

Why we vote

A qualitative investigation of attitudes about participation in elections by young adults

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the perspectives of young adults about voting and participating in elections. It aims to increase our understanding of attitudes towards elections, how young people make the choice of whether to participate in elections and possible connections between that choice and their experiences of family, community, and society. Specifically, through interviews with nine young adults, it asked the phenomenological question of how they perceive the act of voting and what it means to them. The study used a blend of qualitative methods: in-depth interviews using the critical incident technique to explore specific aspects of voting; a grounded theory approach to analysis to develop themes from the interviews; and a story-telling approach to present those themes as the participants expressed them. The analysis creates a descriptive picture that adds qualitative depth to concepts in the literature including young people's attitudes towards voting, influences that affect their likelihood of voting, and barriers and facilitators to their participation. In doing so, it adds to the literature available to help create official and advocacy programs and materials to encourage and support voting. This, in turn, supports a broader social goal of increasing turnout for elections. This research suggests that if we want young people to find a reason to vote, we will have to connect not just the act of voting, but the reasons for voting, to their own lives and perspectives.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores how young adults engage with a key activity of participation in civic life: voting. It examines the perspectives of young adults towards elections and how they perceive the act of voting; their attitudes towards elections; and it asks what influences their choice of whether or not to vote. Participation in elections is important as an indication of civic engagement, along with other activities that make an individual a part of a social world, such as being part of community groups, or acting in ways that benefit society or other individuals. Elections are also important in a democracy, so turnout for an election can be seen as a sign of the robustness and ‘health’ of the society.

The aim of this project is to increase our understanding of attitudes towards elections, how young people make the choice of whether to participate in elections and possible connections between that choice and their experiences of family, community, and society.

For some social scientists participation in elections is one measure of how individuals are involved in their communities and society—what they call ‘civic engagement’. Voting represents both agency—in the ability and choice to participate in a civic activity—and identity—the sense of self and belonging within the society (for example, Youniss et al, 2007, Stepick & Stepick, 2002, 2008, DeSapio, 2008).

In the United States, participation in elections is historically low, with only 61.8% of eligible citizens voting in the 2012 presidential election,

according to the U.S. Census Bureau (File, 2013), and much lower rates of participation in local and non-presidential elections. New citizens through immigration and those with lower incomes or education are all less likely to vote than citizens in general. Less than half of those aged 18-24 vote in the U.S. (File & Crissley, 2012, File, 2013). Statistics in other countries are similar: in the UK, the turnout rate for the same age range has dropped to 39% (O'Toole, Marsh & Jones, 2003). Even in countries with compulsory voting, such as Australia, the Electoral Commission estimates that only 90% of eligible people were even registered on the electoral roll (AEC, 2011).

Young adults are important in studying election participation because the opportunity to vote is relatively new to them, not yet a habit. Their ability to vote is recent enough that they could still remember their first elections clearly. They are at a moment of transition as they move away from their childhood family, and into adulthood in a social and political structure (Youniss, 2007), and their attitudes towards elections are also evolving and being shaped by their current experiences. In this view, the challenge is partially epistemological: what do people need to know to participate in elections effectively.

Voting is not simply an individual phenomenon, but is a social structure manifested through the interactions of an election. Instead of asking how individuals fit into a set of constructs (such as 'citizen', 'voter', 'civic participation', 'community' or 'engagement'), this project will seek to understand their experiences and point of view through their own personal 'lived' experience and how they express the meaning of this experience. This is a phenomenological aim—to understand the way individuals comprehend reality, seeking common

essential features of the experience (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, Heiskala, 2011, van Manen, 1984).

1.1 Research Objectives

The objective of this project is to create a rich description of the essence of an experience for participants (a phenomenological approach), and use themes that emerge from the interviews to improve our understanding of ways elections can be more inviting and meaningful, especially to young adults.

The specific research questions are:

- How do these young adults understand the meaning of elections and their own choices about electoral participation?
- How do their personal histories, family background, and their identification with a cultural or local community affect their attitudes towards participation in elections?
- Does involvement (or disengagement) with other social and community activities and their experiences of society influence their point of view on the choice to participate?

This project used semi-structured interviews with young adults to explore their experiences of elections, and how those experiences are influenced by their family and cultural background, and their connections within their communities.

Despite work in many related disciplines, the challenge of low turnout by young voters remains. Although this project does not address the

larger question of motivating participation directly, answers to these questions can contribute to improving turnout by adding to our understanding of how they make choices about participating in elections and suggesting ways to communicate more effectively.

1.2 How this dissertation is organized

The dissertation is organized into the following sections:

Chapter 2 looks at other research related to this topic, drawing on work from several different disciplinary perspectives.

Chapter 3 covers the process by which the research was conducted, including methodological approach, ontological and epistemological stance, data collection methods, and ethical issues encountered during this project.

Chapter 4 is an extended discussion of the methodology, looking at the challenges in conducting interviews to investigate a topic which may have low salience for the participants. It describes methods used in the interview process, analysis, and reporting.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis of the interview data, organized by the patterns or themes round there.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation with a summary of the main findings, whether the project met its research objectives, the relationship of these results to the existing literature, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

PERSPECTIVES ON PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Elections are a distinguishing feature of a democratic political system—one of ways in which individuals ‘touch the state’ (Design Council, 2004). The degree to which citizens choose to participate in elections can be seen as an indicator of the civic health of a democracy, and participation by new citizens, especially so.

The literature relevant to an examination of the choices young people make about electoral participation covers a wide range of social science disciplines and an equally wide range of research approaches. One of the consequences of this diversity is that there is little cross-citation, with papers from each discipline largely referencing other similar research. The literature review therefore covers a number of different academic disciplines as well as research reports from government and advocacy groups.

People become citizens in two ways: growing into adulthood or through migration. Research that examines the participation in elections by new citizens through naturalization, and their children, young adults who grow up in migrant communities, overlaps with the focus of this dissertation, and is included in the literature review.

Five major themes that emerged from a search of current work in this area are discussed below. They are:

- Election statistics. Studies that examine voting trends and demographics of the electorate.

- Citizenship as identity: A view of citizenship as a developmental process for young adults.
- Migrant transitions: Research on the impact of migration, transnationalism, and acculturation in a new society.
- Young people and voting: Examinations of the ways young people in a society adopt voting behaviors and the barriers to doing so.
- The role of community, family, and values: Research into voting as an activity, influenced by cultural, family, and community traditions.

2.1 Election statistics: trends and demographics

Political scientists study elections through quantitative analysis of trends in voter turnout. Research in the U.S. often relies on analysis of U.S. Census Current Population Survey (CPS) data, supplemented with other survey data.

A limitation of all statistical demographic studies is that they focus on the aggregate population. They identify trends in the data, but can provide little insight into individual behavior, attitudes or the lived experience. Some studies include qualitative elements to explore individual perspectives behind statistical trends, but the research often starts from pre-defined concepts or terminology, rather than from the participants own words.

A further challenge for survey research is its use of potentially unreliable self-reported data. In elections, the difference can be

quantified by comparing actual turnout to reported levels of voting. The variance for U.S. elections can be as large as 11%. Holbrook & Krosnick (2009) suggest that this may be due to a social desirability bias (though they consider other possibilities, such as variations in self-reporting). For any elections research, it is a challenge to find participants who will admit to and discuss the choice *not* to vote.

2.2 Citizenship as identity

The concept of citizenship is complex: spanning personal, legal, and national issues. Definitions of citizenship include concepts such as rights and duties in the community, political participation, and social responsibility, as well as a more personal view of citizenship as membership in a social context (QCA 1998, Gibson & Hamilton 2011, Youniss 2007, Levine 2007, Schiller et. al. 1995).

The concepts of citizenship as membership or identity are part of discussions of two groups of new citizens: young adults and migrants. The U.S. national metaphor of the ‘melting pot’ suggests a giving up of one identity and taking on another. In this view, young persons are making a developmental transition into adult membership in society just as migrants are making a transition from one place (and culture) to another.

One of the themes in the concept of ‘civic identity’ is the need to educate young people as citizens, either through a formal program of civics education in schools or through community involvement (Jarrett et. al. 2005, Levine 2007, QCA 1998, Youniss et. al. 2007).

The goal, however, is not just rote participation, but meaningful involvement, or ‘actualizing citizenship’ in which young citizens

acquire not only knowledge but skills in communication, coordination, and ways to take action (Bennett, Wells & Freelon, 2011, pp.839-841)

One project used qualitative interviews to examine the value of youth programs and described a three-stage process as the participants moved through from an initial state of distrust to connection with adults in the programs to begin a process of building adult ‘social networks’ and ‘social capital’ (Jarrett et. al, 2005). Despite using grounded theory, this project seems to impose language and concepts on the interviews, looking at how (or whether) participants fit into predetermined constructs, rather than allowing the voices of the participants to guide the analysis.

2.3 Migrant transitions

Many of the essays on migrant identity and transitions to citizenship echo an underlying worry: “will they become like us?” This perspective layers the question of identity as a citizen on the additional considerations of migration. Navigating these competing identities can be complex. In a highly mobile world, citizenship is no longer a proxy for defining either interest or identity, and is not restricted to geopolitical borders. Migrants may be able to vote in more than one place, or have no voting rights in any country. (Kull, 2008, p.460).

