EXAMINING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF POLITICALLY ENGAGED COLLEGE STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN NONPARTISAN POLITICAL ACTIVITY DURING THE 2020 U.S. ELECTION

By

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ABSTRACT

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Over the course of the past three decades, scholars and practitioners lamented low levels of political engagement among college students (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; Thomas et al., 2019). The civic engagement movement formed to address concerns about student preparedness for engaging in American democracy, but higher education's response largely upheld involvement in apolitical community service (Colby, 2008; Finley, 2011; Saltmarsh & Hatley, 2011). In recent years, a small number of political scientists began incorporating nonpartisan political engagement activities into course curriculum, measuring civic outcomes, the effectiveness of campus interventions, and other quantitatively driven scholarship (Bardwell, 2011; Beaumont et al., 2006; Mann et al., 2018). Third party nonprofit organizations, also concerned about the lack of college student political engagement, mobilized to encourage nonpartisan political engagement among college students (Jacoby, 2006). Fulfilling a role not formally supported on many campuses, peer educators involved in cocurricular nonpartisan political engagement offer a possible antidote to low participation among college students.

The following qualitative study advanced scholarly insight into the lived experience of college students involved in nonpartisan political activity, such as registering students to vote, hosting debate watch parties, organizing local candidate forums, and participating in an assortment of activities intended to increase the political engagement of peers. In addition to

illuminating the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement, this study also sought to understand how these experiences influenced future aspiration for civic engagement more broadly. Set within the context of a particularly polarized era of American politics reflected at colleges and universities still responding to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the study employed a theoretical framework comprised of emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2018) and the campus political climate framework (Thomas & Brower, 2018). The 15 student participants participated in semi-structured interviews in the fall of 2020 and then contributed to one of four focus groups following the election.

In consultation with participants, the following themes were co-constructed to share the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement during the 2020 election season: navigating uncertainty and disruption, committing to nonpartisanship, turning to digital and online engagement, persuading peers to participate, resisting threats to democracy, and seeking institutionalization of political engagement. Students provided compelling perspectives and stories, offering in-depth insight into their roles and the power of nonpartisan political engagement. As for students' future civic engagement, participants described factors driving their aspiration to remain involved, capacities they developed, and emerging career outlooks related to civic engagement. Practical implications were discussed, including recommendations for how the field of higher education can support nonpartisan political engagement as a functional responsibility within the cocurricular experience in higher education.

Keywords: Political engagement, nonpartisan political activity, civic engagement

Dedicated to the love of my life,
Dr. Kristen Carrillo-Kappus.
Thank you for motivating me through your example,
encouragement, and endless belief in the value of my work.
I also wish to honor the brave Americans who died advocating for the right to vote.
As a tribute to their legacy, the pseudonyms used in this study represent the names of people who
risked their lives during Freedom Summer in 1964.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The following chapter introduces the study, examining the lived experience of politically engaged college students participating in nonpartisan political activity in the context of the 2020 U.S. election. After a brief introduction, I outline the research problem and purpose of the study. Next, I discuss the research design, theoretical foundations, and delimitations. I then review the scholarly and practical significance of the study and identify audiences, both inside and outside of higher education who may benefit from reviewing the findings. Finally, I close by setting the backdrop of the highly polarized and complex political climate amid the COVID-19 pandemic, further demonstrating the relevance of the study following the 2020 U.S. election.

Higher Education's Unmet Civic Purpose

Scholars and practitioners contend student participation in democracy is core to the purpose of higher education (Bok, 2001; Melville et al., 2013; Rowe, 2017). Yet, the civic engagement movement, aimed to reinvigorate higher education's commitment to democracy, primarily upheld apolitical service-learning and volunteer activity (Colby, 2008; Finley, 2011; Saltmarsh & Hatley, 2011). Studies of college students and recent graduates self-identified as civically engaged persons provided evidence of a generation disillusioned by politics (Johnson, 2017; Johnson & Ferguson, 2018). Few would argue against developing college students prepared to engage with the political dimension of civic life, but many civic engagement efforts fail to meet their intended outcomes (Melville et al., 2013). For example, in a study of college student civic engagement, only 11% of students identified a social or political problem as a motivation for their involvement (Kiesa et al., 2007). Mirroring these apolitical sentiments, another study found 99% of respondents engaged in activities categorized as civic, but only 36% of students indicated voting regularly (Hylton, 2018). Democracy requires "active efforts" and

commitment (Rowe, 2017, p. 580). Exercising the right to vote serves as just one, though important measure of college student political engagement.

The data supporting the relationship between level of education and voter participation is persuasive, but incomplete. For every year of postsecondary education completed, voter turnout increased by over 7% among young people between the ages of 29 and 33 years old (Doyle & Skinner, 2017). Although college graduates participate in the political process at a higher rate than their non-college-going peers (Hillygus, 2005), college students still remain underrepresented in political participation as compared to all other voting-eligible groups (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement [NCLDE], 2012). Involvement in the electoral process among 18- to 24-year-old voters remains the lowest of any age group (Thomas et al., 2019). As a result of tenuous political engagement, the voices and needs of young citizens are often absent from public discourse, government operations, and policymaking (Bennett, 2008). Political engagement is habit-forming, so low political participation among young people represents a concerning trend for the future of American democracy (Thomas & McFarland, 2010). In response to the low political participation of young people and fears over a generation adrift, the U.S. Department of Education appointed a group of leaders in 2012 to address the perceived divergence from higher education's civic mission and role in contributing to a healthy democracy (NCLDE, 2012).

The chosen leaders subsequently produced a seminal publication entitled, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, to serve as a call to action for investment in student learning for strengthening U.S. democracy (NCLDE, 2012). The authors urged institutions of higher education to educate students on how the political system functions and students' role in shaping democracy. The direct appeal to encourage engagement in the

democratic and political dimensions of society resulted in several commitments by national organizations and countless colleges and universities. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), for example, founded the American Democracy Project, a driving force for advances in scholarship and practice (Hoffman, 2015). Similarly, NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education – established a Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) constituent group and associated research arm to examine best practices across higher education (Hoffman et al., 2018). Many national efforts responding to the Department of Education, however, coalesced around the concept of democracy, falling short in not explicitly naming political engagement.

Recognizing the lack of institutional action on college student political engagement and participation, several third-party nonprofit organizations formed in recent years. Responding to low college student voter turnout in the 2000 election, early efforts were created and operationalized through national organizations like the New Voters Project, Campus Compact's Raise Your Voice, and Rock the Vote (Jacoby, 2006). Despite the brand visibility of these national programs, early college student voter-engagement efforts failed to substantially change behavior. Recognizing the importance of a link to the local community (Jacoby, 2006), several organizations mobilized in more recent years to train and advise students to lead peer-to-peer nonpartisan political engagement efforts. The Fair Elections Center founded the Campus Vote Project (CVP) in 2012, now located in over 40 states across the country (campusvoteproject.org). The organization works with faculty and staff to develop comprehensive political engagement plans. In 2014, CVP established the democracy fellow program and now supports hundreds of student leaders annually in their work to engage peers on their respective campuses. As part of their role, students receive training and on-going advising to lead nonpartisan political

engagement efforts. The CVP is not alone in seeking greater college student political engagement. The American Political Science Association (2021) curated a directory of over 20 civic engagement groups promoting nonpartisan political engagement. Third-party nonpartisan organizations offer promising practices for increasing college student political engagement.

Along with the proliferation of nonpartisan political engagement organizations, there are also sophisticated tools available to study college student political behavior. Founded in 2015, Tufts University's Institute of Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE) manages the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), providing over 1,000 campuses with data on college student voter registration and participation (idhe.tufts.edu/nslve). NSLVE serves as a data source to help universities understand what kind of impact, if any, their political engagement efforts hold from election to election. Campuses choose to participate in NSLVE and receive detailed accounts of voter registration and participation rates broken down by various identity categories (Thomas & Brower, 2019). Scholars recently used NSLVE data to study political climates for learning about democracy, focusing on institutions with the highest rates of student political engagement to identify promising institutional attributes and practices (Thomas & Brower, 2019). Also seeking to promote the practical importance of political engagement, NASPA and the CVP recently established an annual recognition of voter friendly campuses (Bennett, 2019). All of the efforts made to encourage political engagement may hold a long-term influence on student behavior.

Early voter engagement of young people is habit forming, meaning students tend to vote in subsequent elections after participating at least once (Thomas & McFarland, 2010). A recent study highlighted the importance of cultivating the noncognitive skills needed to carry out the act of casting a vote (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020) The study argued for cultivation of self-regulation

and follow-through, soft skills necessary to register and ultimately cast a vote (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). Furthermore, college students are more likely to vote when taught the importance of voting, how to register to vote, and the means to develop a plan to vote (Junco et al., 2018; Pritzhiker et al., 2019; Verba et al., 1995). The interventions can vary in length and depth of engagement. Findings from a study of 16 campuses with over 25,000 students demonstrated a positive influence of a single educational presentation on voter registration and voter turnout (Bennion & Nickerson, 2016). The influence on voter registration occurred no matter who delivered the presentation, a professor or a peer educator, with negligible differences between the two (Bennion & Nickerson, 2016). Another study found peer-led voting pledge drives also influenced participation (Costa et al., 2018). Peer educators are typically associated with health promotion activity (Wawrzynski et al., 2011), but the present study celebrates student leaders educating peers on politics and government in a nonpartisan manner, such as teaching peers how to vote when living out-of-state or how to view ballots ahead of election day. Due to the habit-forming nature of voting, the work of a peer educator in a single election cycle holds the potential to influence an entire cohort of informed college graduates.

Prior to the 2016 election, evidence suggested reason to decry the lack of political engagement among young adults (Kanter & Schneider, 2013; NCLDE, 2012). Following the 2016 election, however, college students appeared especially motivated (Gardner, 2019; Glatter, 2017). Students were more likely to volunteer for political activities, to participate in demonstrations, and to talk about politics than at any other point in the prior decade (Glatter, 2017). College voters received amplified attention after the 2018 midterm election, doubling their turnout since the previous midterm election in 2014 and increasing the average institutional voting rate from 19.7% to 39.1% (Gardner, 2019; Thomas et al., 2019). National voting rates are

still low compared to other age cohorts, but the trends suggest political engagement efforts may be influencing behavior. The 2020 election marked a historic moment. In addition to the extreme political division among college students (Stolzenberg et al., 2017), the study also reflected student experiences of a world still reeling from the COVID-19 global pandemic. As a result, many inside and outside of higher education remain interested even after the election to learn about the experiences of students and how they made meaning during an unprecedented season.

Better understanding the lived experience of students participating in nonpartisan political activity offers insight into the promotion of political engagement broadly. Students participating in nonpartisan political activity seek to motivate and educate their peers on college campuses across the country. Students in the study operated as nonpartisan political forces in a particularly challenging political environment. At the time of the study, the United States experienced a period of intense polarization (Abramowitz, 2010; Mason, 2018; Zeranski et al., 2009), a trait reflected by the highest level of political polarization recorded among first-year students in decades (Stolzenberg et al., 2017). Polarization and a negative national political climate divert people's attention away from engaging in politics at the local and state levels (Hersh, 2020). Nonpartisan political engagement encourages students to consider not just the national role of politics but also the importance of understanding and contributing to politics at the local level, such as attending town hall events and getting to know the functions of locally elected offices. Concerned about the state of democracy in America, scholars identified the university as the social institution at the "nexus of the larger crises of democratic faith in the U.S." (Kramer & Hall, 2018, p. 6). Educators can either ignore or embrace their role in civic life.

When colleges and universities fail to promote learning in a purposefully nonpartisan political manner, those outside of higher education are left assuming the worst. In addition to the

troubling political divide, conservative distrust of higher education reached an all-time high in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2017). Although a greater number of faculty and staff identify as politically liberal (Gross, 2013), student outcomes do not imply indoctrination, but instead political affiliation holds firm to family preferences (Campbell & Horowitz, 2016). Evidence suggested intentional nonpartisan political learning experiences do not influence statistically significant shifts in college student political ideology or party identification (Beaumont, 2013). Reacting to concerns of liberal indoctrination, various state legislatures acted on policy in recent years, producing barriers for college student voters (Wines, 2019). Lawmakers claimed the changes in voter registration, such as increasing eligibility parameters for students from out-of-state, were developed in response to voter fraud (Wines, 2019). Some politicians proposing new rules, however, openly expressed their distaste for increased college student participation. Arguing for a repeal of same-day voter registration, for example, former New Hampshire House Speaker William O'Brien pronounced, "They are kids voting liberal, voting their feelings, with no life experience" (Nolan, 2011, para. 19). As anxiety mounted in various states over signs of enthusiasm leading up to the 2020 election, elected leaders expressed similar concerns over increased college student participation (Anderson, 2019). Typecasting an entire generation as associating with only one political party, however, runs counter to research on college student voters, who represent a wide range of political ideologies (Stolzenberg et al., 2017). Furthermore, labeling young people as uneducated only heightens the importance of preparing young people to engage in democracy and to make their own informed decisions. In short, studying students pursuing nonpartisan political activity provides valuable insight into behavior congruent with higher education's civic mission. Supporting political learning and democratic engagement among college students can be accomplished in a nonpartisan manner.

