestions given by the participants about how to improve the voting process should be used to guide a policy agenda for the profession of social work. Three main areas need to be focused on: (a) make voting easier and more convenient for vulnerable populations, (b) reduce confusion about how and where to vote, and (c) increase civic engagement especially in how to access power through voting and voting in one's self interest.

Election Day should be made a national holiday. In theory, this would make it easier for individuals to get to the polls to vote. However, very few businesses in the retail and service sectors that employ minimum-wage workers close on National holidays. Therefore, in addition to making Election Day a national holiday, voting times need to be extended. Currently, polling hours are determined by state and local governments. Social workers need to advocate to their local and state election authorities to extend polling hours (participants suggested having polls opened for twenty-four hours). Extending polling hours should be the first policy priority of social work on the state and national level. Social workers should also advocate that those who vote at a polling place are identified on a central computer system, accessible to every polling location within a district, so that individuals may vote at polling place in their district. At the very least, all registered voters should be sent an announcement, a week prior to the election, informing them of where to vote, specific to each election. Finally, there needs to be an initiative encouraging social workers to run for Secretary of State and seek appointments on Election Commissions as a strategic way to protect the voting rights of the populations we serve. Lastly, social workers must advocate that civic education be mandatory for high school graduation to increase knowledge about the importance of voting and how to vote.

Community colleges and other institutions of higher-level education could work to

increase opportunities to distribute information about the importance of voting, how to vote, and non-partisan information about candidates. This could be under the leadership of human service and social work departments and could allow students with these majors to develop their professional skills through their involvement in organizing such projects. Efforts such as these should be ongoing and not limited to presidential elections. Additionally, data suggests, and these findings confirm, that even amongst voters, most citizens are not informed or interested in local elections. Community colleges have the infrastructure to create a culture of voting to combat this trend. These findings support literature that social interaction and educational opportunities encourage informed voting, and that by discussing voting individuals will be more likely to vote in the future (Bedolla & Michelson, 2012; Rolfe, 2013).

Recent political events have led to a resurgence of political awareness and engagement of the public in organized political protests. The profession of social work needs to seize this political window of opportunity to orchestrate planned social change that will enable vulnerable populations to gain political power. Social workers are positioned to use strategies to maximize the momentum of current political protests (Piven & Cloward, 2011). Mobilization models can be utilized to target change in the federal government, increase social justice, and improve the lives of the disenfranchised (Mondros & Wilson, 1994). Following the model of Human SERVE (made up of national social service organizations, schools of social work, and NASW) macro social workers must coordinate efforts to increase the political power of vulnerable populations. In other words, the time is right for planned social change and the profession of social work is in a position to lead the social movement needed to do so.

Macro oriented social workers, especially political social workers and scholars, need to take strong policy positions related to structural issues that cause political inequality.

Additionally, schools of social work and community agencies need to be organized to develop their clients' critical understanding to cast informed votes that reflect their self-interest. This includes direct and indirect interventions aimed at stopping the political narrative that shames recipients of means-tested assistance, in the same way that social work has addressed reduction of racial, ethnic, and gender stereotyping and stigma. Social work must prioritize making the connection between the personal and the political visible to the groups we are called to serve and encourage the collective consciousness of these groups with one another.

Political parties and campaigns do not mobilize voters considered less likely to vote. (None of the participants in this study had ever been contacted.) Collaboration amongst social work educators, policy practice social workers, community organizers, and front line social workers is needed to encourage informed voting, in the same way that collaboration occurred through the efforts of Human SERVE. This is the only way for social work to address both the internal/individual impediments to voting as well as the structural ones related to the barriers of voting created in voting laws. Collaboration is needed to create paths for recipients to overcome conditions of poverty and experiences related to receiving government assistance. Mobilization efforts are needed in local, state, and mid-term elections, not just presidential ones. Not only are these smaller elections important, but also because voting turnout rates are so low, there is greater opportunity to significantly impact them. Together, social workers can begin to address the many dimensions of low voter turnout by recipients of means-tested government assistance.