Research on migration is often influenced by larger social questions of acculturation and loyalty. Stepick & Stepick, 2002 assure readers that, “Contrary to the fears of cultural conservatives, all immigrant youth, regardless of generation, Americanize in many ways extraordinarily quickly” (p.248). Other research suggests that people

can maintain multiple connections and identities (Schiller 1995, Kraidy 1999, Van Bochove, et. al. 2010)

In a grounded qualitative study on cultural identities of migrants from El Salvador and India to the U.S., Jensen (2008) concluded that cultural identity can be a source of strength, helping migrants enter a new society, find ways to be fully engaged in civic life, and become full citizens. One of the seven themes identified is “appreciation for American democracy” and interest in voting. Preston et. al. (2006) found a similar interest in participating in local affairs and the right to vote in a study of transnational migrants from Hong Kong to Canada.

DiSipio et. al. (2008) looked at the transition from migrant to citizen to voter to estimate future voting patterns by Asian Americans. Their data show that that the 3rd generation - those who are born in the U.S. or arrive as a young child – are more likely to vote, and participate at rates similar to the general population. Stepick et. al. (2008) showed similar trends in voter registration. (Stepick and colleagues use a similar categorization, but call those who migrated as a child a 1.5th generation and those born in the new location the 2nd generation.)

2. 4 Young people and voting

The literature on young people and voting covers many of the same themes as studies of migrants, though without the explicit cultural and geographical transition. Researchers seem almost more puzzled by the low levels of electoral participation by young citizens than migrants, suggesting a wide variety of reasons. Kimberlee (2002) identified four classes of explanations in the UK literature on youth

voting: those based on youth, politics, alternative interests, and changes in society.

Some explanations suggest that **youth itself is a barrier**, suggesting that because young people are more mobile, less connected to the community, and have less stable lives they are therefore less likely to vote. A qualitative project found (among other themes) what the researchers called “the politics of being young”. Many of their participants believed they are excluded from electoral politics because they are young and poorly represented in political parties.

“Inequalities based on class, gender, ethnicity, and age are crucial features of (their lives): they are not variables; they are lived experiences” (O’Toole, Marsh & Jones, 2003, p.359)

Projects aimed at increasing turnout have conducted experiments with different ways to motivate voters. In one project, researchers compared voter education literature appealing to a sense of identity (urging readers to “be a voter”) to materials urging people to dutiful action to “go vote” (Bryan et. al., 2011). Their results showed that this small change of an appeal to an active identity could increase turnout by over 10 percent—potentially enough to affect the outcome of a close election.

Political barriers focus on structural barriers to participation in elections, such as the need to register in advance, the challenge of learning about elections, and finding your polling place for election day. An ethnographic study of the voting experiences of people with disabilities (Sanford et. al., 2013), included both observation and interviews to document barriers they experienced. Not surprisingly,

many of them were not specific to elections, but reflected the broader barriers that the participants faced.

Electoral participation is just one type of encounter with the state. A project sponsored by the UK Design Council, *Touching the State* (2004), explored “ceremonies of citizenship”—voting, jury service and the new citizenship ceremony. The project modeled the journey participants followed in preparing for voting, showing a story that is more complex than just showing up at the polls on election day. This project used design research techniques, a blend of ethnographic observation and interaction modeling that focused less on an analysis of “talk” and more on activities than many of the other projects.

Generational explanations look at changes in broader society, and suggest that elections have not caught up to new realities. They include the idea that social media and other use of technology can be more motivating for young adults than traditional get-out-the-vote methods (Iyengar & Jackman, 2003). Indeed, programs that make technology central to learning about and participating in elections have proliferated. For example, RockTheVote creates open source online registration systems, endorsed in a recent federal commission report (PCEA, 2014, p.27); Foursquare enables subscribers to ‘check in’ from polling places; and Facebook has an official space for election information. In addition many advocacy groups, elections offices and candidates use social media sites as part of their online presence.

Alternative explanations suggest that young people are just as engaged, but not in conventional electoral politics. Instead, they are active in community groups, advocacy causes, and other forms of

social expression. A survey and qualitative interviews on civic and community activities by Florida high school students suggested high levels of a wide variety of political and civic activities. Children of recent immigrants devoted more attention to activities in their own cultural community than to national politics (Stepick et. al., 2008).

The Border Patrol Crew (at the University of Texas El Paso) used an action research approach and rapid ethnography in a project that placed bilingual students as election workers, exploring a hypothesis that better language access can improve election practices and make it easier for Spanish-speaking immigrants to vote (Núñez & Sánchez, 2008). By focusing on assistance to their own community, the project aims to create a bridge between officials and the young people. This is, to some extent, a self-fulfilling aim, but one that arguably helped improve election administration, at least in the short run.

2.5 The role of community, family, and values

A theme running through much of the literature is the importance of community and family—and the values or attitudes they embody for individuals. Investigating the role of family for migrant Latinos, Wilkin, Katz and Ball-Rokeach (2009) investigated the role of neighborhood storytellers in the community. They concluded that a strong “storytelling network” connects individuals, families, community organizations, and local media and influences the type and quantity of political activities that individuals engage in. Their definition of storytelling was “low tech” – casual talk among family members and between neighbors (p. 401). Importantly, they theorize that this sort of person-to-person network can help overcome other

barriers to taking action by making information easily available to help individuals adapt to a new environment.

A quantitative survey (Shulman & Levine, 2012) looked at whether the campus environment and social norm predictions affect the first voting experiences of students at university. Social norm theory suggests that peer pressure affects behavior—that people’s behavior is influenced by their perceptions of others. Shulman & Levine asked whether a campus could be seen as a single group, and concluded that campus environments do have “distinct political social norms that, to some degree, explain the political activity of students in that environment.” (p. 549). It is less clear whether the perception of the political views and atmosphere on a campus attracts like-minded students, or whether the environment changes the students.

Other projects have studied (quantitative) survey responses to questions about motives and values for voting. A project in Malaysia comparing attitudes of people in three ethnic communities (Saad & Salman, 2013) asked questions about perceptions of political efficacy, such as “Voting is one way for people like me to give an opinion on what the government does.” They concluded that there is a relationship between attitudes, especially trust, and political participation, but could not determine a causal direction. Another study in Sweden (Carlsson and Johansson-Stenman, 2010), explored whether voters were ‘rational’ (that is, voting to affect the outcome) or ‘expressive’ (that is, focusing on expressing their social or political views through the act of voting) concluded that people often have more than one motive, including ‘self interest, social norms, and desire to express an opinion’ (p.509).

2.6 Summary of themes in the literature

Despite the wide range of methodological and disciplinary approaches, three broad themes emerge from the literature which can be used as a starting point for new research:

- Attitudes towards voting: Views of voting, its role in society, and trust in the process.
- Likelihood of voting: The role of community, social networks, and family context in choices around participation.
- Ability to vote: Barriers and facilitators for participation.

The concepts in these three themes are shown in Table 1. They are used to organize the analysis of the interviews in Chapter 5 and to relate the analysis of this research to the literature.

Table 1. Concepts for motivations for voting from the literature

Concepts relating to attitudes about voting	Concepts relating to likelihood of voting	Concepts relating to the ability to vote
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciation for democracy in general • Identification as a citizen • Beliefs around “being heard” through voting • The value of political inclusion and expression • Voting as a means to address social and economic inequality • Trust in politicians and the political system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The influence of a cultural or geographical community • The influence of social networks and peers • Cultural and family values • Traditions of participation and service • Welfare of the community and the opportunity to improve the situations of friends, family and neighbors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligibility (age, citizenship) • The activity of voting • Knowledge about the mechanics of voting (when, where, and how to vote) • Access to information about elections • Technology as a communication medium

These concepts are revisited in Chapter 5, and used to organize the analysis of the interviews.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Despite a wide variety of approaches to studying elections, young people, and their engagement in voting, few of them approach this work from the point of view of the young people themselves. For example, in a review of the literature on civic engagement among migrant youth Stepick & Stepick (2002) point out that there is a lack of deep understanding of this group and how their cultural and family context affect their civic engagement.

3.1 Aims and theoretical grounding

The broad aim is ontologically constructivist and epistemologically interpretivist. Constructivism and interpretivism both start from the position that the social world is constructed by the people or social actors within it. Social research, then, focuses on what Geertz (1972) calls a “thick description” of how individuals create that world and the meanings they assign to both words and actions. In this case, the description is of participants’ relationships to elections, including both their history of voting (or not) and their current reflections on it.

This project also has a phenomenological aim to understand the way individuals comprehend reality, seeking common essential features of the experience (Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Heiskala, 2011; van Manen, 1984). For example, rather than starting with questions that used previously defined concepts (for example, “civic engagement” or “participation”) or that used election-specific terminology (such as “absentee voting” or “registration”) the interviews were structured to allow participants discuss their activities in their community in their

own way. As Carmouché (2012, p6) suggests “it would be better if we allowed [young people] the space necessary to define for themselves that which they hold or understand to be political.” The analysis process looked at both *what* they chose to talk about and *how* they did so, both in terms of how they framed the issues and the words they used to talk about events in their lives.

This research used ethnographic interviews with young adults to allow a lightly guided exploration from the participants’ point of view. It included nine hour-long interview and some additional shorter conversations. The interviews covered the participants’ current situations, including where they lived, their work and study, and their family background to provide context for the central explorations of their activities in their community (however they defined the scope of “community”) and their history of and attitudes towards participating in elections. The extended methodological discussion in Chapter 4 reviews how the interviews were structured and then used for analysis in more detail.

