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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Understanding How Recipients of Means-Tested Government Assistance Decide Not to Vote and How Social Workers Can Make a Difference?

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*When voter turnout of any one particular demographic or social group is significantly less than that of other groups, members of that group lose their power to protect their basic economic and social rights. Low voter turnout among recipients of means-tested government assistance is especially problematic because election outcomes impact the benefits on which they depend. This article presents results from a qualitative study to understand how recipients of means-tested government assistance decide to vote or not to vote. Four themes emerged related to the patterns of voting behaviors and described as: dedicated voter, voter, nonvoter, and dedicated nonvoter. Each one bases their decision-making about voting on different factors. Therefore, a variety of interventions are needed to encourage voting by all. This article seeks to share the voices, experiences, and perspectives of recipients of means-tested government assistance, in order to inform and improve social work interventions to increase voting.*

*Keywords: voting, welfare, social work, social policy, political attitudes, empowerment*

## Introduction

A defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context. The profession's foundation rests on its commitment to the fit between person-and-environment, which is influenced by social policy enacted by politicians elected by citizens. Therefore, voting is an essential catalyst to impact social

policy and has the potential to improve environmental/structural forces that impact the well-being of individuals. Voting is recognized as a basic right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights because it allows citizens to influence governmental decision making about policies to protect their economic and social rights and to ensure their basic needs (housing, food, healthcare, education, and safety) are met (Wonka, 2015).

However, the profession has struggled with how to incorporate practices to increase voter turnout and encourage strategic voting in order to protect the policy interests of populations served by social workers (Abramovitz et al., 2019). Despite social workers' efforts to increase voter participation, voter turnout in national, state, and local elections in the United States has declined over the past fifty years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). This should be alarming to social workers committed to social and economic justice. Low voter participation, particularly of marginalized populations, reduces democracy and responsive governmental solutions to problems of those who typically do not vote (Bartels, 2008; Campbell, 2007; Frasure & Williams, 2009; Piven, 2011; Verba et al., 1995).

### Importance of Voting for Recipients of Means-Tested Government Assistance

Who votes is important in determining the priorities of politicians and government policy. Voters are more likely to be older, non-Hispanic whites, college-educated, and have higher incomes than nonvoters (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Voters and nonvoters have very different attitudes about the role of government and policy concerns. According to McElwee (2015), nonvoters are more likely to support government aid to the poor, free community college, and raising the minimum wage. Voting blocs with lower voter turnout rates lose influence over elected officials to represent their groups' interests and needs (Leighley & Nagler, 2014; Piven & Cloward, 2000). Generally, political parties and candidates do not even mobilize those known not to vote (Pew Research Center, 2017).

In the 2016 United States Presidential Election, close to 100 million eligible voters did not vote, representing 43% of all eligible voters and a greater number of those who cast a ballot for either candidate

(Amandi et al., 2020). Imagine the power this group would have if they voted on Election Day. Franko, Kelley, and Witko (2016) suggest if lower-income citizens voted at similar rates as other citizens, governmental assistance might be more responsive, resulting in greater equality and access to services by marginalized populations. Who votes matters because politicians (elected by wealthy citizens, PACs, and lobbyists) enact policies that maintain the status quo, benefit the rich, and stigmatize those with lower-incomes. As a result, higher-income citizens feel valued, which reinforces their voting behavior, and lower-income citizens feel alienated, which reinforces their non-voting behavior, thus perpetuating the political cycle that leads to inequality (Hacker et al., 2007; Leighley & Nagler, 2014).

The “transformative” power of “everybody voting” is illustrated by data that shows politicians are more likely to increase spending on programs that benefit lower-income populations when they vote in higher percentages (Franko et al., 2016; Larcinese, 2007). This is especially evident when considering differences between how states distribute welfare funds. States with the highest voter turnout levels among lower-income voters tend to make fewer budget cuts to welfare spending and institute less restrictive welfare policies than states with lower levels of voter turnout by lower-income populations (Avery & Peffley, 2005; McElwee, 2015). Similarly, in municipalities with higher voter turnout, there is greater spending on government assistance (Hajnai, 2010). These examples underscore the pertinence of this study to improving the general welfare of populations served by the social work profession.