Statement of the Problem

Political theorist Harold Lasswell (1936) defined politics as distribution of power, best demonstrated through the title of his book, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, and How*. Hersh (2020) also expressed politics as amassing power to influence communities but argued politically engaged, college educated Americans increasingly participate passively, consuming information about politics but not acting within their local communities. To make matters worse, many college students and recent graduates are not even passive consumers of politics (Hersh, 2020). Evidence suggests college students and recent graduates remain disillusioned by politics and thus avoid thinking about, discussing, or acting within the political system (Johnson, 2017; Johnson & Ferguson, 2018). College students operate within, and graduate into, a world where politics hold immense power and authority over their lives. Politics influence local, state, and national communities in profound ways. The present study brings attention to college students involved in the political dimension of civic life.

I framed the study through the lens of political engagement in part because of civic engagement's historic association with apolitical involvement in community service (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Educators are particularly interested in the promotion of political engagement, getting students involved in their government without accusations of partisan indoctrination. Senior-level student affairs professionals described their own political impartiality as "vital for fostering student learning" (Morgan & Orphan, 2016, p. 25). Political engagement is core to higher education's civic mission because political engagement is a component of civic engagement (Rios, 2014). Conducting a study from a partisan lens, such as examining students associated with a particular campaign or party, would limit the utility of the findings and risk alienating a large number of readers. Studying students involved with nonpartisan political

activity, however, facilitates the investigation of politically engaged students during an election season in a manner not approached narrowly. Learning more about politically engaged college students involved in a decisively nonpartisan way offers awareness for educators, community partners, and scholars committed to encouraging political participation.

Nonpartisan political work is a rich site for learning about politically engaged students. The study focused on the lived experience of politically engaged students involved in nonpartisan activities, such as educating peers on the voting process, conducting voter registration drives, coordinating nonpartisan debate watch parties, organizing local candidate forums and offering access to nonpartisan education on issues and candidates. Sharing the lived experience of politically engaged college students provides important and practical insight for increasing political participation in higher education. Making a compelling case for studying the lived experience of students involved in political engagement work, Hildreth (2003) described student learning experiences as "situational, emergent, and co-creative" (p. 8). The study offers a snapshot in the course of time of a particular group of motivated students. Students involved in nonpartisan political activity exhibit high political engagement and also seek to incite peer involvement. Little research exists on the experience of politically engaged students, and even less on nonpartisan activity. Studies within the lived experience tradition provide educators a depth of understanding, probing how students make meaning of experience (Boylorn, 2012).

The few existing studies on the lived experience of college student political engagement, however, stem from classroom interventions and practicum experiences (Hildreth, 2003; Longo et al., 2006). Additionally, many of the efforts to understand nonpartisan political engagement were studied through quantitative measures of constructs, such as civic skills, associated with formal classroom learning. Responding to low political engagement and high political

polarization, political scientists and other interested faculty members studied nonpartisan

political learning in the classroom (Beaumont et al., 2006). Studies of experiential learning

focused on faculty-led interventions, such as organizing a local candidate forum or launching a

campus-based voter registration drive as part of course objectives and assignments (Bardwell,

2011; Mann et al., 2018). The study aims to examine the lived experience in cocurricular spaces.

Recognized for over 30 years as beneficial to student learning, development, and

persistence (Astin, 1984), college student involvement in cocurricular activity remains a well-

supported practice in higher education (Strayhorn, 2008). Cocurricular activity offers students

experiential opportunities to test their knowledge, skills, and ideas (Rutter & Mintz, 2016). Due

to the associated learning, scholars upheld cocurricular activity as a means to increase college

student civic and political engagement (Strachan & Bennion, 2016; Strachan & Senter, 2013)

Existing research on cocurricular activity, however, lacks directed attention to qualitative study

of college students involved in nonpartisan political activity as peer educators.

Understanding the lived experience of students participating in nonpartisan political

activity leading up to election day affords valuable insight to assist educators, both internal and

external to the academy, in promotion of the democratic aims of higher education. Specifically,

the lived experience of students carrying out nonpartisan political activity expresses various

unknown elements, such as what draws students to nonpartisan political activity, what challenges

exist in conducting nonpartisan work in a heightened partisan political climate, and how students

might characterize their future civic engagement following the election. Whereas prior studies

indicated civically engaged students were disillusioned and disconnected from politics after their

civic involvement (Johnson, 2017; Johnson & Ferguson, 2018), the current study presents insight

from students who are expressly involved in the political domain of civic engagement.

Students involved in nonpartisan political activity offer a unique perspective on political engagement in three ways. First, students engaged in nonpartisan political activity are particularly committed, championing peer involvement in politics over their own political interests. Much can be learned about what experiences brought students to nonpartisan political activity specifically and, following their participation, what they grapple with as politically engaged persons. Second, students involved in nonpartisan political activity develop valuable skills and perspectives (Colby et al., 2010), especially as they navigate a challenging political era and environment. Third, college students who engage their peers through nonpartisan political engagement offer a unique vantage point in learning about the campus political environment during an election season, providing insight to educators, third-party organizations, and anyone concerned with the promotion of political engagement.

Finally, the study enhanced understanding of student aspiration for future civic engagement following their experience of nonpartisan political activity. Limited research exists to provide understanding of college student aspiration for future civic engagement following meaningful involvement in cocurricular activity. In a study on young people's future political ambition, only 11% of students indicated a willingness to consider running for public office in the future (Lawless et al., 2015). Willingness to entertain public office provides some, but not much insight into how students perceive their future relationship with civic engagement following their involvement. Research on the development of identity constructs, such as civic identity and politically engaged identity, offers some understanding of the way college students think about themselves in relation to civic and political life. Studies found civically engaged students held a strong civic identity, caring deeply about their community (Knefelkamp, 2008) but lacked understanding of and interest in the political dimensions of their work and society

(Johnson, 2017; Johnson & Ferguson, 2018). Similarly, scholars characterized a politically engaged identity as viewing oneself as generally concerned about politics and as committed to political participation now and in the future (Colby et al., 2010). The study did not assume a relationship between nonpartisan political activity and identity. Instead, learning how students characterized their intended future civic engagement provided insight into the influence of nonpartisan political engagement on the student carrying out the work. Better comprehending how students viewed themselves in relation to civic life after their involvement deepened understanding of the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the lived experience of politically engaged college students participating in nonpartisan political activity. By gaining an understanding of the lived experience of students involved in nonpartisan political activity, I shared the student perspective of motivations for participation and gathered stories revealing the phenomenon of nonpartisan political engagement at colleges and universities. Additionally, the purpose of the study was to understand how students characterized their future civic engagement following the peak of their involvement. Better understanding of what relationship, if any, existed between students involved in nonpartisan political activity and their future involvement provided further awareness into the nature of the lived experience and indication of possible influence on future behavior. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the lived experiences of politically engaged college students involved in nonpartisan political activity leading up to the 2020 U.S. election?

- RQ2: How do these experiences of nonpartisan political activity influence student aspiration for future civic engagement?

The second research question (RQ2) offered deeper insight into the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement and probed the potential for nonpartisan activity to influence future civic engagement behaviors. Together, the questions developed a complete picture of the lived experience, from participating in the activity, to reflecting upon the experience afterwards.

Colleges and universities are complex political environments where students in the study attempted to encourage the political education and subsequent political participation of their peers. The 2020 election provided a multifaceted context for studying college student experience. The study advanced understanding of the unique experiences of students participating in nonpartisan political engagement in various state and institutional contexts. As a result, the breadth of environmental diversity increased relevance of the findings. Finally, the study's focus on college students' lived experience and acknowledgement of the influence of the campus political climate informed the research design and theoretical framework.

Significance and Audience of the Study

The study holds both scholarly and practical implications. From a scholarly perspective, the study contributed to the existing academic work on the lived experience of nonpartisan political learning in academic classes. Furthermore, the study extended scholarly understanding of nonpartisan political work by examining students involved in cocurricular activities, thus building upon the small existing line of inquiry on political engagement in the co-curriculum. The study offered a unique contribution to scholarship through the focus on the lived experience in this particular election. The findings also provided an in-depth view into how students moved about their respective campus contexts; a perspective not reflected in existing studies.

Although current research offers some guidance as to how students orient themselves to civic engagement, there is little known about how students characterize their future involvement

13

following engagement in nonpartisan political activity. Existing studies include projects examining students self-identified as civically engaged or upon a particular identity construct such as civic or political identity development (Gentry, 2013; Johnson, 2017; Morgan, 2016). Accordingly, I did not presume a relationship between students and civic engagement following involvement. Instead, the study contributed to the literature by gaining an inside perspective into the experience of nonpartisan political activity, and in what ways students described their projected future relationship with civic engagement.

In addition to extending scholarly inquiry, the study advanced practical insight in four ways. First, the study offered further legitimacy to encouraging nonpartisan political engagement as part of the civic mission within higher education. On many campuses, nonpartisan political activity operates on the fringes, vying for institutional attention and support. Students, faculty, and staff can benefit from increased awareness of the important work carried out by students in the study. Second, the study advanced understanding of legally mandated, though under-supported activity. The reauthorization of the 1998 Higher Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1094(a)(23), specifically Title IV, requires all colleges and universities to "make a good faith effort" (Sec. 162) in promotion of student voter registration. Although colleges and universities are bound by legal restrictions regarding political activity (Internal Revenue Service [IRS], 2020), the American Council on Education (2018) outlined activity permissible according to IRS guidance, court rulings, and the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971. Namely, colleges and universities can support nonpartisan political engagement. Institutions may be able to use the findings from this study to foster support for increased nonpartisan political engagement to meet legal expectations and any future federal requirements in the planning and execution of educational interventions. Third, the data can also assist campus-based and third-party

organization advisors, like those at the Campus Vote Project, in providing support to students in peer educator roles promoting nonpartisan political engagement on their respective campuses. The findings can be leveraged for practical needs, such as aiding training for students leading nonpartisan political activity. The more prepared peer educators are to engage their classmates in political learning, the more likely they are to influence peers. Finally, the findings can be used to develop innovative ways to increase political engagement more broadly within higher education.

Inferred by the scholarly and practical implications, the study is relevant to a variety of audiences concerned about the health of college student political engagement within higher education, including stakeholders outside of the academy. Students participating in nonpartisan political engagement seek to increase voter participation and education, creating more informed and invested community members. Given the nature of the study, the three primary audiences include (a) third-party organizations already supporting nonpartisan political engagement work, (b) faculty and staff within higher education, specifically the field of college student affairs administration, and (c) stakeholders interested in the welfare of higher education.

First, third-party organizations can use the findings of the study to improve the training of peer leaders and to cultivate confidence among supporters of nonpartisan political work, such as donors, government officials, and university partners. Second, many higher education and student affairs leaders are also beginning to take notice of the role of this work and may find the study helpful in learning about peer-to-peer nonpartisan political engagement. Observing the lack of espoused versus enacted values of the student affairs profession to promote democracy, Johnson (2019) recently called upon the field of student affairs to integrate democratic learning through deliberative practice. Deliberative practice calls for dialogue about and across social and political differences (Strachan, 2019). Faculty and staff alike, realize their institutions are falling

short in educating for college student political participation and engagement (Matto, 2019).

Finally, in addition to faculty and staff invested in college student political engagement, stakeholders outside of higher education maintain interest in learning about the dynamics of the 2020 election among young voters. Many people outside of higher education, such as researchers at think-tanks, journalists and even partisan actors may wish to learn how college students involved in political engagement work experienced a volatile election year. Additionally, federal and state government actors may also wish to take notice of the role of nonpartisan political engagement in preparing college students to participate in democracy. If leaders within the academy are to uphold their institution's civic mission, then support from state and federal officials is paramount. The findings can be used to encourage the value of the work carried out by students. Next, I review the research design and theoretical framework employed in the study.

Research Design and Theoretical Foundations

The study drew from qualitative traditions to prioritize the student participant's voices, sharing the stories and the complexities of their lived experience. I sought to move beyond a simple inventory of activities and experiences toward the depth found in the qualitative tradition of studying the lived human experience. Specifically, I accounted for the kinds of activities students described, but I also attempted to elicit the lived experience, defined as how students, "live through and respond to those experiences" (Boylorn, 2012, p. 2). Students shared the what of their experience and I probed for the why and how, elements of the lived experience research tradition (Boylorn, 2012). Furthermore, operating from a constructivist paradigm, I believe knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and participant. Therefore, I used a semi-structured interview protocol and employed member-checking to

establish trustworthiness (Jones et al., 2014). Recognizing the importance of reflection following experience, I asked students to participate in focus groups after the 2020 election.

The participants were students associated with the national nonprofit, the Campus Vote Project (CVP), a promising site for studying college students involved in nonpartisan political activity. The students involved through CVP received training, regular advising, and participated in on-going learning opportunities, therefore offering strong examples of students participating in nonpartisan political activity through the cocurricular, out-of-class setting. After receiving approval from my dissertation committee, the Michigan State University Institutional Review Board, and CVP, I practiced purposeful sampling by sending an invitation to the organization's state coordinators requesting nominations from a pool of over 340 student democracy fellows. Purposeful sampling aims to secure information-rich cases (Jones et al., 2014), and the nomination process ensured data responsive to the research questions. Upon nomination, I invited students to participate in the study (see Appendix A). I asked students to complete a short intake form to gather demographic information (see Appendix B) which was helpful in gaining a better understanding of the respondents. Data analysis and representation of findings were informed by narrative techniques, where I detailed a profile and narrative account for each participant in Chapter 4 and thematized findings in Chapter 5. Next, I state the study's delimitations to offer awareness into reasoning behind the research site and participant selection.