The interviews were analyzed using aspects of a grounded theory approach of iterative analysis to identify categories and concepts that reveal themes in the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The interactive nature of grounded theory allows the researcher to be in “constant interaction with the voices of [the] participants” (BSA MedSoc, 2012) and to remain open to all possible theoretical understandings of the data.

Both grounded theory and phenomenological analysis assume that talk can reveal not only beliefs but underlying concepts. In making a

choice between these two approaches, a primary consideration is that phenomenological analysis is often focused on psychological states. Grounded theory, therefore, is a better fit for this project because it seeks to both understand the individual and see them in a social context. It is also appropriate because the participants are not drawn from a homogenous sample, as is common in phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborne, 2003, p.56), except that they are all young adults.

Although this project does not include direct observation of events (as would be possible with participant observation), during the interviews participants recounted their experiences, providing their own stories of those events. These accounts were then analyzed to further explore the choice of events to discuss and content and structure of the stories as participants told them. This approach allows the findings to emerge inductively from the research material—grounding it in the data—rather than looking for matches to pre-determined concepts and theories from the literature.

The grounded theory approach has been criticized as overly prescribed and mechanistic by some researchers (Gewirtz, 2001). Others (Standing, 1997, Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, and Okley, 1994) have pointed out the limitations of a transcript as the primary unit of analysis. As Okley wrote, ‘...beliefs, values and actions...are likely to emerge from chance incidents [or] extended comments’ (p.25) in what Mauthner & Doucet remind us is an ongoing, interpretive process, starting from ‘actively listening to participant’s stories’ (p.124). The challenges of transcript analysis and maintaining contact with the

participants' voices encountered in this project are discussed in the Chapter 4: Methodological Reflections.

3.2 Participants

All participants were young adults, 18-24 years old who had attended high school in the U.S. and were citizens eligible to vote. All of the participants were attending university or were recent graduates. They included a mix of cultural, race/ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds and grew up in urban, suburban, and rural areas of a state in eastern United States. The region includes a majority-black inner city and a more diverse surrounding county¹. Most of the participants were university students. Their age meant that the oldest could have voted in two presidential elections (2008, 2012); the youngest turned 18 after the November 2012 election and had not had an opportunity to vote yet.²

This was a purposeful intensity sample—that is, a sample selected because they are likely to be information-rich cases (Patton, 1990, p.170). Although grounded theory calls for a theoretical sample, projects using grounded theory often start with a purposeful sample to develop the concepts needed for a theoretical sample (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, Charmaz, 2006). For this short project, I used an approach consistent with grounded theory, but did not follow the entire method, instead selected the aspects which fit practically into the scope of the project. As a short, somewhat exploratory project with

¹ U.S. Census data for 2010 lists the city at 64% black (70% total non-white) and the surrounding county at 35% non-white. The city is the third lowest rank in the state for per-capita income, the county roughly median. Source: <http://www.indexmundi.com/>

² There were local elections in some states or cities in 2013, but they took place after the interviews.

few participants, it was unlikely to reach saturation, for example – and did not.

The process of identifying participants for this study was instructive in itself. I anticipated difficulty finding non-voters, in part because of the challenges of talking to people about socially desirable behavior like voting (as discussed in section 2.1). The participants in the study ended up including a reasonable range of election participation, from non-voters to those who voted with little passion to people with strong positive feelings about the importance of voting.

Recruiting through personal contacts and notices at universities and community organizations produced many possible participants. As diverse as the participants proved to be, however, these contacts were less effective at identifying non-voters and people from immigrant families. There are several possible explanations. It may have been that more marginalized or disengaged participants were simply less likely to volunteer for research, or that in this short project I was not able to reach out past my own network. This may suggest why other researchers (Stepick & Stepick, 2002, 2008, Youniss et al, 2007, Núñez, & Sánchez, 2008, for example) drew participants from ongoing programs where they were able to meet and build trust over a period of time. Standing (1997, p. 188) also discusses the difficulty of recruiting some types of people through conventional methods, because of both the limitations of ‘official’ channels and the language used in the invitations to participate.

Conducting interviews in English excluded anyone more comfortable conversing in another language, especially recent migrants who are often marginalized and may feel excluded from elections.

3.3 Interview method

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in a room in the main building of a university center, with one conducted in an office outside of the university. They lasted between 40 and 75 minutes. Following the common techniques of qualitative research, interviews were recorded and initial notes on the interviews made in a research journal.

These early notes were helpful in directing the research in two ways. First, a reflexive look at my own interviewing technique allowed me to refine the way I interacted with the participants and asked questions. In the early interviews, for example, my attempts at broad, open-ended questions often puzzled the participants as they tried to guess what I meant. “Tell me about yourself,” for example, tended to produce a list of descriptors (“I’m a student, I’m 22 years old.”) while a slightly more closed question (“Where did you live when you were in high school?”) opened a conversational topic and allowed me to more naturally expand to a discussion of the places they lived and what sort of communities they were.

3.4 Transcription and analysis

I transcribed the interviews soon after they were conducted, to allow for preliminary open coding. The style and level of detail in the

transcription is not merely a mechanical issue, but something to consider introspectively, as part of the research process. Transcription for grounded theory analysis needs to find a balance between naturalism, in which as much detail including non-verbal utterances are recorded, and denaturalism in which all idiosyncratic elements of speech are removed. (Oliver, et. al., 2005). In the transcription, I aimed to be accurate to the “substance of the interview, that is, the meanings and perceptions created and shared during a conversation” (p. 1279) and especially the way both details of voting and attitudes towards elections are expressed.

Coding, marking up transcripts iteratively for concepts and themes, starts with open coding and then moves to refining the categories to reveal connections and themes among the interviews. I also kept my own notes—memos and diagrams on both on individual interviews and on emerging concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, Sbaraini et. al., 2011). These were especially helpful in preserving my impressions of the individual participants and the context of the interviews, both missing from a transcript.

3.5 Qualitative data management vs. hand coding

I used Dedoose, an online data analysis tool, for some of the analysis work. The advantage of qualitative analysis software is its ability to help manage the data. Code lists, for example, are constructed automatically from open coding entries. Selections of transcripts are identified electronically, rather than simply highlighted on paper, so sections of the transcript that have similar coding can be easily viewed together. On the other hand, a computer screen presents a narrow window into a large body of material. I found it easier to print out the

transcript and read it on paper, marking it up by hand for the initial coding. I could flip between sections quickly and could see what sections were already marked.

Dedoose is entirely online, requiring internet access, which limited when I could use the program. But it was more than convenience; the process felt more fluid and I felt closer to the material, even though I both write and edit on-screen regularly. It may be that it simply takes time to change habits and learn to use a new tool well enough for it to become transparent.

On the whole, an online qualitative data manager may be most valuable for long projects, with data collection and analysis spread over many months, or for projects with multiple researchers, providing a common repository and workspace.

3.6 Ethics and care for the participants

I conducted the interviews in the United States, as a U.S. citizen, so the research setting is a familiar context, based on personal experience as a voter, election day poll-worker, and general local and cultural knowledge of elections. The advantage of familiarity, however, brings a danger of imposing personal experiences and understandings on the interviews, rather than listening openly with a “beginner’s mind”. For a researcher already engaged by elections and knowledgeable about them, close attention to the way participants talk about them is a way of “making the familiar strange” (Bell, et. al, 2005), allowing their own words to reveal how they experience the phenomenon being studied more clearly.

Successful ethnographic interviews depend on the willingness of participants to share their personal stories and opinions. They do not have to participate and can decide what to share in the interview, as well as how openly to express themselves. They will have their own goals—perhaps simply having their story heard and possibly acted on. To gain their trust, the interviewer must be open about the work, listen with empathy, and be willing to follow the conversation where they take it. All participant names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms that loosely reflect the linguistic origin of the real name.

At the beginning of the interview, I both explained the research informally and asked participants to sign a statement giving their consent. A copy of the consent form is included in Appendix C.

This work was guided by professional ethical guidelines and approved by the Open University (see approvals in the appendix). The *Statement of Ethics: Principles of Professional Responsibility* (American Anthropological Association, 2012) covers many of the issues as comparable professional societies in the UK, but seems more appropriate for interviews conducted in the U.S. It includes requirements to avoid misleading participants about the nature of the work, transparency in informed consent, and an ethical obligation to consider the potential impact of the work.

A related ethical guideline, published by two professional organizations, AIGA and the Usability Professionals Association (Design for Democracy, 2005), covers ethical considerations for design and research work in elections. One guideline emphasizes being non-partisan. This turned out to be especially important in the interviews.

Several made comments about politics, for example, wanting to vote for Obama, or talked about their family's political activities. A few however, commented that they did not want to reveal their political opinions, or made assumptions about mine. They were clearly uneasy about this, and I had to reassure that this was not part of the interview. For example, one participant talked about how his sister's change to a different political position from his father caused problems within his family.

Whitney (Interviewer): Are your parents voters? Is that something you talk about in the family?

Jim:³ My dad's very...he loves to talk about the pressing issues of politics. But... My sister is as far liberal as you can go. So when she comes home, my dad is...

Whitney: Sparks fly?

Jim: Yeah... it's always fun. She's very liberal. I don't know where she got that from. Probably from living in New York for three years. It grows on you.