Organization is needed to accomplish this. Whether this is accomplished by the creation of a new agency similar to Human SERVE, which NASW then prioritizes and allots resources to this effort, or whether an established Institute related to a School of Social Work such as NAHPSW provides the critical leadership does not matter. What matters is that a powerful

stance be taken by social work to act while the social political climate allows.

Other Ways to Address the Problem of Low Voter Turnout

Coordinated efforts by social workers are needed to foster critical awareness in the marginalized groups we serve, so they may gain knowledge to make voting decisions in their self-interests. This is the missing leg of the three-legged voting stool as conceptualized by Nancy A. Humphreys (personal communication, January 19, 2017). Past and current social work efforts provide models for how to do this. Both Human SERVE and the Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work are archetypes for how social work can address the problems of low voter turnout through collaboration.

Human SERVE collaborated with Schools of Social Work, NASW, and national social service agencies to register clients to vote, get clients out to vote, and lobbied to streamline voter registration which resulted in the National Voter Registration Act. The Nancy A. Humphrey's Institute for Political Social Work (NAHIPSW) collaborates with the University of Connecticut's School of Social Work and field agencies to expand nonpartisan voter engagement projects. These types of collaborations are needed to increase general critical awareness about the connection between elections and government assistance, fight the stigmatization associated with being a welfare recipient, combat social-structural factors that lead to alienation and resignation, and create a culture of voting.

Implications for Social Work Research

Further research is needed to develop these exploratory findings related to the identification of the four voter types. As social workers begin to implement these voting strategies, research will be needed to measure and evaluate their effectiveness. Special attention needs to be placed on gaining more understanding of the dedicated nonvoter and on how social

service agencies can address their needs. Furthermore, social work research in this area should not only consider ways to increase voter turnout but also to encourage informed voting. There is a big difference. As discussed in the findings sections, voters make decisions about who to vote for “randomly” or are told who to vote for without an understanding of the issues.

Additionally, future qualitative social work studies should be conducted with recipients of means-tested government assistance, who are not enrolled in community college, in order to determine the relevance of these findings. Likewise, a study similar to this one should be conducted three years from now with the same cohort to determine how, if at all, the nature of the 2016 election changed the perceptions of recipients of means-tested assistance, enrolled in community colleges. Also, more research is needed to delineate characteristics of the four voter types in other demographic groups.

The study’s utilization of NVivo’s coding comparison pushed the co-coders to dig deeper into their analysis, from which richer knowledge emerged that could not have been discerned in quantitative data. At the same time, it was not the function of the computer-coding query that generated such findings, but the working relationship of the co-researchers, their respect for the voices of the participants, and their attentiveness to unexpected emerging patterns. This coding method needs to be refined but suggests one way to increase the trustworthiness of data without compromising the integrity of qualitative research.

The findings also suggested more areas of inquiry that were underdeveloped or inadequately explored. Further research is needed to clarify how (or if) voting patterns of families reinforce informed voting. Being part of a family that votes has long been thought to promote voting, but the findings of this research suggest that being a member of such a family does not always promote informed voting nor voting at all. Likewise, specific research is needed

to understand how experiences of those in the military affect their voting decisions. Lastly, continued scholarly research is needed about how frames about government assistance can be broken and replaced with frames reflecting the realities of the growing income inequality in the United States.

Lastly, in all research (social work, political science, sociology, and political polling), question wording is needed that distinguishes between apathy related to dedicated nonvoters and nonvoters. Polls such as the 2012 USA Today/Suffolk University Poll (cited in the literature review section) found that 41% of those planning not to vote had a belief that voting does not matter (Page, 2012). This does not distinguish between whether this belief is a product of apathy related to not caring or a product of alienation related to not believing democracy is possible. More nuanced question wording is needed to parse out these types of differences that have been illuminated in this study.