Delimitations

Articulation of delimitations provides clarity for readers to understand the intentional design choices made in developing the study. I framed participant selection through three distinct strategies. The three criteria students met to participate in the study included, (1) students engaged in nonpartisan political activity through the CVP; (2) students nominated by the CVP

for their nonpartisan political projects and activities on their respective campus; and (3) students representing a diverse range of state and institutional contexts, cocurricular experiences, and social identities. In addition to requesting nominations for students within an organization representing vigorous nonpartisan political engagement, I utilized an intake form to gather data to be used for formal invitations. The intake form invited students to share demographic information, their institution's name, area of study, and other cocurricular involvements.

I selected the CVP because the high level of training and on-going support students involved with the organization received. The organization was also founded on a steadfast commitment to political nonpartisanship in their activities. Furthermore, the CVP maintained a vast reach throughout the United States with representation in various regional contexts. Worth noting, students involved in the CVP did not need to be U.S. citizens, as political engagement encompasses a wide range of activity all members of the community can enact. The survey intake form included questions about the nature of the activity students participated in, not to account for the kinds of nonpartisan political activity students contributed to, but rather to ensure students participating in the study could demonstrate involvement beyond association with the CVP in name only. Finally, I wished to represent as diverse a range of experiences and identities as possible. Simply selecting a potentially information-rich research site was not enough. Instead, I sought to gain sufficient coverage, which "relates to the relationship between one's methodological approach, research questions, data collection, and participant selection strategies" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 109). Prior research demonstrated the importance of social perspective taking (Johnson 2015; Strachan, 2019) and the role of social identity in civic and political development (Johnson 2017, Morgan 2016). The purpose of my mindfulness of the diversity of the sample then was not to achieve a positivist notion of generalizability, but instead

to align with the theoretical and methodological approach of the study to gain suitable coverage. In the following section, I offer definitions for two foundational concepts in the study, cocurricular involvement and engagement.

Key Terms: Involvement and Engagement

Cocurricular activities offer meaningful opportunities for student learning and development outside of the classroom (Peck, 2017). The study built upon decades of research indicating the benefits of cocurricular learning in higher education (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) by focusing on the lived experience of students involved in nonpartisan political work. The terms involvement and engagement are critical to understanding how scholars frame cocurricular activity from a student and institutional point of view (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

Involvement is the measure of student energy, both physical and psychological, invested into the collegiate academic experience (Astin, 1984). Involvement represents student responsibility for learning in college. To some extent, students possess the ability to mediate the amount and depth of their involvement (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Involvement theory placed in-class academics at the center of the collegiate experience and deemed cocurricular activities as supplemental evidence of student contribution of energy (Astin,1984). The input-environment-output (I-E-O) framework is a model used in cocurricular research to control for student characteristics as related to the environment. In the I-E-O model, involvement signified interaction between students and their environment (Astin, 1984). For example, students in the study were involved in cocurricular nonpartisan political activity, investing time and energy (involvement) to create opportunities for political learning at their college or university (environment), resulting in their own development (output). Whereas involvement literature

situates the student as the subject of analysis, the engagement literature focuses on institutional practices (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

Sometimes used interchangeably with the term involvement, engagement is a distinct concept, popularized by Kuh's (2001) introduction of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE offers colleges and universities important understanding into how well educational opportunities are situated to enhance student learning and development. Engagement is therefore focused on institutional action (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Social and academic engagement activities are both associated with post-college outcomes, including increased graduation rates and early career earnings (Hu & Wolniak, 2013). Student affairs educators design, organize, and support various social engagement opportunities, often referred to as cocurricular activities (Tieu et al., 2010). Engagement through the co-curriculum, though not often taken for academic credit, influences student learning (Strayhorn, 2008). The wide range in structure, role, and purpose of cocurricular activity matters to engagement. Participation in explicitly social opportunities, such as attending campus speakers, concerts, and entertainment extend benefits to students, such as a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008). Student affairs practitioners, however, are often concerned about cocurricular activities whereby students actively learn, plan, and contribute through more intentionally structured learning opportunities (Strayhorn, 2008; Tieu et al., 2010). The study utilized the terms involvement and engagement throughout the text. The term engagement is appropriate for describing the work carried out by students affiliated with the CVP. Students elect to become involved through the CVP and promote the political learning among their peers, whether or not they receive institutional support. The term involvement represents the action of students to invest energy into their peer educator roles. The word engagement represents the work students in the study exercise to

increase the political learning and participation among peers. Throughout the dissertation, engagement is used in conjunction with the terms civic and political. As part of the literature review (see Chapter 2), I later delineate the terms civic, democratic, and political engagement.

In the next section, I provide a review of the political climate students in the study operated within. The review of the context is situated in the introduction to build upon the importance and relevance of examining students engaged in nonpartisan political activity leading up to the 2020 election. Although the American political climate evolved by the time the study was published, many of the identified trends were projected to hold true beyond the election.

Political Climate and Context of the 2020 Election

Reviewing the political climate and context of the 2020 election matters for two primary reasons: first, to situate the dynamics students engaged in nonpartisan political activity operated within, and second, to continue making the case for the timeliness of the study. I review the nature and concern inherent in the polarized political climate to signify the need for nonpartisan political engagement to encourage participation over partisanship. In the following section, I share the state of political polarization, introduce the historical context of the political climate, and review the political context as experienced within higher education at the time of the study.

Polarization and Partisanship in the United States

Understanding the polarized political climate of the 2020 election began with recognition of the two-party system in the U.S., where public discourse remained divided between the country's two primary political parties, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party (Twenge et al., 2016). The Republican Party was increasingly composed of people who identified with a conservative ideology and the Democratic Party was increasingly aligned with people who identified with a liberal political ideology (Abramowitz, 2010). Political ideology does not

necessarily need to correspond with party identification. For example, individuals can identify as liberal and vote Republican, or identify as conservative, and vote Democrat. In recent decades however, voting outside of the political party's ideological norm represented an increasingly rare phenomenon (Abramowitz, 2010). Despite the ideological alignment in political parties, people hold various policy positions across the political spectrum regardless of party affiliations.

The nature of the political climate continued to move away from consideration of policy or issue priorities. In fact, Americans may not be as divided on political issues as some suggest. Instead, a person's association with a political party leads to greater behavioral division (Mason, 2013). The electorate is polarized on particular policy issues, but many people yield to behavioral polarization, rooted in emotion (Hersh, 2020; Mason, 2013; Mason, 2018). When emotion becomes negative and based upon group identity, issues become less important than association with winning (Hersh, 2020; Mason, 2013). Inconsistencies in alignment of policy and voter identification led to debate regarding how much of the population falls in the middle of the political spectrum (Abramowitz, 2010), holding beliefs falling within either of the two parties.

Interestingly and concurrent with heightened party polarization, more Americans also fell in the middle of the political spectrum, identifying as independent (Klar, 2014). A broad data analysis conducted between 1970 and 2015 found more Americans identified as independent since 2010 than in the 30 years prior (Twenge et al., 2016). Worth noting, identifying as independent and maintaining a nonpartisan political stance are two different concepts. Research demonstrated voters who identify as an independent tend to associate with a distinct identity construct, similar to when a voter associates as a Republican or Democrat (Klar, 2014). Furthermore, many people claim to identify as independent simply because of a distaste for partisan politics (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). Aversion to partisan in-fighting, however, does not

indicate disassociation with expressing partisan ideas. On the other hand, a person operating in a nonpartisan manner refrains from stating or signaling a party, candidate, or issue preference. The functional practice of the U.S. political system further disentangles nonpartisanship from independent affiliation. For example, candidates in various levels of electoral politics can register as independents (Twenge et al., 2016). Candidates and voters registering as independent express preference to a distinct set of political beliefs resulting in partisan choices. Alternatively, a person identifying as politically nonpartisan would not publicly suggest or support a candidate, even if an independent candidate were on the ballot.

While many believed the electorate was becoming increasingly polarized (Abramowitz, 2010), still others presented polarization as a phenomenon occurring among political elites (Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006; Fiorina, 2017). Moving beyond a binary definition of polarization, scholars described seven sub-groups to depict even more nuance in the division among American voters (Hawkins et al., 2018). Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) side-stepped the question of what or who is driving polarization, and instead suggested polarization may actually motivate participation. If true, higher polarization may result in a temporarily more engaged electorate (Hersh, 2020). While division existed since the dawn of American politics, a unique form of political polarization emerged between 2016 and 2020.

Historical and Recent Context of Political Polarization

The modern polarization of the American electorate is often traced back to the 1960s when White working-class voters in the South moved from the Democratic party to the Republican party (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). The next wave of change occurred in the 1980s, which brought a surge of White evangelical and other religious conservative voters to the Republican party (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). The major ideological shifts of the two

dominant political parties were a reflection of associated social movements. The election of President Barack Obama in 2008, the first African American president of the United States, tested the notion of a post-racial America. Instead, scholars contend Barack Obama's presidency led to racial resentment among a large segment of the electorate, resulting in a widespread friction among Americans leading up to the 2016 election (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019).

The campaign and election of Donald Trump in 2016 reflected the turbulence and complexity of political polarization in America. National politics increasingly focused on conflict and outrage, where Americans "root for a team and spew anger at the other side" (Hersh, 2020, p. 82). The 2016 election of President Donald Trump reinforced the idea of negative partisanship, whereby voters held more hostile feelings for the opposing party, policies, and candidates, than favorable feelings toward their own party or candidates (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). Hersh (2020) believed the destructive feelings toward the opposite party was reinforced when folks began treating politics as a spectator sport. President Donald Trump's subsequent term in office led to mass mobilization, particularly among college-educated women after the 2018 primary (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). Americans behaved more out of disgust for and anger directed at the opposing party than promotion of the ideas advocated in their party.

Beyond disgust and anger, the modern era of American politics became characterized by party identification in the United States often becoming predictable and differentiated based upon social identity (Green et al., 2004; Mason, 2018). Race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation alignment with political affiliation deepened and complicated the political polarization of Americans (Mason, 2018). For example, if an elected official enacts policies viewed as favorable or unfavorable to an entire racial, religious, or other social-identity based category, then members of the specific group feel as if they have no choice but to support one

particular political party over the other. For example, Muslim Americans experienced what many perceived as a hostile political climate in 2017 because of rhetoric used and policies enacted by President Trump, such as a restriction of immigration from several Muslim-majority countries (Calfano, 2018). The increased alignment of social identity with party affiliation represented a complicated and troubling trend.

Many Americans were concerned about the state of democratic processes leading up to the 2020 election (Thomas & Brower, 2019). A poll found widespread American distrust of the voting process, driven by concerns about disinformation, fraud, and voter suppression (Fessler, 2019). The poll indicated 44% of voters feared votes would be miscounted and approximately a third of voters predicted foreign interference resulting in altered results (Fessler, 2019). Distrust held consistently across the political spectrum. In addition to findings of Russian interference in the 2016 election, the incumbent President, Donald Trump repeatedly expressed concerns regarding voter fraud leading up to the 2020 election (Fessler, 2019). In fact, President Trump questioned the integrity of the election system itself during and even after the election. The polling numbers painted a troubling picture of the lack of trust in the political process by government officials and the general American public.

The polarized and tenuous political climate grew more complex starting in the spring of 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the country and world. In addition to the devastating loss of life, ominous economic, political, and social realities clouded the 2020 election season. The pandemic resulted in, "canceled conventions, relegated fundraising and campaigning to the digital realm, and forced many states to rapidly change how people get and submit their ballots, with unpredictable and potentially disastrous results" (Ball, 2020, p. 2). Political polarization's complexity, especially given an increasingly diverse student population,

positioned postsecondary institutions as hotbeds for political conflict and controversy. In the next section, I discuss the trends of political polarization as reflected specifically in higher education.

Polarization on Campus

Universities bring together students from a diverse range of social, economic, and political backgrounds. Notably, young people are more politically active during presidential election years and political events tend to catalyze their participation (Wray-Lake et al., 2019). Students involved in nonpartisan political activity may or may not hold partisan views but are expected to maintain a nonpartisan political persona in carrying out their specific duties. In many ways, students participating in nonpartisan political activity practice what Mindell (1995) referred to as "staying centered in the heat of trouble" (p. 7), navigating conflict and diversity of thought as a trusted, impartial party. Even if students in the study executed their nonpartisan political engagement duties flawlessly, however, they operated in what seemed to be one of the most polarized and volatile political climates in the history of higher education.

The political dynamics described previously about the American electorate mirrored the realities on college campuses across the nation leading up to the 2020 U.S. election. The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) reported the highest level of political polarization among first-year college students in decades (Stolzenberg et al., 2017). Demonstrating just got deeply divided students were, a study found college students actively avoided selecting roommates of the opposite political party more often than they looked for roommates who shared the same political beliefs (Shafranek, 2019). Students went out of their way to avoid interactions with partisans of the opposite political values, a direct reflection of what was described earlier as negative partisanship (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). These findings were bolstered by findings from another study of recent college graduates who described little encouragement during

college to interact across ideological backgrounds, resulting in what scholars referred to as ideological bubbles (Johnson & Peacock, 2020). Despite the high levels of polarization, national norms painted an unexpected compositional picture of college students leading up to the study.