Another participant commented as I walked him out that I was probably liberal (in contrast to hints about his family). I answered in a non-committal way, and he went on to reiterate something he said in the interview about making up his own mind who to vote for.

I feel bad saying this but a lot of it was from my parents' influence because they were always a certain way and so I grew up thinking the same way that they did. I'm trying to get away from that; think more independently. But it's kind of tough for me like that because I'm not a big decision maker. (Ethan)

This was a good reminder that the public (or political) and personal are often intertwined. Being prepared and having thought about how to avoid being drawn into partisan discussions was helpful in keeping the interviews in neutral territory.

³ All participant names are pseudonyms.

I was also mindful that participants may reveal information about themselves that they would not wish made public, however freely they might talk to me. In particular, I planned to avoid any questions about their citizenship status, but it was not an issue as all of the participants were born in the U.S.

One of the ethical obligations of a research is to protect participants from harm (Bryman, 2008, p. 118), usually including keeping their identity confidential. The approach of using a pseudonym rather than a coded identifier was selected as more appropriate to the research focus on personal stories and perspectives, as it presents quotations as coming from people rather than merely being data. Elliott (2005, p.142-144) discusses the ethical issues that can arise when the details of a report enable participants to be identified; there is a low possibility that this could happen in this research, but as a precaution, information such as the name of participants university and program of study have also been removed from the transcripts. Identifying information is stored separately from transcripts and other notes in a secure, off-line location.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON CONDUCTING AND ANALYSING INTERVIEWS

The goal of this research was to explore an activity which, although important, occupies a very small part of most people's daily life. This made conducting the interviews challenging; I had to draw out participants considerably younger than myself while not focusing too directly on elections.

In the end, I drew on three different research techniques: Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) for the interviews, grounded theory for the analysis, and some elements of narrative research for reporting.

4.1 Conducting the interviews: activities and incidents

Ethnographic interviews are often conducted in-depth allowing information and cultural knowledge to be revealed. Spradley (1979) writes about building a relationship with an informant through a series of interviews in which the ethnographer is able to teach an informant how they will work together. Shorter research projects have less time, and are often focused on a specific area of experience, rather than looking in an open-ended way at a cultural setting.

A personal interest in narrative and storytelling led me to start the project with the idea of asking participants to talk about their lives in personal narratives (Elliott, 2005, Erul, 2007, McCormack, 2004). However, in the pilot interviews it quickly became evident that even a modified life-story was not an effective approach for this topic and I

needed a new way to manage the interviews. Elliot (p. 28-32) discusses some of the problems in eliciting stories, and the balance needed between too-open questions that do not get to the point, and too-closed questions that direct the interview into brief, factual answers.

I encountered some of the problems Elliot discusses, especially in getting the interview started. As young adults, the participants seemed at a loss to understand what aspects of their life to talk about, and it was hard to ask questions of them without focusing the interview prematurely on the narrow topic of elections. After briefly describing their family and current situation, they were not sure where the conversation should go, and simply waited for cues from my questions or prompts. More importantly, most did not seem to think of the research topic—participation in elections—as something significant in their lives, and certainly not something to tell a *story* about. Instead it was an event, or activity they might or might not take part in.

The solution was to draw on the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954), replacing the original goal of organizing the interview around personal narratives. Using CIT allowed questions to encourage participants to recall specific incidents or events which were memorable to them, rather than forcing them into attempting to fully recount events (such as registering to vote) which did not seem important or even particularly interesting to them.

Although primarily used to determine the cause of a problem or undesirable incident, CIT can be adapted to different contextual

research needs and provided a way to explore elections as one event, rather than a thread in a life narrative. This is similar to Holloway and Jefferson's approach, discussed in Elliot (2005, p. 30) of "inviting the interviewee to talk about specific times and situations." CIT's value for this project was to focus on specific events, and then fill in details and information about the participants' attitudes and perceptions.

Discussions about specific types of events, including family activities, work, or social causes could start with a simple probe and then move to a more detailed story. Participants often hesitated, only expanding on a story when I indicated interest in it. Reading the transcripts, there are many places where I now wish I had pressed farther, risking being taken "off track" for the benefit of a deeper conversation—an opportunity for further research.

In some of these deeper explorations participants initially said that they were not particularly interested in elections, but then shared stories that showed a much deeper community involvement than they suggested. In the most dramatic story, a participant's family member had died in a police brutality incident. As a result, her family was staging demonstrations against the officials involved.

4.2 Keeping the 'person' in mind during analysis

CIT is most commonly used to understand and diagnose the cause of failures, a rather different goal than the one for this project. Having used a critical incident approach to elicit stories and discussion of events and attitudes surrounding their choices about elections, I returned to grounded theory for analysis.

One of the central techniques of grounded theory is a detailed examination of textual data in the form of transcripts or notes on what participants choose to talk about and exactly how they express themselves (for example, Corbin & Strauss, 1998, p. 57). This deep, structured, analysis approach can, however, make it easy to decontextualize the talk—letting the people disappear into the words.

I chose an approach that used some of the structure of formal grounded theory, while also allowing for the more free flowing analysis of a narrative approach. Many analysis approaches within the qualitative tradition suggest multiple readings of the research material, as the work of coding and unpacking meaning goes on. Mauthner & Doucet (1998) suggest four readings in a voice-centered method:

1. Reading for plot and narrative
2. Reading for personal voice
3. Reading for relationships
4. Reading for cultural context and social structures

As I began the analysis, I wanted first to see each individual interview as a whole before beginning to look at themes and patterns across the interviews. My first step was to identify any factual details about their family background, current situation and election-related activities such as registering, finding information, or voting. Then I marked any incidents or activities where they told a story, going into either more detail or emotional depth. As I continued to read the transcripts and

my notes, I looked for similarities and differences in the events they described, attitudes they expressed, or ways of thinking about elections revealed in the interviews. These results are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

With a phenomenological goal of producing a description that reflects the participants' understanding of their own experiences (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, van Manen, 1984), it was helpful to return to the recordings during coding, so that non-textual details of the conversation such as tone of voice and expressions of emotion are considered during this work (McCormack 2004). For example, the participant who told the story about her family's protest demonstrations spoke very quietly, but this story was introduced in such a small voice and so indirectly that I almost missed it. It took several exchanges and a direct 'invitation' for her to launch into the story.

Whitney: How do you think you will prepare for [the next election]?

Shalia: I know for a fact that the state's attorney is up for re-election. Greg Bernstein, that's his name. I know that I am not voting for him. (laughs) He is terrible.

Whitney: Oh, dear. ...

Shalia: Yeah... he's just the worst. I know that another guy that's running – I don't know what his name is – but I said I might vote for him. Umm. I think – does the mayor runs in this election – was that the ...Governor. ...

Whitney: Governor?

Shalia: Okay... so I don't really have too many issues with the governor. It's just the mayor is an issue to me. So while I am preparing for the election, I'm thinking ... Cause my family is... is in – we're like protesting the state's attorney.

Whitney: Okay.

Shalia: Yeah.

Whitney: What does that mean when you say you're protesting the state's attorney? Tell me what you're doing.

Perhaps all of this is easily discerned from a close reading of the transcript, but keeping the summary notes about each participant, and listening to their voice were useful to help me keep the whole person in mind as the analysis progressed. This is an engaged listening, allowing the participant to “teach you” (as Spradley, 1979 puts it) or paying attention to the way themes, patterns, and interpretations emerge gradually through engaging with the research material throughout a project (Okley, 1994).

Researchers who focus on narrative, such as Mason (2004) emphasize attention to the stories participants tell and how they tell them. In this view the choice of stories themselves is an interpretive act, so the details included and how the story is told are also important. Others thinking about the reflexive relationship between researcher and the field of study remind us that analysis is interpretation, so researchers must also reflexively consider the epistemological and ontological perspectives of both the researcher and the researched (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, 2003) in all aspects of a project from choice of methods to reporting. They suggest that the aim of presenting participants’ voices directly and the role of the researcher in shaping the work are in conflict, though we can “attempt to hear *more* of their voices, and understand *more* of their perspective though the ways we conduct our data analysis” (Mauthner & Doucet 1998, p. 140).

4.3 Reconstructing the context

In *Tales of the Field*, Van Maanen (1998) discusses the different epistemological stances that a researcher can take in writing up an ethnographic project. His labels of ‘realist’, ‘impressionist’ and

'confessional' styles of writing echo the characterizations in Hammersley and Atkinson of the dimensions from official to formal and informal (1995, p. 159). The question is what claim to authority the ethnography makes, and how broadly that claim applies.

Many of the researchers working in a narrative tradition aim for what van Maanen calls an impressionist tale, letting the voice of the participant speak directly. McCormack (2004, 2008), for example, developed an approach in which she collaborated with the participant to write an account that summarized each person's experiences. These stories compressed hours of research data, collected over several years into a description, but a description grounded in an individual case.

In a more experimental approaches to writing an ethnography, Boo (2012) created a fully narrative account, although written from the researcher's (realist in Van Maanen's terms) perspective, it functions as an impressionist tale: presenting a story that is primarily descriptive and leaving most of the conclusions to the reader.

At the other end of the narrative spectrum, much of the literature barely tells a story at all, presenting quotations as chunks of isolated data. However holistically they treated the material from each participant during their analysis, their reports do not aim to present a picture of a person.

The short interviews for this project did not include enough material to create a deep story for each participant. Further, the individual life stories, though interesting, do not directly illuminate the question of how young people make choices about participating in elections. But,

there were patterns and overlaps in both their biographical narrative and in their experiences with elections to construct a meta-narrative for the groups.