Implications about Empowerment Theory

Empowerment should be considered within the context of each individual's lived experiences and with deference to preserving the self-determination of all people. Knowledge gained from this research suggests that some voters are not politically aware or empowered, and some nonvoters are very politically aware and empowered. Dedicated nonvoters are critically aware; they know how government affects their lives and they do not feel as much shame or stigma about means-tested assistance as other voter types. The decision not to vote serves a purpose for them. These facts need to be understood and taken into consideration when social workers are providing services to nonvoters.

It seems reasonable to suggest that those who base their voting decisions on critical thinking are empowered, regardless if they decide to vote or not to vote. However a conundrum

exists in the case of dedicated nonvoters, who usually decide not to vote. While their decision not to vote is meant to convey their lack of trust in the system and discontent with the status quo, some political elites interpret nonvoting as satisfaction with the status quo or lack of having any political opinion. Therefore, their decision not to vote may actually harm their group's ability to improve their socioeconomic conditions. The findings of this study call into question whether all the sub-processes of empowerment (Gutiérrez, 1995) are equally important and how social workers can identify and understand political empowerment. Lastly, more research is needed on differentiating the sub-processes of empowerment and on further developing the concept of political empowerment in order to guide evidence-based social work practice.

Limitations

The most significant limitation to this study was the political time in which the research was conducted. Interviews occurred during the height of political activity leading up to the 2016 presidential primaries. Therefore, the attitudes and opinions expressed by participants may reflect feelings related to the specifics of this election. Additionally, the previous two presidential elections were historic elections which may have affected past reasons for participant voting decisions and have been particular to the candidacy of President Barack Obama and issues specific to those elections. Furthermore, because the state of Connecticut is one of the most progressive states, in terms of voting laws, participants' assessment of structural barriers does not include strict voter ID laws.

Because the study used a qualitative methodology and relied on a small purposive sample size, these findings cannot be generally applied to all recipients of means-tested government assistance programs, enrolled in community colleges. In addition, because education has been found to increase voting (Beaumont, 2011; Ozymy, 2012; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995),

voting behaviors of community college students may be different from others who are receiving means-tested assistance. Because being a community college student was an eligibility requirement, the findings do not reflect recipients of means-tested government assistance, who are not enrolled in community colleges. There could be a significant difference between the two groups.

As previously discussed, the researcher's positionality and political opinions could have influenced the interview process, the nature of questions included in the interview guide, the creation of the code book, coding, and thematic analysis. Participant answers may have been affected by social desirability bias in that participants might have emphasized what they thought the researcher wanted to hear. However, many strategies were used including co-coding and coding comparisons to ensure inter-rater reliability to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of this study and control for researcher bias.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Sample Letter to Community Colleges

Date

Dr. Name
Office of the President
Community College
Address
Address

Dear Dr. Name:

I am writing to ask your permission to interview Naugatuck Valley Community College (NVCC) students as part of a qualitative dissertation required for my completion of a PhD from the School of Social Work (SSW) at the University of Connecticut (UConn). The study explores how recipients of means-tested governmental assistance programs, who are enrolled in community colleges, make decisions about voting and if structural factors affect their decision to vote or not. Low voter turn-out by recipients of means-tested governmental programs is a complicated issue involving both individuals' motivations to vote and voting laws guiding the voting process. It is important to study because the needs of those who vote less are prioritized less by politicians. Who votes matters, not just in electing a candidate, but in determining the kind of policies they enact. The study will provide understanding in an area with little research and its potential to identify ways to strengthen voting procedures is very exciting.

The study offers students the opportunity for their voices to be heard about voting. As an adjunct sociology professor at Housatonic Community College, I am familiar with the community college setting. This research topic was inspired by my classroom discussions with students about political structures, the role of government, and the importance of voting. I chose to include NVCC because of its thriving Behavioral Social Sciences division and the diversity of its students from suburban and urban environments at two campuses. I have received Institutional Review Board approval from the UConn. There is no anticipated harm to participants.