College campuses are often characterized as highly liberal places (Gross, 2013), but the partisan divide among students was more balanced than many would expect leading up to the 2020 election. Around 32% of incoming students identified as liberal versus 20.4% as conservative in 2017 (Stolzenberg et al., 2017). At the extreme ends of the political spectrum, 4% of students identified as far left, and 2% as far right (Stolzenberg et al., 2017). The majority of students, 41.4%, identified their politics as middle of the road (Stolzenberg et al., 2017). Knowing which way middle of the road voters lean politically is hard to determine and may be contingent on the election cycle. Affiliation with political parties throughout the ages of 18 and 30 years of age hold a lasting impact on political participation over time (Wray-Lake et al., 2019). The findings were consistent for both Democrats and Republicans, whereas youth who identified as independent or undecided did not necessarily guarantee electoral participation (Wray-Lake et al., 2019). Identifying with political ideology is influential in the way young people organize their positions on various policy issues (Zeranski et al., 2009). Given the polarized nature of the current political context, a student who identified with a certain ideology likely also identified with a political party.

As a result of political unrest on campuses in recent years, including protests over decisions on whether or not to accept controversial speakers, some questioned the political tolerance or openness of institutions and college students to diverse political viewpoints (Campbell & Johnson, 2018). Evidence, however, suggested a different dynamic. A study found college graduates reported higher political tolerance to those with differing political beliefs than

27

those who did not attend college (Campbell & Johnson, 2018). The same study demonstrated college graduates became less tolerant of racists, racist language and racist behavior (Campbell & Johnson, 2018). These findings are important to consider, especially as the electorate becomes increasingly sorted along social identity lines (Mason, 2018). Understanding political tolerance to diverse political ideas relates to the bigger question of how college may influence attitudes.

The literature on how college affects sociopolitical attitudes is contested. While research demonstrated an increase in civil liberties and egalitarian gender-role beliefs, there was little evidence college influenced partisan orientation (Campbell & Horowitz, 2016). Instead, research revealed familial background held consistent alignment of party affiliation from start to end of college (Campbell & Horowitz, 2016). As with many other measures, scholars need to take into account precollege socialization, attitudes, and a whole host of other inputs (Astin, 1984). A study found prior behaviors were reinforced, not changed in students with a history of interest in politics; the potential influence of college on political behavior was contingent upon certain characteristics and interaction with the environment (Dodson, 2014). If students entered with a set of political attitudes and behaviors, many of those attitudes and behaviors solidified over time. Students identified opportunities to reinforce their prior political beliefs by joining others with similar beliefs (Dodson, 2014). Students in the study encountered an environment where clear political divides existed, even among peers involved in the same organization.

As a way to examine the complexity of the issues facing higher education today, often considered a liberal leaning social institution, some scholars advocated for more research into the conservative college student experience (Gowen et al., 2019). In an ethnographic study of students in a state university's College Republicans student organization, identifying with the party went beyond facts, figures, and policies, but represented a drive to be recognized as a

Republican as part of their identity (Kidder, 2016). Students expressed discomfort based on their perception the majority of their faculty and staff held liberal views (Kidder, 2016). Indeed, 51% of professors identify as Democrats, versus 35% of voters (Gross, 2013). More than a third of the public is concerned about the high number of liberal-identified faculty members, believing bias exists in higher education (Gross, 2013). In fact, 58% of Republicans contend higher education inflicts a negative impression on the country (Pew Research Center, 2017). Morgan (2019) called on faculty and staff to embrace the messy and polarized political climate and to view political engagement and learning as central to the experience of higher education. Students involved in nonpartisan political activity aim to promote political engagement above a partisan position.

In formal interventions of university courses designed to encourage political engagement, evidence demonstrated no significant change in ideological or party affiliation (Beaumont, 2013). Association with a political party is unlikely to change in college or as a result of nonpartisan political engagement learning experiences (Beaumont, 2013). If postsecondary educators take more responsibility for political engagement, some may accuse the academy of indoctrination. Yet, there is also risk in not promoting political learning and participation, detracting from higher education's civic mission to advance the greater public good (Cramer, 2016). The study serves to recognize nonpartisan political engagement as essential, especially as a means to draw in students deterred by the caustic nature of the current polarized political climate. The study also addresses the ways politically engaged college students move beyond pontification and into participation. Many college-educated adults consume political information but do not act upon their political convictions, resulting in what scholars refer to as political hobbyism (Hersh, 2020). Instead, students participating in nonpartisan political work are action-oriented and represent future college graduates who care about the state of their democracy.

Conclusion

The first chapter provided an introduction to the study, examining the lived experiences of politically engaged college students participating in nonpartisan political activity, set in the context of the 2020 U.S. election. After a brief framing of the topic, I outlined the research problem, purpose and significance of the study, research design, theoretical foundations, and delimitations. I then reviewed two central topics related to cocurricular nonpartisan political activity, involvement and engagement. Finally, I closed by reviewing the current political climate in the United States, and specifically in higher education. The chapter sought to introduce readers to the purpose of the study while simultaneously drawing attention to the need for research on the lived experience of college students involved in cocurricular nonpartisan political engagement. In the next chapter, I review literature to ground the study in the ongoing scholarly discourse.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following chapter frames the study on politically engaged college students involved in nonpartisan political activity by reviewing the literature through relevant lines of scholarly inquiry. I detail conceptual boundaries for the study while simultaneously identifying the necessity for research on the topic. Because a wide range of terminology is used to explain various phenomena throughout the literature, I disentangle concepts from one another in the early sections of this literature review. The review reveals understanding of what scholars know about politically engaged college students and specifically, nonpartisan political engagement.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, I trace the concepts of civic, democratic, and political engagement to situate the study within the political dimension of civic engagement. Next, I discuss studies offering insight into the lived experience of students involved in nonpartisan political activity. I then explore concepts related to political engagement of college students and how they come to view themselves in relation to political and civic life. Finally, I close by introducing the theoretical framework for the study.

Framing Civic, Democratic and Political Engagement

Many colleges and universities consider civic engagement and contribution to democracy as core to the purpose of higher education (Bok, 2001; Melville et al., 2013; Rowe, 2017). Although scholars and practitioners in higher education hold assumptions about the meaning behind the term civic engagement, the wide range of terminology used causes difficulty in understanding what the term means both in scholarship and in practice. In recent years, three interrelated concepts appeared in the scholarly discourse: civic engagement, democratic engagement, and political engagement. In this section, I parse out the areas of overlap and the distinct meanings of the concepts as they relate to one another. I follow the conceptual line of

inquiry from civic to political engagement because the progression mirrors the evolution of focus

within the scholarly discourse. By situating political engagement literature within the broader

civic and democratic engagement literature, I argue the lived experience of nonpartisan political

engagement as a noteworthy but under-studied topic within higher education research. Defining

the boundaries of political engagement also provides clarity and direction for the current study,

seeking to understand the lived experience of politically engaged college students involved in

nonpartisan activity and their future aspiration for civic engagement. Finally, I close this section

by reviewing three threads of scholarly discourse within the political engagement literature:

partisan political engagement, activism, and nonpartisan political engagement. I introduce a

conceptual map of ideas presented in the following section in Figure 1.

From Civic to Democratic Engagement

When describing college student civic engagement scholars use terms interchangeably

and inconsistently (Finley, 2011; Jacoby, 2009). Civic engagement is not simply about

exercising knowledge and skills, but also signals an assumption of community-based values

(Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Jacoby, 2009). Affirming this value-laden perspective, scholars defined

civic engagement as a student's focus on the "concerns, interests, and common good of a

community" (Barrett & Pachi, 2019, p. 3). Students involved in civic engagement activity,

therefore, contribute to the advancement of a community and even society at large.

Sharing in the notion of civic engagement as community betterment, Ehrlich (2000)

asserted students can serve the common good through both political and nonpolitical means.

Students in the study directly engaged the political dimension of civic life on their campuses.

Civic engagement interventions and research in higher education, however, remain largely

nonpolitical, detaching learning experiences from the political systems shaping civil society

32

(Finley, 2011; Saltmarsh & Hatley, 2011). Loeb (2010) stated, "Sadly, and ironically, in a country born of a democratic political revolution, to be American in recent years is too often to be apolitical" (p. 32). The apolitical nature of civic engagement is perhaps best exemplified by the over reliance upon service-learning activities for civic learning (Colby, 2008; Finley, 2011; Saltmarsh & Hatley, 2011).

While civic engagement enacted through service-learning is associated with favorable learning outcomes and can introduce students to important societal issues, scholars remain concerned service-learning does little to prepare students for engaging in the process of American democracy (Finley, 2011). Expressly, service rarely educates students about political features of community problems (Melville et al., 2013). Research on the student experience reinforces the critique of service-learning activities, which seldom dedicate time or resources to provide a clear understanding of how formal political systems influence civic life. In a qualitative study of students participating in service-learning for example, students developed a sense of "political consciousness" (Harker, 2016, p. 31), but not the skills or perspectives needed to engage in politics. Students felt a need to address issues through the political system but either did not understand how or deemed politics as too divisive (Harker, 2016). The results demonstrated a need for interventions to activate the political dimension of civic engagement by educating students about the relationship between civic problems and political systems.

The avoidance or hesitancy of the civic engagement movement in higher education to include anything overtly political appears connected to a fear of betraying public trust (Saltmarsh & Hurley, 2011). Conceptually, civic engagement means educating students on all aspects of civic life, yet the movement within higher education lacked direct connection to promotion of understanding and engaging with political systems, processes, or actors (Saltmarsh & Hurley,

2011). Absence of political learning inhibits student understanding of democracy and students'

role in shaping their communities and the nation.

In response to the critique of apolitical civic engagement efforts, scholars urged the field

of higher education to do more to foster knowledge, awareness, and skills to prepare students to

be active members of American democracy (Colby et al., 2010). Moving from a civic

engagement to a democratic engagement paradigm in research emphasized the values and

behaviors underpinning democracy, such as voting, participating in the political processes, and

developing an awareness of current events and political challenges influencing government

decisions (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). A democratic engagement paradigm, however, seems to

sidestep the realities of American democracy, a system steeped in politics and division.

Additionally, those involved in nonpartisan activity discourage use of the term democratic to

avoid confusion with the Democratic Party. Although students participating in nonpartisan

political activity operate within both a civic and democratic engagement paradigm, a political

engagement lens best aligns with their work.

Political Engagement

Flanagan (2013) argued for defining political engagement as a unique "domain of

experience and knowledge," whereby young people "are active constructors of meaning in their

world" (p. 17). The study used a purposeful framing of political engagement, offering a direct

focus on politics, considered within the context of civic engagement. In recent years, college

student political engagement received increased attention in the academic literature. Political

engagement is defined as "the wide range of ways that people, especially young people,

participate in American democracy" (Colby, 2008, p. 4), including efforts at all levels of the

government. Associating political engagement with systemic dimensions, policy issues, and

electoral politics at the local, state, and national level distinguishes the concept from what was previously described as civic and democratic engagement. In characterizing the relationship between civic and political engagement, "civic engagement can be seen as a larger, more encompassing term, whereas political engagement grows out of civic engagement either directly or indirectly" (Rios, 2014, p. 14). Political engagement therefore overlaps with civic and democratic engagement, concerned about the greater community, but holding a particular focus on political systems, policy, and electoral politics.

The common thread tying scholarly understanding of political engagement together is the interaction between the individual and the political system or problems addressed politically. Barrett and Pachi (2019) understood political engagement as interaction with political institutions and decision-making processes. Less focused on the structural aspects of the political system, Hildreth (2003) defined political engagement as both formal and informal activity intended to address community problems. Political engagement was understood as a social process, not done in isolation, but in partnership with others, thus allowing more flexibility in application by including both formal and informal activity (Hildreth, 2003). The study draws directly from Hildreth's (2003) definition of political engagement by retelling the lived experience of nonpartisan political activity, performed in formal and informal ways. Although college student political engagement is a specific form of civic engagement, little scholarship existed until the past decade.

Even the field of study devoted to politics, political science, appeared more concerned about the study of political institutions, theory, and behavior over practical or applied political engagement work (Colby et al., 2010). In response to the gap within the field of political science, including the lack of attention political engagement received in higher education broadly,

scholars launched the Political Engagement Project (PEP), a national study of educational interventions and practices intended to foster college student political development (Colby et al., 2010). The PEP studied student development of knowledge, skills, motivation, and ultimately participation (Colby et al., 2010). As far as politically valuable skills, the project described "planning and running meetings, writing memos, various kinds of public persuasion" (Colby, 2008, p. 5) as beneficial to political engagement. Volunteering and participation in civic and community organizations were deemed important drivers but not necessarily considered political engagement (Colby et al., 2010). Scholars did not count most forms of community service, excluding social and civic related organizations and activities, unless the purpose of the activity became expressly political, such as a church petitioning the state government on a given issue of importance to the community (Colby et al., 2010). Many civic organizations, unless directly stated in their mission, remain apolitical, though members may leverage the group or organization for political purposes. The scholars' definition of political activity also excluded many forms of individual actions such as recycling, unless overtly connected to politics (Colby et al., 2010). Although beneficial to providing definition to political engagement work, the PEP's focus on quantitative measures did not lend itself to understanding students' lived experiences.