Any narrative makes an implicit claim to speak *for* or *in the voice* of the participant to some extent, although (as discussed in Section 4.1 above) this voice is filtered through the researcher's analytic perspectives. But the use of participants' own words colors the presentation of the analysis. As McCormack suggests, stories drawn from research can include "phrases that indicate the relationship of self to society" (2004, p.225) and assumptions of common knowledge, as well as structural details in how they express themselves, constructing dialog, using metaphors, and even use of passive voice.

4.4 How three techniques work together

In this project, I brought together three qualitative techniques at different stages of the project. First, Critical Incident Technique allowed me to probe the specific topic of voting and focus on issues and attitudes that the participants experienced during the interviews. Techniques suggested in the literature on narrative research helped keep the voice of each person in mind during the detailed attention to text that coding requires. Finally, the stories—even if fragmentary—that the participants shared were helpful in understanding the social context that these interviews explored. Taken together they allowed me to construct an analytic portrait showing ways in which young people respond to and make choices about participation in elections.

Chapter 5, presenting the results of this research, begins with three impressionist stories pulling from several participants, to contrast

their experience and attitudes about elections. These stories do not represent a segmentation or suggest that the participants can be neatly divided into groups. But, they are intended to bring out, using a collage of their own words, the emotions and attitudes behind the stories they revealed in the interviews. The goal of the stories is to compile material from the research observations in a way that not only brings out voices from the research, but arranges the material to reflect an emotional perspective.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF THE CHOICES AND ACTIVITIES IN BECOMING A VOTER

Pursuing the idea of using narrative as a way to communicate what is learned from qualitative research, three stories illustrate some of the attitudes towards participation in elections, as discussed in Section 4.3. They are composite stories, with details assembled from several different participants, sometimes called “personas” (Chisnell & Redish, 2006, Pruitt & Adlin, 2006). The persona, or main character in each story has a name to make it easier to refer to it in the discussion of the research results that follows.

Antony: Elections don’t really matter to me

Working two days a week, keeping up with his courses (the ones he loves and the required ones he slogs through), and finding time to hang out with his friends keeps Antony pretty busy. When he hears things about the next election, he just sighs. Politicians just talk and talk, but no one ever seems to do anything about the things that are messed up in his community. His mom complained about waiting for hours to vote. To him, that’s just another sign that things are broken. He knows elections are supposed to be important. Everyone says you have to do your part and make your voice heard and all that. There’s something to not complaining if you didn’t show up, but what if the best candidates aren’t really up to par? Does it really make a difference if he votes. So far it all seems pretty far away, nothing really about things that matter to him. He knows some of his friends vote, and his mother, but he hasn’t made that move yet. He’s not even really sure how to do it.

Robert: I’m starting to think for myself

Robert grew up in a small rural town, the kind of place where there’s not that much to do and everyone is pretty conservative. Not that he minded. That’s just how things were, you know. He started at the local community college, but when he transferred down to the city, things changed a bit. It wasn’t that far, but it seemed to make a difference. Friends from home; friends at school. Family there; friends here. They didn’t merge. And he started to think a little differently than his family. The first time

he voted, Robert asked his parents how he should vote. This time, his father says he should make up his own mind, and he guesses that's right. Now he needs to figure out how to make sense of all the issues. Friends? News? It all seems sort of biased. What he'd really like is to have a direct conversation with the candidates. Maybe not in person, but something that feels that way, not like what they're like when the camera is on. Maybe there should be debates or a forum at school where people can talk it through. Voting ought to be more than just something to do to fill the time. You're electing someone to run the country, after all. In the end, you have to go with what you feel.

Aisha: You've got to fight for what is right

Aisha registered when she was 16. OK, her father told her to, but she always knew she was going to register as soon as she turned 18. It's a big deal, getting to vote. She plans to make a difference in everything she does. She has some big plans that are going to take her to New York—out of this city, anyway. It's not that she doesn't love her family. Her grandmom is the center of the life of their neighborhood. And her parents have been a model for her, building their own businesses and doing things to make things better. She's learned from the way her family goes to vote together, bringing the whole community out. It's not just who you vote for, but bettering the country. The first time she could vote, she and her friends were excited enough to stay up and watch the results. They liked that little "I voted" sticker. It seemed to make their vote important. She thinks it makes no sense not to vote. That's why you educate yourself. People need to take their opportunity to get what they want.

These stories illustrate how material from the interviews, including attitudes about elections, likelihood of voting, and how they make the choice to vote can be used to reconstruct a composite 'person' situating them once again in a social context.

The rest of this chapter returns to the broad themes from the literature (as outlined in Chapter 2, Table 1), using them to organize the detailed discussion of concepts and ideas that emerge from analysis. They are:

- Attitudes towards elections including beliefs and trust in elections and their role in democracy. (Section 5.1)

- Likelihood of voting, including the influence of social, family and cultural values. (Section 5.2)
- The ability to vote, including knowledge of the mechanics of voting and access to information about elections. (Section 5.3)

5.1 Attitudes towards elections

Late in the interviews, after talking in some depth about their own involvement in elections, participants were asked how they would tell someone new to the country about elections. They focused more on the *meaning* of voting than on the mechanics. Although they echoed the convention of having a voice in running the country, they were more nuanced than a simple civics textbook explanation.

It means you have a say in where the country goes, and about who leads the country. I know it's obvious but that's pretty much what I feel about it; that you're not just an unheard voice. You still feel like you don't have that much of a voice but it's still there....You have an obligation to state your opinion. (Ethan)

Voting makes you an individual. It marks your place in this world. It's like your ballot is important to whoever you want to win. Without your ballot, they wouldn't win is what I think voting is.... It's like you're bringing everyone together. You're bringing the whole community out. It's not at all who you vote for, it's about bettering America. (Shalia)

It took me a while to realize, but you're choosing this person not only because of, this policy, this policy, this policy, but do you feel as though this person represents how you personally would take action.... Because the whole country doesn't have a say in every single decision. So it really is important to pick a person that would act in your best interests. (Julius)

Sometimes the same person expressed both great hope and faith in the democratic process, and a lack of faith in the value and impact of their individual participation in elections.

Basically you're voting for a person that votes for another person to be president. So it's not only does your vote not matter, but it also doesn't matter (who wins). (Matt)

I'd like to be involved in the lower level politics before, [but] from what I know or from what I've seen, it's still corrupt. That's how it feels. (Jim)

I'd say (voting) is more of a duty we have to do as citizens, and just get it over with. (Andrew)

The Obama presidency was particularly salient to residents of a largely minority city close to Washington DC. Many of the participants mentioned it as either a memorable milestone (the first black president) or a motivation for voting (wanting to support Obama in his re-election campaign).

I wasn't going to [vote] because to be honest, I really didn't see nothing that was -- I see they been trying to pull him back from trying to do a lot of stuff to try to help the country and stuff like that, so I decided to go ahead and vote again this year. I really wasn't going to do it this year 'cause I didn't see the progress but I know he had to take his time, trying to help everybody. (Jasmine)

Several connected the importance of voting to earlier disenfranchisement of both women and black Americans in their thinking.

"My family was not always allowed to vote, so it's important for us to actually utilize that right now, especially since we didn't always have it." (Sierra)

This fits into a larger theme of the generally looking for direct and personal connections between their lives and the issues in elections. For example, when asked about what he would look for in a candidate if he chose to vote, Sekou focused on whether they would fix problems he can see in his daily life:

I look around and I see the streets are bumpy and stuff; it's not smooth at all, there's houses being foreclosed. I feel like there's

nothing being done around the community. So I definitely want to look at a congressman that's looking to help in the area.
(Sekou)

Two of the participants had stories about events in their lives that had a direct connection to elections. Half-way through the interview, Jim discussed his involvement in the student government (SGA) leadership and was looking forward to a meeting with the chancellor about the process of selecting a new university president.⁴ He had clearly thought in some depth about it and had some specific ideas about how students might be involved, but only made the connection between this process and government elections after some prompting.

Shalia, the participant whose family is involved in protests over a police brutality case, made the connection more directly. She began to talk about this in response to a question about activities her family does together, but as she talked, she began drawing connections between their experience and broader politics, and thinking about how it might impact others. She ends by talking about what she learned from it.

I'm learning that you have to fight for what you want. Like it's not going to come easy. I'm learning that things take time. You have to have a great amount of patience. [This thing with my cousin] I think it's starting to get bigger now. I feel like people are going to see this and they're going to want to help because they've been through something similar to it. We're trying to reach as many people as possible. Anybody that can relate or anybody that wants to support and things like that. Because it's like – I mean we all think, 'How many people have to die before something is done.' (Shalia)

Overall, their trust in the benefit of participating in elections is ambiguous. They repeat conventional wisdom about 'having a voice'

⁴ The Chancellor oversees all of the public universities in Maryland. The university President is responsible for a single institution.

and often participate in activities such as student clubs and student government that suggest that they see a value in them, but they do not make a connection between local organizations and a broader scope of governance. The two students (Jim and Shalia) have a direct connection to politics, but in both cases their experience actually decreased their trust in politicians. For the others, elected candidates simply seem to be outside of their current scope.

5.2 Likelihood of voting and the influence of their families

One of the theories about participation in elections is that it is like a habit, and that participation is most consistent when that habit is developed young, building on regular, even routine, behavior that they see in their own families. This is particularly true of researchers who focus on civics education and citizen identity as a developmental process (see Section 2.2).