Because the income of those who receive means-tested government assistance depends on elected officials’ actions, it is especially harmful when this group has low voter turnout. Unlike broad-based/universal programs (G. I. Bill, Medicare, and Social Security), means-tested benefits are increased only when elected officials take political action to increase them. For example, since the 1970s, the value of food stamps (SNAP) and welfare (AFDC and TANF) has been reduced significantly (Hacker et al., 2007), and stricter limits to eligibility have been put in place. Most recently, the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) increased work requirements for able-bodied adults with no dependents, which is especially alarming in the midst of the Covid-19 health crisis and growing unemployment (Reiley, 2019).

Despite the importance of voting by those who rely on means-tested government assistance, most research about voting is located in political science literature that emphasizes quantitative methods to identify demographic factors related to voting. Statistical data and analysis have not discerned within-group differences between those recipients of means-tested assistance who vote and those who do not vote, which is vital for social workers to understand when designing interventions to increase voting. Social work literature focused on civic engagement and increasing the profession's awareness of political participation mentions voting; however, few social work articles solely focus on voting. No voting-related research has been conducted from the perspective of recipients of means-tested assistance. Without a complete understanding of how these citizens decide to cast a ballot or not, efforts to increase voter turnout often fail (Rolfe, 2013). This research begins to fill this gap by including the voices of recipients of means-tested assistance to understand why and how they decide to vote on Election Day.

## Literature Review

Eligible voters who receive means-tested government assistance are less likely to cast a ballot in any election than those who receive non-means-tested universal government assistance (Piven & Cloward, 2000). The stigmatization of the "identity" of being a recipient of a means-tested government program creates political inequality beyond differences related to socioeconomic status and educational levels (Piven & Cloward, 2000; Swartz et al., 2009). Because the elite perceive poverty to be the result of individual failures, not structural ones, means-tested programs are viewed as a "handout" and structured to direct behaviors and limit eligibility to keep people from getting assistance (Hacker et al., 2007; Trattner, 1999). This is in sharp contrast to non-means-tested government assistance programs such as social security, Medicare, earned income tax deductions, tax deductions for property owners, and corporate subsidies (Abramowitz, 2001; Badger & Ingram, 2015; Bandow, 2018; Hacker et al., 2007). Notably, these programs' recipients tend to be older, wealthier, more educated, white, and have the highest levels of voter turnout (File, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2014; Verba et al., 1995). Because of the inadequate government safety-net to provide

for all citizens' basic needs, recipients of means-tested assistance are less likely to vote, even when they have stopped receiving benefits (Swartz et al., 2009).

In addition, the stigmatization of recipients of means-tested assistance is disseminated by the media which "create and maintain the political interests of dominant social groups" (Bullock et al., 2001, p. 243). News coverage about poverty is focused more on ending welfare dependency, than on the context of poverty or its structural causes (Bullock et al., 2001). These negative images are especially harmful to Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) and women (Sparks, 2006). Gilens (2006) found that news about poverty and social welfare policy was more likely to highlight African Americans than white European descendants, wrongly giving the impression that poverty is associated only with BIPOC communities. This perpetuates racial stereotypes, racializes welfare policy, and lessens public support for adequate governmental assistance (Avery & Peffley, 2006; Gilens, 2006; Clawson & Trice, 2000). Additionally, the images of welfare recipients as (a) "welfare queens," (b) mothers having more babies to collect more welfare benefits, (c) irresponsible mothers who leave their children to go to work, and (d) single mothers who are either immoral for having sex out of wed-lock or overbearing and responsible for driving their husbands away, lead the public to believe that women are to be blamed for poverty, instead of the structural inequality (Sparks, 2006).

These racist and sexist stereotypes link social welfare policy with implicit racial stereotypes of laziness and dependency (Winter, 2008), which are used by elected officials (Brockwell, 2019) to limit government spending on assistance to the poor (Hero, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Schram et al., 2006). For example, the racial composition of a state's welfare rolls can be used to predict how that state will manage its TANF block grant allocations (Fording, 2006; Soss et al., 2006). States with more racially diverse populations are more likely to adopt stricter work requirements, time limits, and policies to regulate personal behavior, such as drug-testing (Avery & Peffley 2005, Fording, 2006, Soss et al., 2001).