Early in the fall semester, I would like to contact Human Services/Pre-Social Work, Sociology, and Psychology coordinators and ask to speak to introductory classes for 10 minutes to recruit students. Eligible participants must have received TANF/welfare or SNAP/food-stamps in the past twelve months, speak English, and be enrolled in a community college. My goal is to interview ten students from NVCC by the end of fall the semester. I will meet twice with student participants. At the first meeting I will administer informed consent process and a brief electronic survey. The second meeting will be a semi-structured interview approximately sixty minutes. I would like to use a private space to conduct the interview at NVCC, such a library study room or conference room, in order to ensure confidentiality.

I will call next week to follow-up on this request. I am happy to provide more information or meet to discuss details of the study. For further verification you may contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Nancy A. Humphreys. She recently is retired from the UConn SSW and can be reached by contacting Kathy Birnie (860-570-9323).

Regards,

Addie Sandler, M.S.W.

203-241-6395

Adelaide.Sandler@uconn.edu.

Appendix B: Informed Consent/Information Sheet



University of Connecticut

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Nancy A. Humphreys, DSW

Student Investigator: Addie Sandler, MSW

Study Title: Structural Factors and Voting Decisions by Recipients of Means -Tested Governmental Assistance Programs

Invitation to Participate

You are invited to participate in the interview because you are currently a Connecticut resident; English speaking; a part-time or full time student enrolled in either Capitol Community College, Naugatuck Community College, or Three Rivers Community College; and were enrolled in either TANF (welfare) or SNAP (food-stamps) in the past year and eligible to vote on November 6, 2012.

The Student Investigator is a graduate student at the University of Connecticut, and is conducting the interview as part of her dissertation. She is interested in exploring how recipients of means-tested governmental assistance programs make decisions about voting and how structural factors affect their decision to vote.

What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

You will meet with the researcher two times at the community college you are attending, and at a time of mutual agreement. The first meeting will last between 20 and 30 minutes. At this time you will be asked to complete a brief survey. At the second meeting you will be interviewed for approximately 60 minutes. A follow-up interview may be requested if further exploration and explanation is required

What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?

We believe that the risk presented to you by these interviews is minimal. The Student Investigator will focus on a range of topics, but may discuss previous experiences involving social or emotional conflict. You may choose not to answer any of the questions. A referral list of agencies that may be helpful to you will be provided, upon request. The only inconvenience is the amount of time the interviews take.

What are the benefits of the study?

You may not benefit directly from participating in these interviews. It will be beneficial to the Student Investigator because it will help the interviewer's complete her dissertation and may aid her in future research. The research could also benefit the social work profession and how social workers promote effective voting opportunities for all people.

Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

There are no costs to you. For your time you will receive a \$15 gift card either to Target or a grocery store near you. If a second meeting is required, you will receive an additional gift card.

How will my personal information be protected?

With your permission, the interviews will be audiotaped to obtain complete and accurate information. The Student Investigator will have the interviews transcribed by a professional transcription service. All identifying information will be removed. Only the PI and Student Investigator will have access to the transcripts. The tapes will be destroyed after they have been transcribed. Also, you will be assigned a unique identifier, which will be included on the electronic survey. Only the Student Investigator will know the true identity of the participants.

You should also know that the UConn Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Office of Research Compliance may inspect study records as part of its auditing program, but these reviews will only focus on the researchers and not on your responses or involvement. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to be in the study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. You do not have to answer all questions, you can choose to not answer a question and move on. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

Whom do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about the study. If you have further questions about the project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator, Nancy A. Humphreys, PhD, by calling Kathy Birnie, Doctoral Program Administrative Assistant, 860-570-9323 or the Student Investigator, Adelaide Sandler, 203-241-6395. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 860-486-8802.