Parents. Whatever their current attitudes about elections, all of the participants said that their parents were voters (though some were more avid voters than others). They also talked about being encouraged both to register and to vote. In some cases, this could sound more like being compelled than encouraged, as they used words like “pushed me,” “kept at me,” and “made me” to describe persistent family members. However, they also said that they were glad they were so strongly pushed to vote.

Friends. Similarly, they believed that some, or even most, of their friends vote. A few talked about group activities and discussions. Some who said that they were reluctant to vote at first, attributed peer pressure to their decision to go vote.

My friend, actually [got me to vote]. Because I wasn't even going to vote at first. Then I thought about it; he's doing it so, I guess I can. It was actually my best friend that got me to do it.
(Jasmine)

I don't know ... about... voting habits. We do hound each other to go out and vote. Just the sort of thing to – more of a humorous thing than a dealing with logical sort of thing. You say hey, go vote; go vote – you know. Probably because we all vote the same; that's why we want each other to vote. (Ethan)

Their first voting experience. If voting is a habit, the first experience can be an important factor in whether someone continues to vote. For some, the flaws in the system were very apparent. Even the one participant who had never voted started with a negative impression of what it would be like.

I went along with my grandmother and my cousins to vote when Barak Obama first got elected. It was so crazy like a huge line and stuff – that's when I had homework to do and stuff. ...The line was crazy. Like people actually had chairs and stuff. The line wasn't getting nowhere. (Sekou)

Another talked about it as “boring” and unexpectedly old-fashioned.

It was sort of boring I guess. I expected a lot of it to be electronic with ... some people there keeping watch. (long pause) but the first time I went, actually I couldn't because that was the primaries and I'm an Independent. So that was really disappointing. Then when I actually voted, there were just a bunch of volunteers they've got this whole deal where they tell me, ya know, go ahead to that one. Then there was just sort of like a Windows 95 looking PC I punched numbers into. (Matt)

Barriers to voting. As part of the discussion they were asked what would keep them from voting. Their two answers echo some of the attitudinal themes. First they said that voting was partly a matter of convenience. It is an extra stop in their day, often out of their normal

patterns. As Matt put it, he voted because he was with someone else who was voting, so figured he might as well vote himself.

A more serious concern is the poor choices of candidates bothered them. With little trust in the political parties, a weak understanding about the local candidates, and little belief that it affected their lives directly, they simply did not get excited about specific elections. This suggests a circular relationship in which their lack of experience gives them no way to engage, and their lack of involvement means they learn little about the impact of the decisions made in elections.

5.3 Ability to vote

The ability to vote includes legal and logistical issues such as being eligible to vote, knowing where to vote and voter registration. But these were less important to the participants than questions about how they were able to make decisions about the candidates and issues.

The themes related to ability to vote are eligibility and registration; the issue of preparing to vote is taken up in Section 5.4.

Eligibility

The invitation to participate included the requirement that the person be 18 years old. This was partially to avoid data protection and ethics issues in working with younger persons, but is also the age at which one is eligible to vote in the U.S. All of the participants were aware of the significance of their age for elections. They talked about whether they were able to vote in 2008 (for the oldest) or 2012.

Registering to vote

Advocacy organizations working to improve participation by young adults⁵ (and others) conduct voter registration drives because in the U.S., voter registration is a pre-requisite activity to voting itself.

Although election law varies from state to state, the general process is the same, and federal laws enforce some national consistency. In Maryland, where most of the participants live, there is a 45-day advance registration requirement and an active program to register people at motor vehicle agencies (MVA) under the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA). Maryland also requires voting in a specific neighborhood polling place, on Election Day. Maryland has launched two changes to their election system for 2014 (changes announced *after* the interviews): online voter registration and early voting centers⁶.

The participants who were the most avid about voting had anticipated the day they would be eligible and planned for it. One, for example, turned 18 just before leaving for university and talked about putting voter registration on her checklist of things to do – clearly focused on the moment when she could do so.

⁵ Examples of these groups include the League of Women Voters, the Latino advocates NALEO and MALDEF, the Asian-focuses AALDEF and 18MillionRising, to name just a few of the national organizations.

⁶ Early voting is by county, however, so few of the participants would be able to vote at their university, even under the new scheme. Their city and the surrounding county, for example, are separate government entities for elections administration. Participants live (and therefore vote) in as many as eight different counties.

What I did at the time, was I went to the post office, I asked for a voter registration form. They gave me one. I took it home. I filled it out. ... It was important to me. I had been planning [to do] that. Once I was 18, I was going to register. That was that.
(Leah)

Only one of the participants was not yet registered to vote. He said that it was a decision, reflecting his ambivalence about elections and a general lack of trust that his participation matters.

I think it was a decision because I feel like even if everyone votes, say if I want Barak Obama to win, which he actually did, but even if he gets the majority vote, Congress still decides whether or not he gets elected. I don't believe we have much freedoms for like dictating who gets elected. ...Because I think Bush -- maybe he didn't have a majority vote, but he still won....So I don't really get the point. (Sekou)

For the rest, registration was not a particularly large or special event even for those who, as the character *Aisha* did, made their own plans to register. Some were helped by their parents who supplied the forms or urged them to register.

Some did not even remember registering at all, and told me that they just got a card in the mail telling them where to go vote, suggesting the degree to which they simply took it for granted that once *eligible* to vote that they would seamlessly be able to .

Surprisingly enough, they actually sent me my voter's card. So they sent me my voter's card and I think there was a phone number on the back. ... I was like alright; I guess I can vote now. I looked at it, found out where to go to vote, everything like that. (Julius)

But for most of them, registering to vote was a routine experience, often done at the suggestion of their parents. This was often done at the MVA and therefore connected to a much more salient (if bureaucratic) rite of passage: the drivers license. A few signed up at

voter registration drives in their neighborhood or other events, simply because the opportunity presented itself conveniently.

From what I know I did it when I was getting my license. It was just kind of – they said do you want to vote and I was like – sure. Come sign up. (Jim)

Every time I go to the MVA there's a thing there....register to vote. I'm going to be sitting here anyway, I might as well do this. So I probably would have eventually, before this election, at least. (Matt)

It is likely that the high rate of voter registration in these interviews reflects the self-selection bias discussed in the methodology chapter in section 2.1. People are more likely to volunteer to talk about something they do, than something they don't do, especially if the underlying attitude of voting as an expected activity, even a duty, is a general one.

On the other hand, among this group, there are two factors supporting registration: suggestions or support from the family and convenience. It is not clear whether they registered to vote at all *because* it was convenient or whether they registered at the *most convenient* opportunity. It is also worth noting that these young adults are from working families, they were attending university, and all spoke English, so they are not from among the most marginalized groups.

They did, however, talk about some of the barriers and problems they encountered and wondered why they could not be fixed. These small stories were not just anecdotes about problems, but contributed to a general distrust of the process.

[My boyfriend]...was not able to vote last year, and he was very upset about that. Something went wrong with his registration although he voted in the election before. My boyfriend is three years older than me. So he voted in the local election beforehand and something was wrong with his registration and he couldn't vote. By the time he found out it was too late and there was nothing they could do. I don't know. He was very upset he couldn't vote. Very. Upset... but he definitely believes in that too. (Sierra)

Interestingly, this outspoken participant does not seem surprised at that there would be a problem with the voter registration. In contrast, another participant had a long story about a problem registering for a class at the university and how he fought them over it. Things going wrong in bureaucracies are, perhaps, part of their everyday experience. With just one exception (Shalia) they did not make a direct connection between elected leaders and their own lives. With little understanding of how government works, they also had little insight into how government agencies impact them and could be influenced through elections.

5.5 Access to the information needed to make choices

Perhaps related to the lack of a clear understanding of what Americans vote *for*, these participants did not seem to have trusted, reliable sources of information they could use to learn about the candidates and issues. This could be a circular relationship: when they are not aware of or engaged by an election, they do not seek out information; because they have weak sources of knowledge, they are not engaged. Whatever the cause and effect, they all talked about the challenge of finding the information they need to participate effectively.

Many presented their families as having political opinions, but there is also evidence that even older people struggle with the choices.

Well, my grandmom she just recently turned 80 in June. So she's been voting for a while. My grandmother, it's a process with her deciding who she's going to vote for. This election was so easy for her to decide. I remember when I was little and she went to go vote, and she was always still debating who she was going to vote for when she got to the voting booth. (Shalia)

How they understand different types of elections

People are unlikely to vote in an election they are not even aware of. One of the striking themes in the interviews is the degree to which all of these young adults connected the idea of “election” only with the Presidential elections, held every four years. They are only vaguely aware of other national offices (Congressional Representative or Senator) or state and city offices like Governor or Mayor, and largely unaware that anything else appeared on the ballot. When asked, they clearly *knew* that those other positions are elected, but they were not focused on them, or even particularly interested in them.

When I think of voting, I only think of the president and the vice president. I had no idea it was all these other people and laws and things that came after that. (Shalia)

The exceptions again fit into the theme of the need for a personal connection to engage their interest. Shalia knew about a Congressman who lived on her family's block and centered her plans to vote in the next election on defeating an official involved in her family tragedy. Jim's band had played at campaign rallies for local politicians, so had met them (though this seemed to make him less, rather than more, likely to want to vote in local elections). Leah has

worked as a poll worker and learned through that experience how much variety there is.