Political engagement ranges in terms of the depth of the experience. Whereas horizontal engagement represents surface level actions, such as passively posting personal opinions on social media, vertical participation includes a complex understanding of issues and comprises sustained engagement (Harward & Shea, 2013). The study was interested in vertical engagement, involvement in activities beyond the surface or in name or affiliation only. Students involved in nonpartisan political engagement participate in activities aligning with vertical participation, whereby their effort and energy requires active, not simply passive, political action. All civic

engagement, therefore, is not political engagement. Most political engagement, however, falls under the umbrella of both civic and democratic engagement.

In an effort to visualize the position of the study within the broader scholarly discourse, I developed Figure 1 as a conceptual aid to demonstrate the differentiation and intersection between civic, democratic, and political engagement. The study seeks to understand the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement within the scope of civic engagement. The figure represents the notion of civic, democratic, and political engagement as overlapping and intersecting concepts. Civic engagement, as defined previously, encompasses general commitment to betterment of the community. Democratic engagement represents a smaller range of experiences and activities than civic engagement, aimed at promotion of democracy. The figure accounts for political engagement activities falling outside of the goals and values espoused through civic and democratic engagement, as signified by the partisan component of political engagement partially out of range of the spheres of civic and democratic engagement.

Figure 1.

Situating Nonpartisan Political Engagement
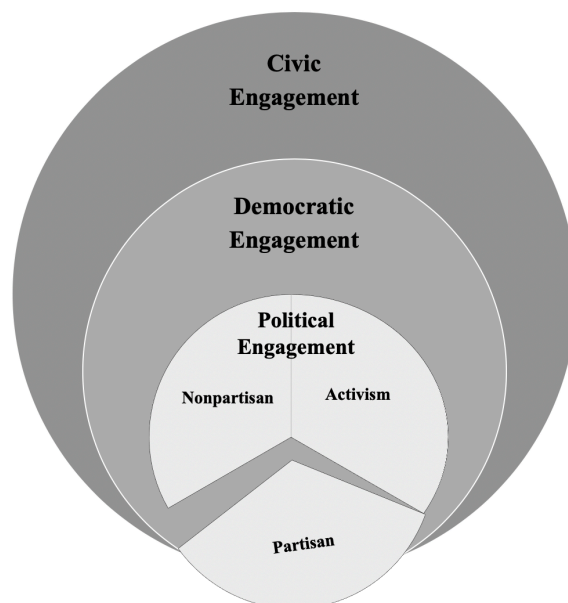
To further understand political engagement in relation to the study, I categorized literature on political engagement as partisan, activist, or nonpartisan. As represented in Figure 1, the activities or goals categorized as nonpartisan and activism can seem to blend together, visually demonstrated by a light grey line between the two forms of political engagement. For instance, categorizing the act of registering people to vote depends on the sociopolitical context and even social identity of the student participating. Furthermore, many nonpartisan activities, such as voter registration drives, were considered activism at points throughout U.S. history (Hart & Gullan, 2010). Today, the legal citizenship of students participating in political engagement activity can also influence whether or not their work is considered a form of activism (Mendes & Chang, 2019). Additionally, Figure 1 represents the troubling nature of partisan politics, whereby some activity conducted in the name of partisan politics may or may not fall within the frame of civic or democratic engagement. For example, a student involved in partisan activity may act in a purely self-interested manner, only seeking to advance their candidate over any stated goals for improving the community, thus operating outside of values espoused in a democracy or civic life. Students in the study participated in nonpartisan political activity, but in their personal time, they also engaged in partisan and activist political engagement. Differentiating the three concepts from one another was important to understanding students in the study and in doing so, I argue the importance of nonpartisan political engagement.

Partisan Political Engagement

Partisan political engagement activities such as canvassing for a candidate or petitioning representatives regarding a particular cause offers educationally meaningful experiences (Colby et al., 2003). Although important learning can take place in a partisan context, activities associated with partisan political engagement "often [involve] a deliberate polarization of issues

38

and demonization of the opposition" (Colby et al., 2003, p. 71). Partisanship risks portraying one side as always right, and the other as always wrong. Students participating in partisan political activity, therefore, may not experience the goals espoused through civic engagement, namely "problem solving and helping others" (Zukin et al., 2006, p. 7). In partisan engagement, the activity risks becoming focused on winning instead of improvement of the community or society.

The current political context is increasingly clouded by what scholars refer to as negative partisanship, whereby people hold stronger negative views toward those who do not believe what they do over believing in the goals and substance of their own side of the political spectrum (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). Studying student political engagement through a partisan lens then is arguably short-sighted and limits understanding of the diverse perspectives across the political spectrum. After all, parties and the issues they seek to address morph throughout the course of history. Furthermore, studying student experiences set in the framework of partisan political activity would limit the reach and utility the findings can have within the civic mission of higher education, where students should be afforded the space to grapple with diverse political ideas (Morgan & Orphan, 2016). Students should instead receive encouragement to think critically to understand the issues and the records of political candidates, parties, and causes, ultimately using their own intellect to make political decisions. Students involved in nonpartisan political activity seek to engage their peers in the political process and discourse, over promoting the goals of a particular partisan agenda. Sometimes students participate in political engagement behaviors considered disruptive to the political system, a form of activity referred to as activism.

Activism as a Form of Political Engagement

Activists may operate within a partisan lens or outside of partisan politics altogether. Throughout the course of U.S. history, college students advocated for social change using their

voices, bodies, and words in defiance of the status quo (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019; Corrente et al., 2018). The rich history of American college student activism positions college campuses as "contested ground upon which social and political ideologies have been tested" (Dailey et al., 2018, p. 44). College campuses were, and are still, often at the center of major social change efforts, from race, to gender, ability, sexual orientation, and other causes with regard to equal treatment under the law (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019; Dailey et al., 2018). Although social movements arise in waves, a brief focus on activism is important to the study for three distinct reasons. First, there is an argument to be made for understanding activism in the context of political engagement and as related to nonpartisan political activity. Second, students involved in nonpartisan political activity may view their activism as a complementary component of their political engagement. Finally, from a methodological standpoint, the activism literature offers strong examples of ways to study the lived experience of political engagement, which is particularly beneficial to the design of this study. To further exemplify the role and relevance of activism in relation to the study, I next review a recent national study on identity-based activism.

Scholars conducted a study exploring the experiences of student activists engaged in identity-based activism (Linder et al., 2019). In discussing the relationship between student activists and their actions, the authors clearly articulated an approach to position student voice over objectively stated outcomes (Linder et al., 2019). Instead of using a positivist approach, the authors studied the wisdom students derived from "integration of experience, knowledge, and discernment" (Linder et al., 2019, p. 76). The study probed specifically for student integration and depiction of their experiences over measurement of civic constructs. Students came to participate in activism for four primary reasons: social identity, community, anger, and responding to local and national events (Linder et al., 2019). Regarding identity, students were

more likely to be involved with activism directly related to identities they held. Many undocumented college students, for example, practiced political engagement openly, representing what many consider as a form of activism (Mendes & Change, 2019). Other undocumented students engaged in politics by practicing forms of silent activism, such as writing and contributing to political causes (Mendes & Change, 2019). Next, some students became involved with activism as a result of a particular community encouraging them to do so. Anger arising from recognition of injustices motivated others to become activists. Finally, the student narratives emphasized various local and national drivers for involvement in activism-related work (Linder et al., 2019). The differences between students involved in identity-based activism versus nonpartisan political activity may reveal more about the way students think about politics.

Students in the activism study acknowledged formal political systems as powerful, yet viewed the system as limited in bringing about change (Linder et al., 2019). Participating in identity-based activism requires emotional energy and courage, but not necessarily trust in the political system. There was a time when nonpartisan political activity, such as registering women and people of color to vote, was considered a deliberate act of activism (Hart & Gullan, 2010). As the U.S. political system evolved over time, nonpartisan political activity today is not typically categorized as activism. The presence of voter suppression within the U.S. political system, however, makes nonpartisan political activity – especially attempting to increase participation of young and more racially diverse populations – potentially controversial to some partisan actors (Wines, 2019). Referring to college student political engagement as controversial does not mean the nonpartisan political activity operates outside of formal political system.

Typically, activism is designated as such because the activity seeks to interrupt, rather than perpetuate the current political operations. The deliberate actions in activism are often taken

because the formal system has not been responsive to the needs or voices of particular communities. Political action can be categorized as conventional or nonconventional, both of which seek to influence, disrupt, or participate in the recognized political system (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). Unconventional forms of political engagement include behaviors like participating in marches, protests, graffiti, blog posts, and other informal actions (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). Formally structured channels of political engagement, such as calling a political representative, attending a town hall event, or voting are all examples of conventional forms of political action (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). Given the description of formal activities, nonpartisan political activity naturally fits within the conventional frame.

Nonpartisan Political Engagement

Political engagement involves an overarching identification as someone who cares about politics (Colby et al., 2010). A politically engaged person is interested in the local, state, and national levels of government and politics. Political engagement is chosen voluntarily, requires collaboration, and often involves conflict (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010). Nonpartisan political activity meets each of the traits of political engagement, however, people involved in nonpartisan engagement seek to remain impartial despite the presence of conflict. The focus on impartiality, core to the standards of nonpartisan political activity, is congruent with notions of educational practice. In a study of senior student affairs administrators, for example, leaders upheld the ideal of nonpartisanship whether they worked at a public or a private institution (Morgan & Orphan, 2016). In adherence to the civic mission of higher education broadly, the assertion of political neutrality was viewed as "vital for fostering student learning" (Morgan & Orphan, 2016, p. 25). The administrators subscribed to a nonpartisan political approach in their roles, not because of some code or professional pledge, but in response to a perceived, unwritten rule stemming from

institutional and community stakeholders (Morgan & Orphan, 2016). Next, I review existing

research on college students' nonpartisan political activity, experiences, and subsequent learning.

Studying College Student Nonpartisan Political Engagement

Despite the proliferation of third-party organizations devoted to increasing nonpartisan

political activity among young people and college students specifically, there are few studies on

cocurricular nonpartisan political activity. The following section begins by reviewing the

existing examples of studies on the lived experience of political engagement. Next, I review what

is known about nonpartisan political engagement in formal curricular interventions, classroom-

based, or guided projects and associated studies. I close by examining relevant findings from

research on cocurricular activities and campus-wide events.

Lived Experience of Political Engagement

Scholars increasingly call for research on the lived experience of college students. Binder

and Wood (2014) advocated for a qualitative approach to study politically engaged students

stating, "The largely quantitative, social psychological approach cannot depict the types of

interactions that students have on their distinctive campuses, or how students make sense of

those experiences" (p. 222). Similarly, Strachan (2019) more recently argued, "Students' lived

experiences, often shaped by their demographic identities, affect the way they respond to

learning activities" (p. 1). Educational interventions should consider student self-identified

characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences. The study centers the lived experience of students,

illuminating the meaning derived from nonpartisan political engagement. Although much of the

research on political engagement is quantitative in nature, two examples, though outdated, offer

qualitative insight into the lived experience of politically engaged college students.

First, a study of a course and associated practicum relied upon semi-structured interviews to understand the lived experiences of political engagement among college students. Utilizing four levels of questioning, the authors garnered descriptions of experiences, what students had learned, if students had used those skills in other spaces, and whether or not change had occurred as a result of the course and practicum (Hildreth, 2003). The findings demonstrated how students could develop political skills in the real world. Students applied what they were learning about political engagement in their interactions with peers, family, and student organizations. A critical finding revealed "students' experiences in the field can be difficult, emotionally charged, and full of unexpected outcomes" (Hildreth, 2003, p. 3). The challenges students experienced in the field reflected the reality of conflict as an imbedded aspect of political engagement (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010). Conflict served as a motivation for some students, but also a barrier to interest.

Another study on the lived experience of politically engaged students suggested initial student resistance to involvement in politics (Longo, Drury & Battistoni, 2006). The findings of resistance aligned with more recent work suggesting student distrust of politics (Harker, 2016). Despite the experience of negative partisanship (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019), the study revealed political learning can still thrive in "practicing the messy, ever difficult process of democracy" (Longo, Drury & Battistoni, 2006, p. 315). Notably, students viewed learning outside of the classroom as more practical than learning tied to course credit (Longo, Drury & Battistoni, 2006). The findings therefore demonstrated the importance of out-of-class activity.

The two studies discussed here examined the lived experience of politically engaged college students, offering valuable insight into the phenomenon. Because the studies focused on faculty-led interventions, the findings revealed little about co-curricular activity. Additionally, by nature of research, the studies reviewed reflected the political context at the time of the

respective studies. As suggested by the two studies reviewed here, the vast majority of research on nonpartisan political engagement exists within the context of formal curricular interventions.

Formal Curricular Interventions

Although most studies of nonpartisan political activity emphasize learning associated with academic courses, the findings still offer important insight for the study focused on cocurricular political engagement. I now review faculty-led nonpartisan political learning and engagement efforts, highlighting findings from experiential learning activities. Over the past two years, the American Political Science Association (APSA) called for increased participation in nonpartisan student voter engagement, a call some political science faculty mobilized to address (Matto, 2019). Experiential nonpartisan political learning interventions were weaved into courses, becoming more common across higher education. Many of the activities reflect the kind of work participants in the study engaged in, though not linked to a course. The following studies on political engagement in academic courses included research on civic measures and courses with integrated voter registration efforts, campus programming, and observational research.