Like social welfare policy, voting policy is impacted by racial bias (Epperly et al., 2020). The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution was enacted in 1870 to give African Americans the right to vote. Still, states adopted voting restrictions such as the grandfather clause,

poll-taxes, literary tests, exclusions of African Americans from voting in all-white primary elections, purges of African Americans from the voting rolls, disenfranchisement of former prisoners, and violence to stop newly enfranchised African Americans from voting (Brooker, n.d.; Epperly et al., 2020). To combat these restrictions, the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965. Section five of the Voting Rights Act included the “coverage formula,” which required states with voter registration and voter turnout rates less than fifty percent to get federal approval to change their voting laws. Section five impacted nine states—Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia—and counties in California, Florida, New York, North Carolina, and South Dakota (United States Department of Justice, 2020). In 2013, the Supreme Court decision of *Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder* ruled that section five of the Voting Rights Act was unconstitutional. This ruling allowed states previously limited by section five of the Voting Rights Act to change their state’s voting laws without federal approval. As a result, many of these states changed polling places’ locations, added strict photo identification requirements, limited early voting, and redistricted (Newkirk, 2018; *The Formula Behind the Voting Rights Act*, 2013). These changes impose Jim Crow-era voting restrictions designed to suppress the vote of BIPOC populations and individuals with low incomes (Brooker n.d.; Epperly et al., 2020; Hajnal et al., 2017). These changes are dangerous for recipients of means-tested government assistance because voting impacts social welfare policy, and thus their income.

In addition, since the 1980’s millions of BIPOC populations have lost their right to vote because of a felony conviction (Uggen et al., 2020). As stated by Alexander (2020) this is “due in large part to a racially biased, brutal drug war” (Alexander, 2020). Despite recent reforms to end felony disenfranchisement, in 2020 5.2 million Americans, which is 2.3 percent of the voting-age population, lost the right to vote (Uggen et al., 2020). Kendi (2019) laments the connection between voting and social policy:

It is becoming harder for people of color to vote out of office the politicians crafting these policies [health care], designed to shorten their lives. Racist voting policy has evolved from



disenfranchising by Jim Crow voting laws to disenfranchising by mass incarceration and strict voter-ID laws. (p. 22)

Racism is embedded into the criminal justice system, the political system, and social welfare policies, all of which maintain structural inequality (Hero, 2006; Kendi, 2019) and fuels voters' apathy (Piven & Cloward, 2000; Solt, 2008).

In 1983 social worker Richard A. Cloward and sociologist Francis Fox Piven founded Human SERVE at the Columbia School of Social Work to reduce barriers to voting (Piven & Minnite, 2008). Its goal was to mobilize social workers and social work students to register voters and participate in related Get out the vote (GOTV) activities through the National Association of Social Work (NASW) and schools of social work. As a result, seven million new voters were registered to vote, yet voter turnout in the 1984 Presidential election declined (Piven & Cloward, 2000). This prompted Human SERVE to lobby for legislation to modernize voter registration and allow agencies serving BIPOC and low-income populations to register voters (Piven & Cloward, 2000). With the mobilization of other social service agencies, the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993 was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Bill Clinton on May 20, 1993. This legislation is commonly referred to as the Motor Voter Law because it allows citizens to register to vote when applying for a driver's license or any federal social service, including TANF, SNAP, and WIC. Since its passage, several states challenged the law, but the courts upheld its constitutionality (Piven & Minnite, 2013, United States Department of Justice, 2019). Despite this victory, the United States Department of Justice continues to litigate against states not in compliance with the law.

Since 1995, the Nancy A. Humphrey's Institute for Political Social Work (NAHPSW) has collaborated with the University of Connecticut's School of Social Work and field agencies to expand non-partisan voter engagement projects. More recently, in 2016, The National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign was formed to "integrate non-partisan voter engagement into social work education and practice" (Voting is social work, n.d.). Despite these efforts, there is more work to be done.

## Empowerment

An empowerment perspective guides the profession of social work to improve individual and community functioning and promote “social justice and a reduction of social inequality” (Gutiérrez, 1994, p. 4). Empowerment uses an ethno-conscious framework, rejects the individual fallacy assumption that individuals are to blame for their circumstances, and adopts the ecological perspective (Lee, 1996), the unifying paradigm for social work (Robbins et al., 2012).