Voluntary Participation

You do not have to be in the study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. You are free to skip any question that you do not want to answer and you can stop answering any questions and/or stop the interview at any time. All meetings with the researcher will take place at the community college where the student-participant is enrolled, at a times of mutual agreement.

Documentation of Consent:

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks and inconveniences have

been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Participant Signature:

Print Name:

Date:

Signature of Person
Obtaining Consent

Print Name:

Date:

Appendix C: Script to Professors Requesting Permission

This will be a phone call but if I am unable to make contact by phone, I will email them this script, in letter form.

I am a PhD student at UConn's School of Social Work and I also teach sociology at Housatonic Community College. I need your help to recruit students to interview for my dissertation, which was inspired by classroom discussions with my students. My study explores how community college students, who have been recipients of TANF/welfare or SNAP/food assistance in the past 12 months make decisions about voting and how, if at all, structural factors affect their decision to vote. I do NOT want to know who students voted for, just why some do vote and others do not. This information will be used to identify ways to make voting easier. This is important because voter turn-out rates determine outcomes of elections and those who are elected make social-welfare policies. I have received permission from UCONN, your community college, and your department chair to recruit students from introductory level classes if you are willing.

May I come and speak to your class for 5-8 minutes to recruit students for my study? I will briefly explain the study and collect the names of those who may be interested in participating. I will ask all students to complete an interest/screening form and a folder to ensure everyone's privacy is protected. The form takes about one minute to complete. Not all students who express interest and are eligible will be selected. Eligible participants must have been eligible to vote in the 2012 election, received TANF/welfare or SNAP/food-stamps sometime in the past twelve months, speak English, and be enrolled in a community college.

I will meet twice with student participants. At the first meeting I will administer informed consent and a brief electronic survey. At the second meeting I will interview students for approximately sixty minutes. It is important that I talk both to voters and nonvoters, so all voices are heard. No harm is anticipated to volunteers as a result of participation. As a thank-you after the interview, participants will be given a \$15 gift certificate to their choice of either Target, Big Y, Stop and Shop, or Shop Rite.

Appendix D: Classroom Presentation Script

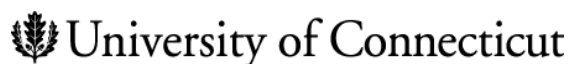
Hi. I teach sociology at Housatonic Community and I am a PhD student at UConn's School of Social Work. In order to get my PhD I have to do a research study. Because of conversations I had with my students, I decided to explore how community college students who have also received TANF/welfare or SNAP/food assistance, decide whether or not to vote. Also I am curious how, if at all, structural factors affect your decision to vote. I am not interested in who students voted for. I am hoping that some of you will be willing to be interviewed by me. I need to talk to both students who vote in elections and those who tend not to vote, in order to understand all perspectives. I hope some of you will participate in this study by volunteering to let me interview you. It is a great opportunity for you to express your opinions and have your voices be heard.

I will meet with you two times during this fall semester, at a private location at this college, during a time convenient for you. The first meeting will last about 30 minutes. At this time I will explain all the details of the study and ask you to complete paper work and take an electronic survey on an iPad. At the second meeting I will interview student participants which will take about 60 minutes. I am going to audio-taped interviews. Your participation is totally confidential. Your professor will not know if you spoke to me. I will keep all paper-work and audio-recordings in a locked cabinet at UConn and destroy them at the end of the study. I know you are busy, so as a thank-you after the interview, I will give participants a \$15 gift certificate to their choice of either Target, Big Y, Stop and Shop, or Shop Rite.