Two quantitatively driven studies offered insight into nonpartisan political engagement tied to classroom learning. Perhaps the most comprehensive study to date, the Political Engagement Project (PEP), utilized pre- and post-survey instruments to study the effects of 21 select courses and programs across the U.S. (Beaumont et al., 2006). The programs were chosen using a framework developed to identify the most promising practices to foster student learning and political engagement. The study demonstrated PEP-identified courses resulted in improved political understanding, skills development, and self-reported intention to remain engaged in politics (Beaumont et al., 2006). In another quantitative study of civic skills and values, faculty focused on three separate nonpartisan projects tied to a single course: the design and contribution

45

to a fact-check blog, the authorship of a voting guide, and organization of a voter registration drive (Bardwell, 2011). Utilizing pre- and post-test surveys on various self-reported items for an intervention and control group, the results indicated statistically significant movement in various civic skill and attitudinal items. Reflective assignments offered insight into the experience of nonpartisan political engagement, suggesting students were particularly energized by the ability to witness an immediate impact of their efforts (Bardwell, 2011). The findings revealed students participating in nonpartisan political activity may benefit from tangible interpersonal experiences. Quantitative studies of formal classroom interventions are limited with regard to understanding the lived experiences of students engaged in less formal learning experiences. Standardized quantitative measures tend to "miss the story involved in how students learn" (Hildreth, 2006, p. 286), thus making the case for moving beyond quantitative measurements of classroom-based interventions.

Two mixed method studies focused on connecting coursework to out-of-class voter mobilization efforts. First, students who enrolled in a course took part in a door-to-door outreach effort to encourage voting during a local congressional race (Bennion, 2006). From an educational perspective, students felt participation in a nonpartisan political activity allowed them to obtain a more holistic and personal experience with politics (Bennion, 2006). The students encountered community members who voted consistently in elections over the span of many years, serving as a source of inspiration. Students also witnessed lack of enthusiasm about politics, examples of negative partisanship, and rudeness from some of the community members (Bennion, 2006). Despite some negative experiences, students felt a deeper connection to candidates and the campaign staff and volunteers who dedicated a great deal of energy to their roles (Bennion, 2006). In a similar, more recent, study of a course dedicated to planning and

implementing a get out the vote (GOTV) scheme, students gained a new appreciation for how much time and energy went into campaigns as a candidate, staff member, and active supporter (Rank & Tylock, 2018). Both studies revealed positive and negative experiences related to voter mobilization but differ from the present study because of the link to an instructor and classroom.

Some faculty involved students in planning, organizing, and attending nonpartisan political events on their campuses such as local candidate forums, debates, and watch parties. In one study, faculty members organized a congressional candidate debate and engaged students in the planning and execution of the event (Boeckelman et al., 2008). Students assisted with logistics, publicity, and even developed debate questions for the candidates (Boeckelman et al., 2008). Findings suggested students struggled with understanding how to navigate university bureaucracy (Boeckelman et al., 2008). The study revealed institutional roadblocks and understanding how to plan and promote events through the university channels as likely barriers many students face in nonpartisan political engagement. The student organizers also experienced challenges in getting partisans to work together and to agree on items, such as the debate structure and format (Boeckelman et al., 2008). Students who attended the debate were asked to write reflection papers, offering insight into the experiences of attendees (Boeckelman et al., 2008). The overwhelming feedback from the papers indicated the debate encouraged students to get to know candidates in a more informed way (Boeckelman et al., 2008). Students gaining proximity to the political process furthered their education of candidates and issues discussed.

Finally, in a faculty-led study, over 500 college students observed polling places on election day in 2016, making note of processes and detailing inefficiencies (Mann et al., 2018). The design of this study is especially relevant to the study because many of the studies conducted on experiential learning in political science occur on a single campus. This faculty-led study,

however, took place at 23 different colleges and universities. The students first received training on a polling place observation protocol, then were sent to a randomly assigned polling location to take extensive notes for two hours (Mann et al., 2018). Experiential contact with the electoral process via polling center observations encouraged student interest in future civic engagement and electoral science research (Mann et al., 2018). Participants were engaged in a purposefully nonpartisan political manner on multiple campuses across the country, suggesting mere proximity to political engagement work can result in common findings regardless of academic setting. Students in the study are unlikely to participate in the exact political engagement activity, but they may volunteer at polling locations on election day, experiencing similar learning.

Although the faculty-led studies reviewed offer some insight into the lived experience of nonpartisan political activity, few studies employed qualitative methods to gain insight into student experience of nonpartisan political engagement. Additionally, none of the studies focused specifically on student-driven, out-of-class or cocurricular involvement in nonpartisan political engagement work. In a recent study of classroom interventions supporting first year student voting, scholars encouraged more colleges and universities, "to attempt more evidence-based interventions to promote voter turnout—with the potential to expand the pool of young voters in future elections" (Bergan, et al., 2021, p. 19). Students in the study engaged in student led, out-of-class activities, sometimes associated with student organizations. Thus, I now turn to research on activities not tied to academic programs to offer existing scholarly understanding.

Cocurricular Activity

Cocurricular experiences are noncompulsory, meaning students decide whether or not to apply to or volunteer for such opportunities. Trolian and Barnhardt (2017) described joining cocurricular associations as important "levers for understanding, infusing meaning and

appreciating the relative status conferred through one's membership, as well as the power or status that comes from acting as part of a collectivity" (p. 143). In short, cocurricular activities are opportunities with which students choose to associate, not mandated as part of the academic curriculum, but become meaningful to student learning and development.

Evidence supports the importance of peer relationships in the political engagement of young adults (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). If a student's peer group is politically engaged, they are more likely to be engaged (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). Colleges and universities support a plethora of opportunities for students to associate with various groups or communities outside of the classroom. A key component to political engagement "involves learning within a politically active group or community—people consciously engaging in politics and trying to get things done around some shared political concern" (Beaumont, 2013, p. 51). The existing research on cocurricular activity indicates evidence of the development of civic learning through student organizations (Strachan & Bennion, 2016; Strachan & Senter, 2013; Trolian & Barnhardt, 2017).

Studies of student involvement in cocurricular activities offer insight during transformative periods of life (Strachan & Senter, 2013). Involvement in student organizations, specifically Greek organizations can "cultivate members' civic identities, political skills, and political efficacy" (Strachan & Senter, 2013, p. 385). Studying student organizations prioritizes learning of politically relevant skills and perspectives (Strachan & Senter, 2013). Despite the call by researchers like Strachan and Senter (2013) to examine how cocurricular experiences influence civic and political measures, little research has advanced this line of inquiry.

A study sought to understand whether or not relationships exist between self-selected cocurricular involvements and how likely students were to characterize social and political involvement as important upon graduation from college (Trolian & Barnhardt, 2017). Results of

the study indicated participation in two specific kinds of cocurricular activities led students to view social and political involvement as important beyond college: religious organizations and peer education activities (Trolian & Barnhardt, 2017). Association with religious organizations suggested affiliating with a third-party organization outside of the institution holds meaning in developing a sense of future civic and political involvement. The authors contended "the combination of one's skills, content knowledge, and community connections cultivates social capital, and reinforces the idea that community involvement is valuable" (Trolian & Barnhardt, 2017, p. 152). Peer educators support their campus community by engaging their peers in learning, typically in health-related efforts. The National Peer Educator Study found peer educators demonstrated strong gains in various learning outcomes, including civic engagement measures (Wawrzynski et al., 2011). The authors stated, "Due to their role on campus and the visibility that comes with it, peer educators are seen as role models for appropriate behavior" (Wawrzynski et al., 2011, p. 26). Peer educators therefore influence their peers through campus life. Unfortunately, little is known about peer educators promoting nonpartisan political engagement through organized programs. Next, I turn to research on campus-wide events.

Campus-Wide Events

In the following section, I review three studies to offer insight into the student experience of organizing campus-based political engagement events. Studies of campus-wide events and programs maintain relevance to the study because students engaged in cocurricular nonpartisan political activity are often involved with planning and executing public events.

A study on a festival-style event as part of a national debate watch effort from the Commission on Presidential Debates, provided insight into the experience of both organizers and over 600 student, faculty, and community attendees (Howard & Posler, 2012). Students planned

many aspects of the program including fundraising and staffing a voter registration table. To understand experiences of participants, researchers employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, using pre- and post-test surveys. Student attendees did not shift their political beliefs about candidates or issues (Howard & Posler, 2012). The organizers discovered the importance of incorporating aspects of entertainment to attract and retain attendees (Howard & Posler, 2012). The study provided some insight into the student experience of organizing and hosting one specific nonpartisan political engagement event on a single campus.

Next, a study reviewed a mid-sized public university's annual Citizenship and Democracy Week, where faculty and staff organized over a dozen interdisciplinary programs for students and community members (Forren, 2017). Over 95% of students indicated programming increased their interest in politics and community affairs (Forren, 2017). Perhaps most relevant to the study, findings indicated program organizers created "a rich web of interpersonal networks" (Forren, 2017, p. 227). The networks resulted in knowledge-sharing between members of the community invested in increasing political engagement opportunities.

Finally, an interdisciplinary grant-funded effort organized by several faculty members at a mid-sized liberal arts college, included a blend of cocurricular and formal classroom interventions (Yanus et al., 2015). Students planned and organized three out-of-class colloquia events intended to increase discourse across political differences (Yanus et al., 2015). The study found formal coursework provided the lowest impact on political engagement and efficacy compared to out-of-class events, attributing this finding to preexisting high political interest of students who enrolled in the courses (Yanus et al., 2015). Although the project offered a compelling campus political engagement model, the absence of student voice limited

understanding the activities from the student point of view. Next, I review literature focused on informal encounters in the lived experiences of students involved in nonpartisan political work.

Informal Political Engagement Experiences

The previous section focused on formal activities and experiences in political engagement, specific to nonpartisan political activity. However, students participating in nonpartisan political activity also experience informal interactions in carrying out their role. In the following section, I review literature to account for informal interactions. The following literature in particular influenced the questions I asked students in the study. I encouraged students to not only share about their formal interactions, but I also invited students to share about the casual interactions as part of their lived experience. The literature I now outline provides further understanding in what is known about the types of informal experiences.

Civic Talk

Although political communication between and among everyday people is one of the oldest human interactions, the phenomenon remained understudied until recently (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). Scholars now refer to the informal interactions among people as civic talk, sometimes described as "discussing politics and current events in one's social network" (Klofstad, 2009, p. 857). Civic talk is understudied because naturally occurring interactions are so obvious, but also so difficult to study (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). Over the course of the past two decades, however, scholars increased focus on informal interactions. Walsh (2003) argued, "Informal interaction should not be overlooked, because it is a way in which people collectively develop fundamental tools of political understanding" (p. 2). Research suggested politically engaged college students may develop their tools of political understanding and influence peers through informal interactions.

Further, evidence indicated civic talk influences civic participation (Klofstad, 2009). The positive relationship between civic talk and participation is noteworthy because civic participation is necessary for a functioning democracy (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016). A study about the relationships between and among residential hall classmates found discussion among roommates more consistently influenced political participation than interactions with peers in the general hall context (Klofstad, 2015). Similarly, a study found family, friends, and roommates were influential in processing political information (Kiesa et al., 2003). These examples suggested proximity and the nature of the relationship matter and students involved in nonpartisan political activity thus influence peers in their network.

Political networks are defined as "the social network members with whom an individual discusses politics, elections, or government" (Sinclair, 2012, p. xii). Overwhelmed by the amount of information and distrust of the motivations behind sources of information, people turn to individuals in their network to learn more about candidates and current events (Sinclair, 2012). Students involved in nonpartisan political activity therefore serve an important role on their campuses, offering trusted, nonpartisan information about politics, how to register to vote, candidates, and more. Informal conversations result in knowledge exchange whereby voters synthesize competing information (Sinclair, 2012). The political network, those whom someone has conversations with, can profoundly inform and influence attitudes and behaviors (Sinclair, 2012). Students engaged in nonpartisan political activity seek to influence the political engagement of their network.

When engaging in informal exchanges regarding politics and current events, there is some research on the stocks of knowledge people use in conversation. One study utilized transcripts and fieldnotes from two separate ethnographies of political talk and in-depth

interviews to better understand how people come to their political convictions on a variety of topics (Cramer & Toff, 2017). Findings suggested people utilized personal experience just as much as facts garnered through the media to formulate their opinions. Cramer and Toff (2017) explained, "Even when they [community members] are discussing facts, they do so with reference to and often filtered through the perspectives developed through their own lived experiences" (p. 765). The finding further situated the role of lived experience in the study of political engagement. Students involved in nonpartisan political engagement likely pull from their own experiences to influence their peers.

The literature offered two explanations for why someone would engage in an informal conversation about politics, social and civic motivation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016). Social motivation entailed allowing political conversation to emerge naturally, related to relationship-building (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016). Civic motivation, on the other hand, was tied to goal-oriented outcomes like attempting to change someone's mind on a topic or trying to get someone to behave differently (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016). Scholars found no matter the motivation for conversation, either motivation led to civic participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016). Young people were more likely to hold social motivations for engaging in political discussion (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016). Some students, then, may be motivated to be involved in nonpartisan political work because of the benefit of social connection and as a byproduct, influence peers.