Finding trusted sources of information

When asked where they got information about elections, they offered an unexceptional list of options, including television and online newspapers, but also including looking for unbiased direct sources.

They are clearly aware of the challenge of finding trustworthy sources of information, and the debates about whether the different news sources are biased, and some talked about their efforts to seek out better sources.

I don't know because I – when they say stuff that's politically charged – I can feel where they're coming from because I lean towards that side but I don't want to be around people that are all like that. Most of my feeling is like maybe there's a balance. The problem with that is, that there's so much crap flying around each way, that there's no way to justify what source you get your news from. That's why I get C-Span⁷. (Ethan)

They wanted to get information first-hand. Several of the participants mentioned wanting more structured information through their university, in debate or informational forums. And, they wanted to be able to meet candidates directly, and least in theory, saying that it would be more “personable” and make it easier for them to get to know the candidate. Interestingly, having met politicians directly did not make Jim feel he knew them better. Speaking about the candidates whose rallies his band played for, he said:

I've talked to Barry Glassman – I forget which – I think he's running for senator this year. I don't know if he announced that

⁷ C-SPAN is a non-profit cable network that broadcasts public affairs programming, such as the proceedings of Congress and informational forums, much of it without commentary besides identifying the event.

but I think he's running for senator this year. So I've talked with them all but they all – every one I've talked to... they all seem to have this fake – not fake – but face they put on when they are in public. I want to know what they're like when the camera's not on. (Jim)

Use of technology and electronic information

When participants sought information about elections outside of in-person sources such as their personal networks, they almost always turned to digital sources: searching the web (“Google”), social media networks (primarily Facebook), and online news media. Some had favorite sites for news and political opinion; a few followed specific organizations through a site or news feed. When asked how they would find basic information such as their polling place, they immediately said they would look for this information online, rather than telephoning.

Although many of the participants were studying subjects related to online communication (from programming to design), few had given much thought to ways in which electronic information could be used for civic or election information. They had some isolated experience with using online social action sites: Shalia and her family had used the site change.org to gather support for their protests, and she said it has been effective. Leah belonged to a network that shared “action alerts” on issues she cared about. Ethan talked about studying social games and other sites promoting social involvement in one of his classes. John and Matt had created sites for local and university activities.

In general, their experiences are an echo of the literature suggestions that the basic condition of youth, including their relative inexperience,

contributes to their low participation (Kimberlee, 2002; O'Toole, Marsh & Jones, 2003). They did not make a strong connection between their personal experiences and the possibility of using digital media to create a civic connection. In general, they saw the digital world as a source of information rather than a replacement for in-person communication.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS: PUTTING ELECTIONS IN CONTEXT

Other research on election participation suggests a wide variety of issues that might explain the low turnout for elections, especially among young adults. The participants in these interviews echo all of these issues, as well as the motivations for voting from the literature (Table 1 in Section 2.6), especially those relating to attitudes towards voting. The value of the ethnographic interview is to provide a richer, more nuanced view of the themes than a quantitative analysis can provide. The analysis shows the contradictions these young adults struggle to resolve in almost all aspects of participating in elections, as they take their first steps in voting—or to ‘being a voter’ as Bryan et. al. (2011) would put it.

The theme in the literature of the influence of family traditions and peer community is strongly represented in this research. Parents and older relatives are important through the example of their own behavior, by setting expectations for voting, and by helping participants navigate the voting process for the first time. Friends exerted peer pressure to vote, especially when the group discussed (and shared) political viewpoints.

Although researchers (Shulman & Levine, 2012, for example) looked at the influence of the campus environment and the role of organizations (Stepick & Stepick 2002, Stepick et. al. 2008, Youniss et. al 2007) the literature does not mention the desire many of the participants expressed for the university to be more active in helping them learn both how to participate in elections and the issues decided

there. This is both a practical consideration (the location is central in their lives) and an extension of the role of the university in shaping their lives.

This connects directly to the theme of ‘citizenship as identity.’

Collectively, the stories in the *Robert* persona (see Chapter 5) illustrate the struggle to shape their adult identities, including their political opinions. This tug-of-war between their family values and their identity in a larger society is implicit in the developmental theories (for example, Gibson & Hamilton 2011, Youniss 2007, Levine 2007), but is more similar to the descriptions of migrants’ generational acculturation (Jensen 2008, DeSipio 2008, Stepick et. al. 2008), suggesting that the new citizenship journey for young adults and new citizens may have similarities worth further exploration.

These participants, like migrants (Jensen 2008, Preston et. al. 2006), have a general understanding of voting as a core feature of being an American and an appreciation for the idea of democracy. Despite growing up in the U.S., however, one of the unexpected findings in this project is how little the participants understood about the mechanics of voting. Both the academic literature and advocacy approaches to increasing participation suggest that information is a key, and focus on practical steps.⁸ But these young people had a profound knowledge gap. None seemed to really understand more than the basics about elections, even to the point of not knowing (or really understanding) that there are local elections and local

⁸ For example, the League of Women Voters (a well-respected, national, non-partisan election and civics education group) breaks voting down into steps in their flyer “Take 5 to Vote.”

governments. Better civics education could be part of the solution, as Levine (2007) and others suggest, but policies to make participation easier and make the information easier might also be a solution. Although elections advocacy groups emphasize voter registration as a prerequisite to voting (and an easily measured metric), registration was not a barrier for these participants, as they all found convenient ways to take this step, even if they did so almost accidentally in the course of other events, such as attending a concert or getting a driving license. The sense of voter registration being an easy or automatic process seems unusual in comparison to the literature, and may be a positive result of a program that allows people to ‘pre-register’ at the Department of Motor Vehicles as much as two years before they are eligible to vote.

It is unclear which of them will develop a life-long habit of voting and being engaged in their community. They did vote at a higher rate than the election statistics suggest, likely a result of self-selection for the interviews. But even in this small group, there were those who had chosen not to, or were not sure they wanted to vote. The key may be in finding ways to engage them within their limited scope of interests, so that they will find value in participating. This research suggests that if we want young people to find a reason to vote, we will have to connect not just the act of voting, but the reasons for voting to their own lives.

It seems that participation in elections has both epistemological and phenomenological aspects. Whether individuals consider the impact of their vote, or vote as a way of voicing an opinion (‘rational’ and ‘expressive’ to use the terms in Carlsson & Johansson-Stenman,

2010), they need both knowledge about how to participate along with an active identity in (and engagement with) the community.

Perhaps more importantly, although they want to address social issues, they have little practical faith in the impact they can have through voting. How can we create excitement about being a voter when the whole experience is, as Ethan put it “underwhelming” and when they do not see elections as offering any real opportunity for change? As Sekou put it, the politicians don’t seem to fix the potholes in his streets or make his neighborhood safer.

6.1 Project reflections

This dissertation set out to answer questions about what young adults understand about the meaning of elections and their choices about participation, how their personal and cultural context affects those choices, and the impact on other social and community experiences through ethnographic interviews.

Recruiting proved to be a challenge, even in such a small-scale project, resulting in a narrow range of participants, with young people in a single geographical area. They register to vote in the same state, with the same state laws. Most attend the same university, and many are in similar programs of study. I did not ask for socio-economic data, but anecdotal evidence suggests that their families are neither particularly poor nor especially well-off. This homogeneity of the participants is both a strength and a weakness. The narrow range of diversity made it easier to analyze the interview data seeing areas of consistency and difference among the participants, especially with a

small number of them. But it also makes it harder to generalize from the results.

A single interview was not enough time to get to know the participant and go deeply into the issues. Given their low salience in day-to-day life, conducting a series of interviews around the time of a major election would allow the research to follow the participants through a longer process. The danger is that any focus on voting would change the participant's behavior. The research would have to be structured to acknowledge this issue and incorporate it into the analysis, perhaps by including elections as part of a broader interest in community involvement.

Even with these limitations, the interviews covered many of the topics needed to address the research questions. The discussion covered their families, communities, and their thoughts about elections in a way that goes deeper than simply answering a question on a survey. The interviews met the goals of gathering material for a richer picture of their personal history, attitudes, and motivations. This could help election officials and advocates construct outreach programs that are a better fit for encouraging young adults to vote, giving them the right tools and information, in the right format, at the right time.

6.2 Opportunities for future research

More in-depth research is needed, conducted with more diverse groups of participants and a variety of social settings, to further explore the themes of how young adults perceive and learn about participating in elections, specifically, what differences (if any) there are among a variety of cultural backgrounds and social contexts.

Expanding the research would also allow a deeper exploration of attitudes and how they affect the likelihood of voting, aiming for a stronger theoretical understanding of how to motivate participation.

The theme of wanting direct involvement in, and personal communication about, elections, suggest that action research or participatory ethnography (such as that in Núñez & Sánchez, 2008) might be an effective research method to understand young adults, new citizens and other non-voters.