To be eligible to participate you must have been eligible to vote in the 2012 election, received TANF or SNAP in the 12 month, speak English, and be enrolled in a community college. To determine if you meet these requirements and let me know who is participating, I am going to give everyone this survey and a folder. The survey takes about one minutes to complete. Everyone should fill it out to protect the privacy of those who want to participate. Expressing interest in volunteering for the study does not mean you will be selected to participate or that you must participate. You may choose to drop out of the study at any time. I will destroy all surveys except of those who are selected, which will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at UCONN. Once you have completed all the questions, place the form in the folder and I will collect it. If you are selected I will call you in the next week.

Thanks in advance for completing the survey. And I hope that you will consider participating because it is a great chance for you to have your experiences and opinions make a difference.

Appendix E: Screening Tool



Principal Investigator: Nancy Humphreys, DSW

Student Investigator: Adelaide Sandler, MSW

Study Title: Structural Factors and Voting Decisions by Recipients of Means -Tested Governmental Assistance Programs

Basic Information about the Study: This study is being conducted to explore how recipients of means-tested governmental assistance programs make decisions about voting and how structural factors affect their decision to vote. You will meet with the researcher two times at the community college you are attending, and at a time of mutual agreement. The first meeting will last between 20 and 30 minutes. At this time you will be asked to complete a brief survey about your voting history and demographic information. At the second meeting you will be interviewed for approximately 60-90 minutes. For your time you will receive a \$15 gift card either to Target or a grocery store near you.

1.) Do you speak English? *(Please choose one.)*

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

2.) Were you born on or before November 8, 1994? *(Please choose one.)*

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

3.) Were you eligible to vote in the 2012 Presidential election? *(Please choose one.)*

- ☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Not sure

4.) Have you or anyone in your household received any of the following government services and benefits in the past twelve months? *(Check ALL that apply.)*

- ☐ Food assistance, such as SNAP benefits
☐ Welfare benefits

5.) Do you live in Connecticut? *(Please choose one.)*

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

6.) Would you be willing to participate in a research study to learn how citizens decide to vote or not vote?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Need more information, please call me.

Name_____

Best number to reach you_____

Thanks for your interest. You will be contacted in the next few days.

Appendix F: Interview Guide

Thanks so much for agreeing to speak with me today. It is critical for the voices of community college students to be heard. The purpose of the study is to understand how recipients of means-tested government assistance programs make decisions about whether or not to vote in any election. The effects of how structural barriers, if at all, influence this decision are especially important. Lastly, the personal attitudes of student participants' about the nature of politics, voting, and the impact of government on their lives is relevant. There are no right or wrong answers. This study seeks to understand your unique experiences, thoughts, and feelings. You are the expert. It is critical that voters and nonvoters with different backgrounds be included in the study. Without this range of perspectives the study would not be complete. The study's purpose has nothing to do with **who** you vote for. Rather the focus is on **how** you decide whether or not to vote at all.

1. What is your general attitude about voting in any election?
 - a. Is it important to vote, does it really even matter?
 - *If yes, important ...* Tell me more about the reasons or ways it is important?
 - OR
 - *If not important...* Explain more about what led you to believe that voting does not matter?
 - b. Is your opinion the same for all elections (Presidential verses congressional, state, or local, primaries)?
 - c. In your opinion, do the outcomes of any election impact either you or your community?

If **no** impact...

 - *But still vote...* What keeps you going to vote if it feels like to you that elections have no impact in your life?
 - OR
 - *And do not vote...* Imagine elections did impact you and your community, what would be different; how would you recognize impact?

If **yes** impact....
 - d. How does voting/not voting make you feel?
2. In what ways, do you consider politics or government to be relevant to you?
 - a. In what ways might you ever blame politicians or the government for problems impacting you or America in general?
 - b. What about the opposite, do you ever notice them having a positive impact on you or America?
 - c. Do these beliefs explain how you feel about voting?
3. Talk about your impressions and experiences around the requirements for and process of going to polls to vote?