Political Disagreement

Whereas civic talk refers to naturally occurring conversations about politics and current events (Klofstad, 2009), political disagreement is defined as "conversations where individuals are exposed to viewpoints that are different from their own" (Klofstad et al., 2013, p. 121). A study on political disagreement examined the relationship between political disagreement and

various measures of political preference found within the 2008 American National Election Studies data (Klofstad et al., 2013). Findings demonstrated individuals with stronger partisan beliefs encountered more political disagreement in their political networks (Klofstad et al., 2013). Individuals who hold firm to their convictions are likely to encounter friction in everyday conversations about politics. Encountering different perspectives in conversation offered the opportunity for participants to reexamine their beliefs (Klofstad et al., 2013). Students engaged in nonpartisan political activity confront ideas different from their own, while maintaining a nonpartisan political stance.

A quantitative study sought to determine whether or not disagreement negatively influenced motivation to participate in elections (Pattie & Johnston, 2009). Supporting evidence viewed disagreement as constructive, leading to increased political tolerance and even suggesting motivation to participate (Pattie & Johnston, 2009). The findings suggested students may derive motivation, in part, from encounters across political differences. Students participating in nonpartisan political engagement likely encounter different opinions than their own and may find motivation to continue such engagement because of these very interactions. Next, I review literature on how politically engaged college students orient themselves to civic and political life.

Student Relationship to Political and Civic Life

The study attempted to gain an understanding of the lived experience of nonpartisan political activity and how students relate to political and civic life following their involvement. Although research does not conclusively substantiate concerns, evidence suggests today's college students demonstrate less ambition for future involvement in politics than previous generations (Lawless et al., 2015). When students are involved in purposeful activities, however, research indicates a positive influence on future interest. For example, students involved in

various course-based experiential learning activities expressed intent to continue involvement in similar activities (Mann et al., 2018; Trolian & Barnhardt, 2017). Additionally, the habit-forming nature of political engagement (Thomas & McFarland, 2010) reveals students may seek to cultivate their civic involvement into the future. Research is limited, however, in providing insight into understanding how students involved in nonpartisan political activity characterize their lived experiences and what relationship, if any, the experiences hold in their future aspiration for civic engagement.

Next, I turn to literature relevant to explore the way politically engaged students relate to political and civic engagement. I begin by exploring political motivation, a concept demonstrating why some students become politically engaged in the first place, barriers to motivation, and factors for continued involvement. I then discuss two distinct but related topics, civic duty and political trust, suggesting possible conceptual explanations as to how students who participate in nonpartisan political activity orient themselves prior to and after involvement.

Political Motivation

Politically motivated people, like the students under examination in the study, seek education to develop their political skills (Colby et al., 2010). Exercising the skills cultivated through education can in turn increase motivation, but some level of motivation must first exist. Knowledge, skill, and motivation are dynamic and self-sustaining concepts, all contributing to student political engagement (Colby et al., 2010). For example, political knowledge such as understanding of political systems, processes, history, and current events can serve as motivation for political participation. Students then cultivate skills, such as lobbying political officials, organizing community members regarding a problem in the community, or navigating voter registration. Emotions can serve as motivation in one of two ways. Negative emotions, such as

56

fear and anger motivate political learning and participation, while positive emotions, such as optimism and a desire for joining something bigger than oneself, also serve to direct participation (Colby et al., 2010). Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are relevant to understanding political engagement (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017). Research suggests motivation presents differently in political participation online versus in person. Offline political participation is associated with intrinsic, internal motivation and online participation is associated with extrinsic, external motivation (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017). Students involved in nonpartisan political activity engage peers through in-person and online encounters, perhaps representing more meaningful interactions and reinforcing intrinsic motivation. Political efficacy is considered an important component of political motivation (Colby et al., 2010).

Scholars differentiated political efficacy as internal and external (Colby et al., 2010). Internal efficacy is considered a psychological factor defined as "the self-belief that one can understand and participate effectively in politics" (Barrett & Pachi, 2019, p. 12). External efficacy, conversely, is understood as an individual person's perception of the political system's responsiveness to citizens (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). Whereas internal political efficacy consists of an individual person's belief to navigate, participate, and influence the political arena, external political efficacy represents motivation derived from belief in the political system itself. As a result, one can have high internal political efficacy, but believe the local government is not responsive to the needs of the people, resulting in lack of motivation for political engagement. Instead, one might have a low internal political efficacy, and thus disengage completely from the political system altogether.

Aside from a conscious choice to disengage, there are arguably more barriers to political involvement than reasons for participating in the first place. Investment of time, money, and

skills all serve as barriers for anyone seeking to become involved in politics (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Additional barriers for students include navigating voter registration, identifying their polling location, learning about items on the ballot, and a peer group equally inexperienced (Plutzer, 2002). Not seeing the result of energy and time spent, or perhaps feeling disillusioned when a cause one cares about is struck down, stand as barriers to continued political motivation. Political engagement rarely produces an immediate reward such as, "knowing that our actions made a crucial difference in a political outcome we care about" (Colby et al., 2010, p. 139). Students may become disappointed if treated poorly or if unable to achieve the goals they set out to accomplish on their respective campuses. When individuals persist in their political engagement despite the many reasons not to do so, they pull from intrinsic motivation, such as personal values what some scholars refer to as a sense of civic duty (Blais & Achen, 2019).

Civic Duty

The concept of civic duty offers one possible explanation as to how students involved in nonpartisan political activity may orient themselves to politics prior to and following their cocurricular involvement. The notion of civic duty is rooted in philosophy and rational choice theory. Duty is demonstrated through Kant's categorical imperative, described as follows: "Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Kant et al., 2011 [1785], p. 71). Therefore, when deciding upon possible actions, such as to vote or abstain, the categorical imperative upholds a duty to select the action that would be better if everyone chose the same action. Simply put, "the dutiful person votes because she believes that it is the right thing to do" (Blais & Achen, 2019, p. 478). The act of casting a single vote, however, is not necessarily a rational choice as one vote is unlikely to decide the outcome of an election (Blais & Achen, 2019). Therefore, scholars contend the act of casting a

vote must be motivated by something else, perhaps a belief in the importance of acting politically, or a sense of duty. Recent research on civic duty renewed the old argument in favor of sense of duty as an enduring concept to explain voting behavior and political engagement (Blais & Achen, 2019).

The study determined two factors influenced the decision to vote: political preference and sense of duty. Political preference held a central role, whereby, "People vote when an election seems important and engaging, and they stay home when it does not" (Blais & Achen, 2019, p. 474). Politically engaged students may be drawn to involvement because of the perceived significance or stakes of the current political moment. Although the authors found strong political preference influenced voting, their research also confirmed convincing evidence of an ethical consideration in a person's decision to vote (Blais & Achen, 2019). Even in absence of a strong political preference, many voters acted out of a sense of civic duty, believing voting was simply the right thing to do (Blais & Achen, 2019). In addition to influencing voting behavior, "the data show that politically engaged citizens are more likely to have a sense of duty" (Blais & Achen, 2019, p. 494). Applying the concept of civic duty to the students involved in nonpartisan political activity served as a natural extension of civic duty research.

Some scholars, however, suggest not all students embrace a sense of duty and instead align with a different characterization of their political engagement. Scholars theorized a change in the way young people understand democracy, representing a departure from the dutiful citizen model (Bennett et al., 2009). Whereas a dutiful citizen may hold a sense of duty to vote and educate themselves about political issues, an actualizing citizen focuses on lifestyle politics above participating in politics through traditional outlets, such as attending town hall forums, contacting public officials, and showing up to vote. Instead, the actualizing citizen participates in

"political consumerism, volunteering, and social activism" (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 107).

Political consumerism is best described as making a political statement through the choices of where and how to spend money. An actualizing citizen may care deeply about an issue and volunteer for an organization, but then fails to leverage the formal political systems to advocate for the same issue. Students involved in nonpartisan political activity encounter the tension between the dutiful and actualizing citizen in their peer interactions. Finally, the actualizing citizen participates in social activism, a valuable form of political engagement, not always reflecting trust in the system. Though distinct from the concept of civic duty, political trust maintains relevance to the study.

Political Trust (and Distrust)

While civic duty may arguably drive student involvement in nonpartisan political activity and characterization of their future civic engagement, how students articulate their trust or distrust in the political system and process is also relevant. Better understanding whether or not political trust or distrust influence student behavior prior to or after student involvement in nonpartisan political activity offers important insight into the nonpartisan political experience. In the following section, I define political trust and distrust by examining research on activism in the 1960s and 1970s. I then demonstrate depth in understanding political trust in college students by reviewing a study highlighting the importance of precollege experiences in relation to political trust. Finally, I place the concept of political trust within the current political context.

Research on political trust stems from research on youth activism in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1964, the Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee organized a voter registration drive, now known as Freedom Summer, to register Black citizens in Mississippi (McAdam, 1988). Over a thousand people, many White college students from the north, were met with violence,

resulting in arrests, beatings, and the death of three young activists (McAdam, 1988). During the same era, young people expressed frustration, sometimes violently in many cities, resulting in riots (Hart & Gullan, 2010). Comparing research on students participating in Freedom Summer (McAdam, 1988) with students participating in riots (Paige, 1971), Hart and Gullan (2010) held strong evidence both student populations were politically engaged. The difference between young adults participating in conventional forms of political engagement and students taking part in activities considered destructive rested in different notions of trust in the political system (Hart & Gullan, 2010). Students involved in riots lacked trust in the political system, while students who boarded busses to Mississippi placed trust in the political system, or at a minimum believed in their ability to influence or to change the system by leveraging tools within the system.

Fortunately, students participating in nonpartisan political activity today do not typically face the same political climate and fear of imprisonment or violence for their involvement in nonpartisan political engagement. Although students face some risks, their social involvement, at a minimum, entails some level of becoming "psychologically vulnerable" (Loeb, 2010, p. 29). Also, as mentioned previously, many undocumented students avoid political engagement activity, both because the formal political system does not recognize their voice through the right to vote and also out of fear (Mendes & Change, 2019). Political trust, therefore, represents a certain level of social privilege in the ability to engage in the political system.

Although the activities performed today by students are similar to those of the students volunteering during Freedom Summer, current research does not offer insight into whether or not political trust remains a key component of student relationship with civic engagement following nonpartisan political engagement. Identity-based activism research, however, suggested students participating in activism expressed frustration with formal political systems (Linder et al., 2019).

Frustration or distrust of the political system differs from apathy, or lack of interest. Some young people may be referred to as apolitical, where they "may simply not have any interest in political matters" (Barrett & Pachi, 2019, p. 4). Conversely, some young people may actually be "antipolitical and vehemently refuse to engage with political matters" (Barrett & Pachi, 2019, p. 4). Due to their actions and commitment to educating peers, students participating in nonpartisan political activity arguably hold a fair amount of trust in the political system, possibly stemming from precollege experiences.

Research on precollege notions of political trust offers insight into understanding key concepts which may provide insight into why college students initially become involved in nonpartisan political activity and how they characterize their future involvement. A study found "primary agents of socialization" (Gentry, 2013, p. 59), such as parents, socioeconomic status, citizenship, and education, as formative to political development. In a different study, scholars sought to better understand various ideas of precollege characteristics leading to political trust (Flanagan & Gallay, 2008). Two findings related directly to students involved in nonpartisan political activity. First, the higher the level of parental education, the higher the level of trust students held in political structures upon entering college. Second, ethnically underrepresented students were less likely to trust elected officials, or "to believe that the government was interested in ordinary people" (Flanagan & Gallay, 2008, p. 15). As a result, the study indicated social identity shaped notions of political trust. Students involved in nonpartisan political activity may enter the activity holding political trust, though to varying degrees, as influenced by precollege experiences and social identity. Little is known, however, about whether students hold a sense of political trust following their experience, which may in turn influence future perception of civic engagement.

Although politically engaged college students may be drawn to and continue to be motivated by a sense of political trust, they remain immersed in a political climate where their peers distrust politics (Johnson & Ferguson, 2018). In addition to the influence of disillusioned peers, the political climate remains disrupted by distrust. Beyond distrust in the system, there existed widespread distrust of the political establishment leading up to the 2020 election (Fessler, 2019). Also referred to as anti-politics, some Americans viewed politics as "broken and a political class characterized as uncaring, untrustworthy, and out of touch with ordinary people" (Clarke et al., 2018, p. 2). Little is known about whether or not being immersed in a climate of political distrust influences students' future relationship with civic and political life. The study revealed insight into how students described their future civic engagement, accounting for references to political trust and distrust.

Thus far, I reviewed relevant literature providing insight into the lived experiences of politically engaged college students. I then explored work to offer conceptual insight into how students characterize their relationship with civic life. In this final section, I construct a theoretical framework for the study to narrow conceptual gaps unclear in the existing research.

Theoretical Framework

Students in the present study engaged in nonpartisan political activity on a number of college and university campuses throughout the United States. The study sought to not only understand the lived experience of college students involved in nonpartisan political activity but also to learn how students viewed their future civic engagement, employing a qualitative approach to address both research questions. Qualitative research design combines research, theory, and experience to develop a conceptual understanding of the phenomenon studied, meaning a theoretical framework is "*constructed*, not found" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 41). The

theoretical framework of the study is comprised of three primary components: student experience in nonpartisan activity, emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2018), and the campus climate for political learning and engagement in democracy (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Figure 2 represents the visual I developed to depict my conceptual understanding of student experience in nonpartisan activity. I briefly describe the model, then explain the theory informing each component of the model.

Figure 2.