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

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine how recipients of means-tested social welfare programs make decisions about voting. Data was collected using a grounded theory approach to generate

knowledge about why some recipients of means-tested assistance vote and others choose not to vote. One-on-one interviews provided a nuanced look into their decision-making that is not possible in survey research and elevated the participant to an “expert” status, which is less possible in focus groups. Most importantly, it provided an outlet for the voices of participants to be heard, congruent with the ethical basis of social work to promote social justice and empower vulnerable populations.

Participants were recruited in 2015 from three community colleges in a northeastern state, one each from an urban, rural, and suburban location. Community colleges were used to recruit participants for two reasons. First, more than 40% of all community college students or their families meet eligibility requirements for means-tested programs (Ma & Baum, 2016). Second, by using a college setting for recruitment, the variable of education could be controlled. This is important because education is correlated with voting (Beaumont, 2011; Hillygus, 2005; Ozymy, 2012; Verba et al., 2003). Study and consent procedures were approved by the university review boards of the researcher and all three community colleges. To be eligible for the study, participants, or someone living in their household, had to be enrolled in either TANF, SNAP, or WIC in the past twelve months; have been eligible to vote on November 8, 2012 (the Presidential election immediately preceding data collection); and be a current part-time or full-time student enrolled in one of the community colleges. Recruitment presentations were given to introductory level psychology, sociology, and human services classes. Thirty-one total students expressed interest and met eligibility criteria, and twenty-eight students participated, resulting in a 90% response rate. As a thank-you, participants received a \$15 gift certificate to their choice of a grocery store after completing the second interview.

Two in-person contacts (pre-interview contact and semi-structured interview) were made with each participant at their community college. During the pre-interview contact, an electronic Voting History/Demographics survey was administered to collect data on participant characteristics and allow for a contextual breakdown of their traits and experiences. It included questions about participants’ past voting history, perceptions of the role of government, which were taken from a 2014 Pew Research Poll, and general

demographic information. The second contact was a semi-structured interview. It consisted of six open-ended questions with multiple follow-up questions and probes for each. Additionally, spontaneous probes were used to obtain more in-depth answers and encourage more natural responses (Padgett, 2008). In some cases, probes were informed by data collected from the electronic surveys. Often the researcher summarized and clarified participant statements during the interview. This provided “on-the-spot confirmation or disconfirmation of the interviewer’s interpretations” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 195). All contacts were conducted between October 26, 2015, and February 25, 2016. During this time frame, national attention was focused on the Republican and Democratic political races leading up to the 2016 presidential primary elections. These events may have influenced participants’ perceptions about how they make voting decisions, which is the major limitation of the study. Saturation was achieved in this study, as distinct themes of voting behaviors emerged, and no new codes or sub-themes were developed before all interviews were completed (Padgett, 2008). Each interview was digitally recorded, transcribed by the researcher, and uploaded into NVivo 10, as were field notes.

## Analysis

Because the study’s sample was composed of both participants who had voted in past elections and those who had never voted, negative case analysis was used to compare these groups. In this way, the logic and method of case study analysis was adopted. It allowed for the discernment of patterns that promote and discourage voting (Eisenhardt, 2002). Data from each case (individual) was unpacked and examined but viewed as a whole in relation to others in their same voting category of “voter” or “nonvoter” (Padgett, 2008). Data from “voter” and “nonvoter” categories were viewed in comparison to each other, voting literature, statistics, and theory. Additionally, constructs developed in the conceptual framework to operationalize empowerment were developed as provisional codes (Miles et al., 2014) when transcripts supported their inclusion.

A second coder with a different perspective and knowledge than the primary investigator-author was used to ensure rigor. After

co-coding eighteen transcripts, an overall inter-rater reliability score of 0.8494 was achieved. Additionally, a matrix coding query was used to confirm the emergence of four different voting themes related to voter types noticed and developed by the researcher and co-coder. Lastly, data from the electronic surveys was retrieved from Qualtrics, and reports of frequencies were used to compute averages. These results were used to triangulate the findings of the analysis.

## Results

The demographic characteristics of the twenty-eight participants were diverse and provided a plentiful and robust opportunity to explore “why” and “how” citizens with so much at stake in elections decide to vote or not. Participants were almost evenly distributed between the three community colleges. Sixteen participants voted in past elections (54%), and twelve never voted (46%). All but one participant (96%) received SNAP benefits. The one participant who did not receive SNAP benefits received only WIC benefits. Two participants who received SNAP benefits also received WIC benefits, and one received TANF and WIC benefits. Notably, three (11%) participants were veterans of the war in Afghanistan, two participants shared they had been homeless for several months in the past two years, and sixteen participants (57%) had a student loan. Demographics of age, gender, race, and gender will be discussed in relation to the differences in voting behaviors.