- a. Probe for details: Has anything been confusing? OR What has made it easy? Personal difficulties and/or frustrations related to being able to vote (example: transportation, childcare, polling hours, registration process, absentee ballot, long lines)
 - *If identity a voting obstacle...* Have you ever thought about why that (policy, law, requirement etc.) is in existence? So tell me your conclusion OR thinking about it now, what's your take on the purpose of it?
 - b. Do you think every voter in the state has these same experiences/issues?
 - *If think they do not...* Talk a little about what is different and why you think this is? How does this make you feel?
 - c. Do these impressions/experiences around the process of voting affect your decision to vote?
 - d. *If vote...* What, if any, strategies do you use to make voting fit into your daily routine?
 - e. Is there anything that could be changed to make the process of voting possible/easier for you and others in your community?
 - h. Other countries have different laws around voting, for example not requiring voter registration, allowing citizens to vote at any polling location, and making Election Day a national holiday. What's your opinion about the way America is different?
4. Talk in general about how much attention you pay to news and politics?
 - a. Is there any kind of issue you would be more likely to follow?
 - b. How closely and in what ways do you follow political campaigns and elections? (Commercials, written material, debates)
5. Are there certain issues that influence whether or not you decide to vote?
 - a. Can you talk about if you tend to be concerned about issues that directly affect your life or others that reflect your values or those that seem to make sense for the good of the country?
 - Does your past/current enrollment in government programs like welfare or SNAP affect your view of politics or voting?
 - In what ways, does your status as a community college student impact your decision making to vote or your attitudes about political issues?
 - b. Do the personal characteristics of candidates affect whether or not you vote, NOT who you vote for?
6. Is there anything else that we have not discussed that you think is important for me to know that influences your decision to vote?

Appendix G: Demographic and Voting Survey

*** Note this survey will be electronic using Qualtrics. Prompts will not be needed because the appropriate question automatically will be displayed.

Please enter your birthday to be used a Participant ID (00/00/0000): _____

Please answer the following questions about voting. In any election there are many reasons why people choose to vote or not to vote. This study seeks to identify reasons for both voting and not voting. Reasons for each are equally valued and important. Your individual experiences and attitudes are important. There are no right or wrong answers. Thank you in advance for your time and honesty.

Please mark an ☒ in ONE box, unless otherwise asked.

7.) Which of these statements describes you? (*Please choose one.*)

- ☐ I am not registered to vote
- ☐ I am registered to vote
- ☐ I am not sure if I'm registered to vote

8.) How frequently would you say you vote in Presidential elections? (*Please choose one.*)

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Some of the time
- ☐ Nearly Always
- ☐ Always

9.) How frequently would you say you vote in other elections (local, state, Congressional elections)? (*Please choose one.*)

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Some of the time
- ☐ Nearly Always
- ☐ Always

10.) In the most recent Presidential Election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, did you vote? (*Please choose one. Remember it is not important who you voted for.*)

- ☐ No, did not vote (**Go to question 5.**)***
- ☐ Yes, voted (**Go to question 6.**)***
- ☐ Do not remember (**Go to question 7.**)***

- 11.) In any election, some people do not vote. Thinking about your decision **not to vote** in the 2012 Presidential Election indicate the importance for each of the following possible reasons that some people have for not voting in any election.

For every reason, mark ☒ in ONE box.

| | Not Important | Somewhat Important | Very Important |
|---|------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| a. I was either ill/disabled or caring for a family member, who was ill/disabled. | | | |
| b. I lacked transportation. | | | |
| c. I was out of town. | | | |
| d. I did not know where to vote. | | | |
| e. I did not understand how to get an absentee ballot; the process was too complicated. | | | |
| f. I did not register in time. | | | |
| g. The hours the polls were open were too inconvenient. | | | |
| h. The hours the polls were open conflicted with work responsibilities. | | | |
| i. The hour's polls were open conflicted with family responsibilities. | | | |
| j. I could not take time off from work. | | | |
| k. I could not take time off from school. | | | |
| l. Too difficult for me because of lack of child-care. | | | |
| m. I went to vote and the line was too long for me to wait. | | | |
| n. I went to vote and was told that I was longer registered. | | | |
| o. I went to vote and was told that I was in the wrong polling location. | | | |
| p. I went to vote and I did not have the correct ID. | | | |