APPENDIX A

SUMMARY OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Name⁹	About the Participant	Election History
Ethan	Home-schooled by Christian parents. Thinks he'll move back to his home town after university. Studying computers and web design. (White)	Registered at DMV. Voted in 2012 with advice from parents.
Jim	Grew up in a conservative rural town, but starting to think differently than his family. Works as a graphic designer and plays in a working band. Member of student government. Studying design. (White)	Registered at DMV. Chose not to vote in 2012 because he felt unprepared.
Matt	Family from an isolated rural part of the state. Has a 16 month daughter, but his ex-girlfriend pushed him to go to the university. Quietly well read. Studying programming. (White)	Registered at DMV. Voted in 2012, but only because it was easy.
Sekou	Lives with his mother in a bad neighborhood of the city. Studying computers/design. Wants to start his own game company. (Black)	Not registered to vote. Doesn't think voting makes a difference.
Andrew	Wants to be a voice actor. Or a game designer. Did half the interview in an English accent. Studying computers/design. (Black/Hispanic)	Doesn't remember registering. Father took him to vote in 2012
Julius	Lives with mother and sister, and works in the same Apple Store. Having administrative problems with the university. In several clubs. Big, vague plans. Studying games design. (Black)	Says his voter card was sent to him automatically. Voted in 2009
Sierra	Lives with professional parents. Final year in university. Has her entire life planned: university, law school, work in finance, buy or start a basketball team. (Black)	Registered at 18 on her own.
Shalia	Inner city family, now living in the county. Family involved in political protests. Shy. Working two jobs and studying	Registered at 18 on her own.

⁹ These are pseudonyms, similar in origin or style to the participants real names.

	entrepreneurship. Dreams of going to New York and starting a magazine. (Black)	
Leah	Graduated, working in a non-profit good-government group. Very passionate, but looking for her direction. (White)	Registered at 18 on her own.
	Short conversations	
Faith	I just know that I live in the United States, and I want to have a say in who runs the country. (Black)	Registered at the DMV. Family calls each other to make sure they vote.
Toni	I try to get all my friends to vote. Because we are the generation that it is most likely going to affect the most so that's why I want to make all my friends to vote. (White/Hispanic)	Canvasser came to her home. Voted in 2012
Jasmine	I wasn't even going to vote at first. Then I thought about it; my friend's doing it so, I guess I can. (Black)	Voted in 2008 and 2012. Disillusioned, but a friend urged her to vote.
Dara	I would have made it happen if they hadn't because I was excited to vote. I went to the inauguration and everything. It was a big deal for me. (White)	Registered at a canvass table at a concert. Voted in 2008 and 2012. Parents helped her with absentee ballot.
Mia	I was planning on it. It wasn't really a question of whether I was going to or not. (Black)	Grandmother pushed her to register and vote. Voted in 2012.
Charles	I voted in that election, the first one, because there was excitement surrounding it. It was the first time you can vote to exercise that particular right. Then for the second time I was eligible, I didn't vote because of apathy.. like, I was busy, but then the next time around it was the presidential election. (White)	Registered at college in another state and voted there.

Writing the composite stories

The composite stories (personas) in Chapter 5 are loose thematic groupings of the interview participants, based on their overall attitudes towards voting: how strongly they felt about the importance of voting, how much they were self-motivated to participate, and their likelihood to continue voting.

Table A. Story sources

Persona	Participants used as sources for the story
Robert	<p>Ethan, Matt, Jim (plus Charles)</p> <p>All three of these participants had moved to the city from a rural town and were beginning to see a split between their high school friends and family and their new lives. They struggled with this, both liking the familiarity of their hometown and their independent thinking. They expressed feelings of distrust in the process, and struggled to find ways to make up their own mind about whether to vote and who to vote for.</p> <p>They wanted a direct connection to candidates and a better understanding of the issues to feel comfortable participating in elections.</p>
Antony	<p>Sekou, Andrew, Julius (plus Mia, Daria)</p> <p>These participants grew up in the inner city or nearby county. They still relied on their parents for direction and support. All expressed unhappiness with the way things are, but with a sense of both anger and resignation. Their descriptions of both their lives and attitudes towards elections were a bit vague. They seemed the most affected by the interview context, and more expressive towards the end of the sessions.</p> <p>They had the weakest understanding of the elections process, and needed better information about the impact of their vote to be motivated.</p>
Aisha	<p>Sierra, Shalia, Leah (plus Jasmine, Toni, Faith)</p> <p>The three women all had goals for their lives and a passion for making a difference in the world, though they varied from having a detailed map to a general plan to a more vague goal. Their families were all active voters. They all had personal stories to explain why voting is important to them, and were the most self-motivated, for example, making their own plans to register as soon as they were eligible.</p> <p>They wanted a way to make a difference and for their belief in the importance of elections to be rewarded.</p>

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Welcome, research context and consent

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. My name is Whitney Quesenbery. I'm a student researcher at the Open University, working on a masters dissertation project to learn about people's activities with their family and in their community.

Before we begin, I'd like to go over what we will do together. This interview will take around an hour. If it's all right with you, I'd like to record it. The recording will be used only to help me remember what we talk about and take notes.

In my report, what I learn from you will be aggregated with information from the other interviews. You will be identified only by pseudonym, so that your contributions to this research are anonymous.

[Give them the consent form to sign. Start recording.]

About them

[Start by grounding the interview in their own lives. Follow their lead in how they talk about themselves, but use these questions to cover their current situation. Throughout the interview, use echoing and prompts to encourage them to talk. Remember to give them space to think, rather than peppering them with questions.]

To get us started, tell me a little bit about yourself.

Where are you living right now?

You are going to school [here]. What are you studying?

Do you work as well as studying?

Tell me about your family.

About their community

[Prompt as needed for type of community, what kinds of people lived there. What was their family's "community" as they grew up? If they moved around, ask about differences.]

What was the place that you grew up in like?

- Did you move around or live in one place?
- What kind of place is it? Is it a close-knit community?
- What are the people like there?
- Are you still close to the people you knew when you were younger?
- What do you like most about it?
- Who are some of the people who had the most influence on you? Why?

What about where you are living now?

- How is where you live now same or different from your family home?
- Do you have a different group of friends here than when you lived at home?
- Do they overlap? How are they the same or different?

What kind of community do you see yourself living in after you graduate?

- Same as family home or different?
- Close-knit community or just a place to live?

Activities in the community

[Don't define community for them, but let them decide what this means and follow their lead. What sort of things do they do. Probe for specific stories that can cover not only what they did, but how often / how long / why they started the activity, what its value is to them. If they talk about cultural activities, ask about whether any cultural groups they might feel they belong to and how that might have affected them. Do they talk about different cultural communities differently?]

Are you [were you] active in your community where you grew up? Tell me about that.

- Sports, school activities?
- Church or community groups?
- Things you did on your own vs. things with your family

What about here at [university]?

University clubs or organized activities?
Social community outside of class?
Social change, politics, or other charitable activities?

What about being involved outside your immediate community – in the city or country as a whole?

Is this something important to you?
Social change, politics, or other charitable activities?

[If there is something that seems particularly important to them, follow up on that. Ask about details of the activity. What got them involved? What does being involved mean to them?]

Elections

[Turn specifically to voting and general political participation]

What about participating in elections, following the campaigns or voting? Is this something that you have done?

Are you registered to vote?
When and how did you register?
Who/what motivated you to register?
Did you vote in the last election? Why/why not?

Is this something you talk about with friends or family? Tell me about that.

Do you feel that it is easy or hard to vote? What motivates you or is a barrier?

[Follow up on any stories about complexities around eligibility, registration, getting information about elections, getting to the polls, etc. but also probe around attitudes that can themselves be barriers.]

Do you think you'll (want to | continue to) vote in the future?
Why/why not?

[Follow up as needed: does your vote make a difference? What matters to you when you make choices about voting?]

If I asked you to explain to someone new to this country what voting in elections means, what would you tell them?

[Follow up any points they make about the value of participating, things that make voting hard, whether someone should vote.]

Ending questions

We've been talking about your experience and how you are involved in your community. We're coming to the end of our time together, so I'd like to ask you a few final questions to wrap up our discussion.

As I said, the goal of this project is to learn about people's communities and what influences what they think about voting. Do you have any final thoughts about this, before we finish?

Wrap up

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today.

Thanks again for your time.

[Turn off recording]

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. The goal of this project is to learn about people's activities with their family and in their community and how they take part in activities like community organizations or elections. I am conducting this research as a student at the Open University. What I learn will be included in my academic class assignment, and might also be used to make recommendations to improve community service.

If you agree to participate, you will discuss your family background, community activities, and your own experiences.

Your participation will take approximately an hour. With your permission, I will make an audio recording of the interview to use for my notes.

In my report, what I learn from you will be aggregated with information from the other interviews. You will be identified only by a pseudonym – that is, your own name will not be used, so that your contributions to this research are anonymous.

You may choose not to participate at all, may choose not to answer any questions, or may stop at any time. Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with any organization or government.

If you voluntarily agree to participate in this research, and have had all your questions about it answered, please sign below.

Your Name Your Signature Date

Researcher Date

Whitney Quesenbery
email: (gmail address)
phone: (mobile number)

APPENDIX D

RECRUITING FLYER OR EMAIL

Help us learn about your community.

I am working on a project to learn about people's activities with their family and in their community and how they take part in activities like community organizations or elections.

If you are 18-28 years old and a U.S. citizen, I'd like to talk to you.

We'll meet at a place and time convenient to you, and discuss your family background, your community, and your own experiences in the community.

What is important to you? What does it mean to vote? Do you feel that your voice is heard? I want to know why or why not.

Whitney Quesenbery
email: (gmail address)
phone: (mobile number)

I am conducting this research as a student at the Open University in the UK. What I learn will be included in my masters dissertation, and might also be used to make recommendations to improve community services and elections administration.

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