Through the grounded theory analysis, themes related to how voters make decisions about voting emerged. These themes suggest four distinct patterns of how voters make decisions related to voting. These patterns are discussed in terms of four types of patterns related to voting behaviors: dedicated voter, voter, nonvoter, and dedicated nonvoter, acknowledging that within them are individual differences. These themes were not based on quantitative measures of voting frequency, often used in voting literature to describe voters. Instead, they were based on general patterns and commonalties of how recipients of means-tested government assistance described their voting decisions. Voter decision-making is a complex psychological process influenced by structural political factors. The patterns associated within each voting type should

not be understood as absolutes but as generalities to guide social work interventions to encourage voting. Future studies are needed to confirm the identified themes of these findings and test the validity of the patterns related to the identified voter types.

### *Dedicated Voters*

Seven participants were identified as dedicated voters. This group's average age was thirty-two years old, slightly older than the overall average age (twenty-eight years old) of the sample. Most were female (five out of six) and African American (five out of seven), and one was also biracial. No Hispanics were represented in this group.

Dedicated voters have a strong voter schema, meaning being a "voter" is part of their identity (Bedolla & Michelson, 2012). Voting is routine. They vote regardless of whether or not they like the candidates and whether or not an election has a historical significance. They philosophically believe in democracy and perceive their one vote is the "capacity" for them to exert control on the political process. They do not blindly trust politicians and are aware of the inefficiency of government and politics, but intellectually trust the process of democracy. No other voter type demonstrated this unequivocal sense of the importance of voting and social trust. This supports research that social trust is an important factor in promoting voting (Kelly, 2009; Putnam, 2000; Uslaner & Brown, 2005). Dedicated voters' confidence in the system contributes to their sense of having self-efficacy to influence the political system, which is critical for individuals to feel they have the ability to vote and make a difference (Beaumont, 2011; Condon & Holleque, 2013; Ozymy, 2012; Verba et al., 1995). They have a sense of responsibility to vote because the democratic process depends on it. "Raven," a 37-year-old African American female, explained, "You have to do it. It is a must, you know. That's what I was taught when I was growing up."

Dedicated voters keenly understand the relationship between electoral politics, policy, social welfare, and their lives. They understand that their government assistance is tied to electoral politics. "Melanie," a 46-year-old, non-Hispanic/white female voiced this belief: "Whoever we have in office, whichever office we are dealing with has to do with my livelihood. My children's livelihood.

My family's livelihood. Everybody around us." Being a recipient of means-tested government assistance did not discourage dedicated voters from voting, as the literature suggests of welfare recipients (Edin & Schaeffer, 2015; Soss & Schram, 2007; Swartz et al., 2009). Instead, being dependent on government assistance motivated them to vote to put a leader in office who will reform policy in a way that benefits their lives.

Dedicated voters overcame challenges to voting by planning ahead and not getting discouraged by obstacles. They scheduled their day around voting, and several mentioned using free transportation offered by campaigns to get to the polls, regardless if they supported the candidate. They found ways to overcome barriers to voting because of the importance of elections. Dedicated voters perceived the "benefits" of voting outweighed the "costs" of having to overcome the barriers to voting, which is associated with increased voting (Driscoll & Krook, 2012; Edlin et al., 2007). They possess the socio-psychological characteristics associated with informed voting and demonstrate behaviors consistent with intrapersonal, interpersonal, and political empowerment.

### *Voters*

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

Voters do not vote with the same intensity, thoughtfulness, or intention as the dedicated voter. The "voter" type is not defined by the frequency of one's voting as some participants always vote, and others vote sometimes. What connects them is their shared perceptions about the meaning and significance of voting and similar patterns in making voting decisions. They lacked the strong social trust, sense of efficacy, and conviction about the importance of voting, which is linked to intrapersonal empowerment and demonstrated by dedicated voters.

Voters had a continuum of perspectives, beliefs, and levels of understanding about how, if at all, electoral politics affected them.