| | Not Important | Somewhat Important | Very Important |
|--|------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| q. I forgot to vote or send in absentee ballot. | | | |
| r. I was not able to make an informed decision. | | | |
| s. I did not have enough information about the candidates. | | | |
| t. I did not think there was a difference between the candidates. | | | |
| u. I did not like either of the candidates. | | | |
| v. I do not care about politics. | | | |
| w. I think one vote does not matter. | | | |
| x. I think the results of the election will not make a difference in the lives of real people. | | | |
| y. I think the outcome of the election will not affect my family or myself. | | | |
| z. I chose not to vote to send a message to the powers that be. | | | |

SKIP the next question and Go to question 7.***

Mark ☒ in ONE box.

| | Not Important | Somewhat Important | Very Important |
|--|------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| a. I always vote. | | | |
| b. I wanted to protect my self-interest. | | | |
| c. I was concerned for the welfare of others. | | | |
| d. I was excited about the election. | | | |
| e. I was encouraged to vote by someone or an organization important to me. | | | |
| f. I voted with a friend or family member. | | | |
| g. I wanted to be part of the process. | | | |
| h. I have loyalty to a political party. | | | |
| i. I was impacted by a television commercial. | | | |
| j. I have strong opinions about issues. | | | |
| k. I received a phone call or a knock on my door by a candidate or their representative. | | | |
| l. I strongly supported a candidate. | | | |

| | Not Important | Somewhat Important | Very Important |
|--|------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| m. I believe it is part of my civic duty. | | | |
| n. I wanted to honor those who fought for my right to vote. | | | |
| o. I wanted to represent others like me (i.e. my gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, social class, etc.) | | | |

12.) What is your opinion about government? (*Please choose one.*)

- ☐ Is all most always wasteful and inefficient
☐ Often does a better job than people give it credit for
☐ Don't know

13.) How would you complete the following sentence? Government aid to the poor...
(*Please choose one.*)

- ☐ Does more harm than good
☐ Does more good than harm
☐ Don't know

14.) What Community College are you currently attending? (*Please choose one.*)

- ☐ Capitol Community College
☐ Tunxis Community College
☐ Three Rivers Community College

15.) To date, how many semesters of any community college have you completed?

Please write the number of semesters on the space provided. For example: If this is your first semester enrolled in any community college, write "0".

_____ (Number of semesters)

16.) Which of the following do you consider yourself? (*Please check one.*)

- ☐ Full-time student
☐ Part-time student

17.) What is your major? *Please specify:* _____

18.) Do you currently or have you ever had a student loan? (*Please check one.*)

- ☐ No
☐ Yes

19.) Which of the following do you consider yourself? (*Please choose one.*)

- ☐ Not employed
☐ Employed part-time
☐ Employed full-time

20.) What is your age? (*Please write your age on the line provided.*)

_____ (Age in years)

21.) What is your gender? (*Please choose one.*)

- ☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Transgender
☐ Other: *Please specify:* _____

22.) Are you Spanish/Hispanic or Latino/a? (*Please choose one.*)

- ☐ No
☐ Yes

23.) What is your race/ethnicity? (*Please choose all that apply.*)

- ☐ Black or African American
☐ White
☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
☐ Bi or Multi-Racial
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
☐ Other: _____

24.) Which of the following describes your relationship status? (*Please choose one.*)

- ☐ Single (never married, not living together)
- ☐ Married (not separated)
- ☐ Living together (not married)
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Widowed
- ☐ Other: *Please specify:* _____

25.) What city/town and state do you live in? (*Please write town/city and state on the space provided.*) *Example: Hartford, CT*