Some had a general understanding of the relationship between electoral politics and policy but lacked a clear understanding of how this might impact their lives or their government assistance. For example, "Jasmine" a 28-year-old African American female, stated, "They just gave me a sticker, and I felt important like I did something that mattered to most people around me. But I really didn't see how it would affect me at the time or how it would help me." This is interesting because a lack of political knowledge or interest and apathy about politics are factors known to impede voting (Blais & St. Vincent, 2011; Piven & Cloward, 2000). Yet, in five of the nine voters, lack of political interest did not impede voting; it instead impeded their informed voting. This suggests that this group of voters lacked insights related to interpersonal empowerment.

In contrast to dedicated voters, voters could be dissuaded from voting because they did not like candidates' character traits. Additionally, voters were less willing than dedicated voters to overcome hurdles associated with voting. "Winter," a 26-year-old white female summed it up, "So if I have time that day, then I go, and I vote. But it's usually like a hassle". Other participants discussed the difficulty of getting transportation to vote, the inconvenience of dragging their small children to the polls, and having to take time off from work as reasons they decided not to vote. This outlook is consistent with the literature that means-tested recipients are less likely to vote for practical reasons (Edin & Schaeffer, 2015; Soss & Schram, 2007), making the fortitude of the dedicated voter type so remarkable.

### *Nonvoters*

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

For the most part, nonvoters do not think about voting. They are apathetic and disinterested in the political process. As "Joy," a 28-years-old Hispanic/white female, summarized, "I don't care. Since it's not an interest, I'm not really seeking information or questioning."



Apathy defines this voter type. This is consistent with literature and public opinion polls linking apathy as the primary internal barrier to voting (Page, 2012; Piven & Cloward, 2000). Additionally, it suggests that these nonvoters lack traits related to political empowerment. Nonvoters lack understanding of the nature of social-political issues and the connection between politics and government assistance. When asked about the relationship between food stamps, politics, and voting, "Franklin," a 25-year-old Hispanic/Bi-racial male, replied, "I do not see the connection." Nonvoters seem to lack a critical understanding of how political structures influence their lives and thus lack interpersonal empowerment, which limits their motivation to vote and overcome barriers to voting.

### *Dedicated Nonvoter*

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

Dedicated nonvoters are especially unique. They share traits of both dedicated voters and nonvoters. Similar to dedicated voters, dedicated nonvoters understand the relationship between electoral politics, policy, and their lives. Dedicated nonvoters, like nonvoters, think voting is not important, but this belief does not stem from apathy related to not caring. Rather, it is the product of alienation related to not believing democracy is possible, believing that politicians do what they want, are controlled by political donors, and do not care about people like them. "Daryl," a 23-year-old African American male, discussed how elected officials are "puppets." "Obama was the only one I was interested in because I could relate...I felt like even with him [President Obama]...He is a puppet. He is not running the show anyway. We all know Presidents do not run the show."

Dedicated nonvoters lack any sense of social trust, hope, or self-efficacy. They believe their voices do not matter and lack any sense of intrapersonal empowerment. They feel overwhelming powerlessness fueled by being a recipient of means-tested government assistance. "Alexus," a 22-year-old Hispanic/Black female, discussed how politicians do not care or understand people like her.

Because it [enough benefits] would show me that the politicians or the governor or the mayor care about needs that me and people that are similar to me go through...It's just they don't care about a lot of needs that people like myself are going through.

The inadequate response by government officials to address public needs stemming from social and economic inequality reinforces their belief that politicians do not care and voting does not matter. This is the cycle that discourages lower-income citizens from voting (Hacker et al., 2007; Leighley & Nagler, 2014). Dedicated nonvoters are resigned that nothing can or will be done to change the system. Alienation is known to impede voting and political participation (Adams et al., 2006). Additionally, unlike voters and nonvoters, they are keenly aware of how politics impact their lives and possess a strong sense of interpersonal empowerment. Yet, in voting literature, alienation/resignation and critical awareness of one's social position and the nature of social-political issues are not associated with one another. Critical awareness is widely thought to lead to action to influence systematic change and thought (Freire, 2000). This anomaly makes the identification of the dedicated nonvoter significant. More nuanced question wording is needed in all research that distinguishes dedicated nonvoters and nonvoters' motivations not to vote.

## Discussion

These findings provide insight into voting literature, the profession of social work, and ways to increase voter turnout of marginalized citizens. To address low voter turnout, indirect interventions are needed to encourage "the party of nonvoters" (Pew Research Center, 2014) to understand the political process, think more critically about the importance of voting, and consider voting decisions in strategic ways. The four voting behaviors patterns provide a way to better understand voters and nonvoters and suggest appropriate voting interventions to increase voting participation amongst those with different understandings about the importance of voting. Social work needs to meet each voter where they are in terms of how they perceive voting and how they understand their positionality as means-tested government assistance recipients. In the

past, social work has approached voter engagement in a generic, cookie-cutter method. It was assumed that registering voters and providing them information about voting and rides to the polls would lead to greater voter participation. An array of interventions are needed to encourage informed voting by all voters.

*Dedicated voters* need to be encouraged in their voting practices and tapped to work within social service agencies to support ongoing efforts to create a culture of voting. Their voices are powerful. On the other hand, *voters* need opportunities to gain critical awareness and understanding that voting is important to influence policy decisions, not just cast a ballot for a candidate. It is essential that voters make informed decisions about whether or not to cast a ballot (Sandler et al.). Social workers can provide data that demonstrates how high voter turnout of marginalized groups has the potential to lead to greater political power, protection of a group's interest, and increased access to public services. This information can encourage informed voting decisions and provide foundational reasoning for how the potential benefits of voting outweigh the costs related to inconvenience. Lastly, social workers in social service agencies can develop creative ways to mitigate factors that make voting inconvenient for voters and encourage voting. For example, by extending hours at community child care centers, organizing transportation to the polls, and providing resources for clients to locate their polling place, along with having access to mail-in ballots, voters will be more likely to cast ballots. Likewise, social workers focused on policy practice and political social work can lobby for the voting process to be more convenient.

It is hard to motivate a *nonvoter* to vote when they fundamentally have not thought about voting and do not care about voting. Nonvoters exemplify being apathetic to voting in the way Piven and Cloward (2000) understood the role of apathy. This apathy is related to a lack of interest in politics, policy, and a lack of a sense of being a voter. Social workers in social service agencies and educational settings can promote voting just by discussing voting in non-partisan ways, which for the nonvoter might encourage their awareness and interest in voting. Once nonvoters have at least thought about voting, they may be better able to hear messages that encourage voters to vote. Otherwise, they might continue to block out this information because they believe it does not apply to them.

One of the most important findings of this study is the emergence of the *dedicated nonvoter* theme. Past literature and conventional thinking by political elites have assumed that nonvoters are satisfied with the status quo and are generally apathetic (Piven & Cloward, 2000). These findings suggest otherwise. Dedicated nonvoters decide not to vote because, based on their positionality, they believe that their voting is useless. Dedicated nonvoters are unsatisfied to the point of being alienated and resigned, which has led to their decision not to vote. This decision is understandable. To increase the likelihood of dedicated voters deciding to cast a ballot, social workers should focus on dismantling the sources of their alienation. Dedicated nonvoters need opportunities to connect with elected officials and provide an outlet for their voices to be heard. Interventions such as town-hall-style forums and meetings with elected leaders to address their needs would begin to break down their deep sense of alienation.

## Conclusion

Social work interventions are needed to encourage recipients of means-tested assistance to gain an understanding of the political process, think more critically about the importance of voting, acquire a sense of group identity with other recipients of means-tested government assistance, and consider voting decisions in strategic ways. Voting blocs have the power to impact policy (Piven & Cloward, 2000). Social efforts to increase voter engagement are consistent with social work values and are vital to promoting social justice (Abramovitz et al., 2019). Social workers who interact directly with recipients of means-tested assistance in social service agencies and other community settings are in a position to encourage voter engagement. Through greater voter participation, recipients of means-tested assistance can increase leverage to gain greater government resource access. Community agencies need to be organized to develop their clients' critical understanding to cast informed votes. Social work must prioritize making the connection between the personal and the political visible to the groups we are called to serve. In addition to voter registration drives and get-out-the-vote efforts, social workers can provide non-partisan information about the voting process and explain and distribute information about the different responsibilities

of local, state, and the federal government. Macro social workers need to continue efforts to make the voting process more accessible and take policy stances that address structural inequalities that fuel alienation. Now is the time for the profession of social work to unite in efforts that can increase the voting power of marginalized populations so that all voices are heard and the needs of all people are addressed in public policy.

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