Conceptual Framework for Nonpartisan Political Engagement in Higher Education
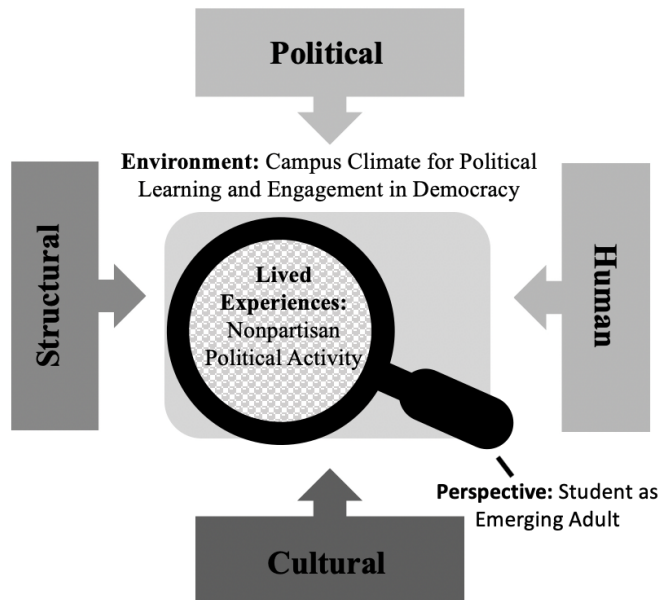
The visual (see Figure 2) helped clarify ideas and assumptions in the study. I adapted the campus climate for political learning and engagement in democracy framework (see Figure 3) to represent the environment for the lived experiences of nonpartisan political activity (Thomas & Brower, 2018). My adaptation included the four major conceptual elements from the original model, the structural, political, human, and cultural frames. The collegiate environment is represented by the light grey rectangle in the middle of the model. The magnifying glass symbolizes the student perspective as an emerging adult (Arnett, 2018), suggesting amplification

of experiences in the context of the student's current life stage. Within the magnifying glass, the checkered design in focus represents the many experiences and interactions the student encounters in their role. Furthermore, each student's experience is shaped by their unique lens. As the visual suggests, the environment, lived experience, and student perspective are embedded within one another inside the central, grey shaded area. For instance, a student may become involved with nonpartisan political activity as a result of an aspect of their experience as an emerging adult. Once the student engages in the experience of nonpartisan political activity, aspects of the campus political climate influence the experience and possibly even the student's sense of self as an emerging adult.

In the following section, I describe the three components of the theoretical framework and the research and theory informing each aspect of the study's design. Then, I discuss a secondary conceptual framework informing my second research question, conceptualizing future aspiration for civic engagement following involvement in nonpartisan political activity.

Conceptualizing Nonpartisan Political Experience

The following section offers conceptual grounding for the lived experience of nonpartisan political experience, represented in Figure 2 as the checkered area within the magnifying glass. Experience and the connection to learning occupy an enduring history in educational philosophy and theory. Dewey (1938) endorsed the importance of experience, stating, "Amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience" (p. 25). Experience was believed to entail either positive or negative implications, all of which influenced subsequent future experience (Dewey, 1938). In the study, students chose to engage in nonpartisan political activity through a national not-for-profit organization with a mission to encourage political engagement.

Applying the role of experience to learning, the theory of political socialization clarified assumptions about the relationships between experience and learning in the political arena (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010). The theory rested on a thesis of action and experience: "Acquisition of skills and attitudes that constitute the elements of citizenship occurs in the doing within a political context" (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010, p. 23). The model utilized situated learning theory, adult scaffolding, and perspective taking as bodies of literature to frame the theory. First, situated learning theory is "based on the idea that individuals acquire habits and identities when they become meaningfully involved in a community of practice" (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010, p. 30). Students engaged in nonpartisan political activity belong to a community of practice. Their community of practice encompassed a national network of peers and a local context on their respective campuses. Second, regarding the concept of adult scaffolding, McIntosh and Youniss (2010) suggested three necessary elements: "training, access to a real political system, and support while participating in that system" (p. 32). Students in the study received all three components of support, most notably connection to an advisor through the Campus Vote Project. Finally, the theory of political socialization referenced the importance of perspective taking, or "the ability to see and understand an issue for a perspective different from one's own" (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010, p. 33). The study accounted for whether or not, and if so, how much students incorporated perspective taking as part of their lived experience of nonpartisan political activity.

Whereas the theory of political socialization offers framing of the student experience of nonpartisan political activity, emerging adulthood (EA) theory extends and deepens understanding of the population of focus in the study. Next, I describe the aspect of my theoretical framework as represented by the magnifying glass in figure 2.

Emerging Adulthood Theory

Students in the study were legal adults caught in between adolescence and adulthood. Societal shifts over the past 50 years resulted in a call for a "new life stage concept" (Arnett, 2018, p. 11), leading to the development of emerging adulthood (EA) theory. EA theory grew out of recognizing fundamental demographic and societal changes revolutionizing the life experience between the years of 18 and 29 years old. Changes included encounters with racial and gender diversity in higher education, postponed age for major traditional life events, and the emergence of technology and the knowledge economy (Arnett, 2018). Since its first iteration which focused on cultural and social features influencing the call for a new way to think about the life stage (Arnett, 2000), EA evolved to include the following five features: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and optimism (Arnett, 2018). In my study, I assumed students involved in nonpartisan political activity navigated these aspects of EA, in turn influencing how students felt and interpreted their lived experiences.

I now describe the five features of EA theory, all relevant to the study. First, emerging adults grapple with identity, meaning "they clarify their sense of who they are and what they want out of life" (Arnett, 2018, p. 15). EA theory does not describe developmental stages, but instead, a general understanding people experience identity formation during this period of life. At the same time students explore their identity, they experience instability represented by the temporary nature of relationships, economic standing, roles, responsibilities, and more (Arnett, 2018). Emerging adults are focused mostly on themselves during these formative years, not necessarily exhibiting selfish behavior, but rather defining who they are, what their commitments will become, among other efforts (Arnett, 2018). Next, students feel caught in-between their youth and adulthood, not quite youth and not quite adults yet (Arnett, 2018). Finally, the

emerging adulthood model includes the experience of optimism, representing the hope students hold to chart a life forward and make contributions into the next stage of life (Arnett, 2018). EA theory offered the study a framework represented by the life stage influencing both the lived experiences of nonpartisan political activity and the aspiration for future civic engagement.

The formation of values and political beliefs, developed in the early-adult years, maintain relevance and often persist late into adulthood (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). The period of emerging adulthood then holds great relevance for students in the study and for their future civic engagement. In addition to navigating their own commitments to political engagement, students in the study also tried to influence the political engagement of their peers who also operated in the emerging adulthood life stage. Theorizing the enduring aspects of generational differences, scholars contend the political experience of a particular cohort takes place in a unique environment shaped by the political climate, events, and possibilities in a given era (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Developmental life stages, coupled with the particular experiences of a generational cohort ultimately shape political and civic behavioral differences among generations (Zukin et al., 2006). Due to the importance of the political climate for the population in the study, the theoretical framework includes complex consideration of the environment.

Campus Political Climate

The environment is an important aspect of the student experience in the study. Dewey (1938) described the environment as "whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes and capacities to create the experience which is had" (p. 44). Young people are not passive consumers of their environments, but instead operate as "highly active agents who actively select information to which they attend in their environments" (Barrett & Pachi, 2019, p. 111). Students in the study navigated the environment as representatives of political engagement

to their peers, faculty, staff and even external stakeholders. Civic and political participation are influenced by "a wide range of macro, demographic, and social factors" (Barrett & Pachi, 2019, p. 110). Macro factors include environmental factors such as the political context and history, laws and politics, the media, and more. Demographic factors include socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, race, and ability, among other identity categories and intrapersonal psychological factors (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). Social factors include civic and political behavior shaped by the political context (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). Altogether, the physical location, context of the sociopolitical period, self-identified demographics of participants, and political climate make the study unique and not necessarily replicable. The current study does not intend to extend understanding broadly, but instead provides a snapshot in time of a particular sample of students and dynamics of the political era and institutional climates for political learning in 2020.

In seeking a comprehensive way to understand the complex dynamics students experienced in the collegiate environment, I turned to Thomas and Brower's (2018) framework on campus climate for political learning and engagement in democracy (see Figure 3). Campuses range in their approach to support political learning and democratic engagement (Thomas & Bower, 2019). In a study of colleges and universities characterized by high student voter engagement, common attributes included "gatherings, celebrations, discussions, high emotions, and excitement" (Thomas & Brower, 2017, p. 13), especially but not only during election years. Campuses with high levels of political learning and engagement fostered a cohesive and integrated approach, whereby no single department, person, or structure drove the efforts (Thomas & Brower, 2017). In the study, students worked on campuses with diverse campus political climates. The campus climate for political learning and engagement in democracy conceptual framework offers a means to develop a comprehensive understanding of the lived

experience of politically engaged students. The authors posited, "Campus climates reflect widely shared sets of norms, patterns of behaviors, and attitudes, as well as structures and programs that manifest or reinforce those institutional attributes" (Thomas & Brower, 2017, p. 15). Next, I review each element of the framework relevant to the study.

Figure 3.

Campus Climate for Political Learning and Engagement in Democracy Conceptual Framework
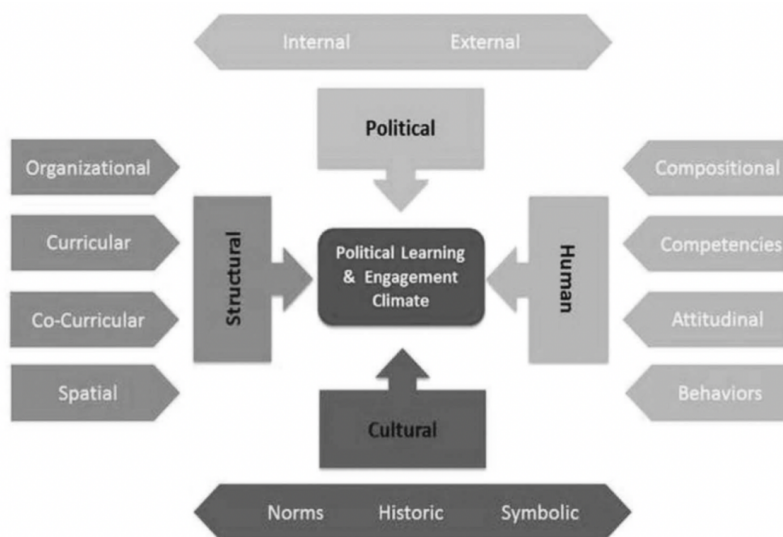
Note. © 2018 Nancy Thomas and Margaret Brower. Reproduced by permission of Nancy Thomas and Margaret Brower 2/12/2020. Permission to reuse must be obtained from rightsholders.

Thomas and Brower (2018) proposed the political campus climate model to assist in the examination of "campus conditions for political civic learning and engagement" (p. 259). The authors characterized campus political climate as "a complex ecosystem of interconnected structural, cultural, human, and political factors that affect college student learning" (Thomas & Brower, 2018, p. 247). The model expanded upon Bolman and Deal's (2017) four frames model for understanding organizations through the elements of structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. In place of the symbolic frame, Thomas and Brower (2018) redefined the area as the cultural frame in recognizing "no two colleges and universities are alike" (p. 254). The

structural aspect of the model included four areas, namely organizational, curricular, cocurricular, and spatial (Thomas & Brower, 2018). By definition, students in the study operated through the cocurricular aspect of the environment but moved through curricular, organizational, and physical aspects of the environment. Next, the political frame defined "how decisions are made, who has power, voice, and authority" (Thomas & Brower, 2018, p. 256). The political frame included both internal and external dimensions. The internal political frame included how the institution itself made decisions, who held power, and ways budgets were designed and allocated. The external dimension largely included how external actors viewed the campus. For example, the external political dimension included whether or not local candidates and political officials visited the campus to speak with students. Finally, the human frame accounted for the breadth and depth of diverse perspectives and experiences present among students, faculty, staff, and stakeholders. The human dimension included factors like precollege experiences and the interaction of skills and behaviors in the environment. The study used the campus climate for political learning and engagement in democracy framework in research design and data analysis.

Theorizing Future Aspiration for Civic Engagement

In an earlier section of the present chapter, I discussed research and theory offering insight into students' relationship to civic and political life. I began by exploring political motivation (Colby et al., 2010), then I discussed two distinct concepts, civic duty (Blais & Achen, 2019) and political trust (Flanagan & Gallay, 2008). All literature reviewed offered conceptual insight into how students related to civic and political life prior to, during, and after involvement. None of the concepts reviewed, however, were designed specifically for students involved in nonpartisan political activity. Accordingly, I utilized these bodies of literature to address my second research question, theorizing future aspiration for civic engagement.

In an effort to visualize the complex dynamics influencing aspiration for future civic engagement, I constructed a model informed by a variety of underlying concepts. As demonstrated in figure 4, the study sought to understand which, if any, of the following dynamics informed how students characterized their future desired involvement in civic life following their nonpartisan political activity. The image demonstrates overlapping, intersecting, and unknown elements contributing to how students described their intentions. Using my conceptual framing on aspiration for future involvement in civic life, I first explored the ways students enter into the activity, attempting to garner an understanding of student motivation for nonpartisan political engagement. An underlying assumption I accounted for prior to conducting the study is students involved in nonpartisan political activity hold a sense of civic duty and demonstrated trust in the political system.

Figure 4.

Conceptualizing Student Aspiration for Future Civic Engagement
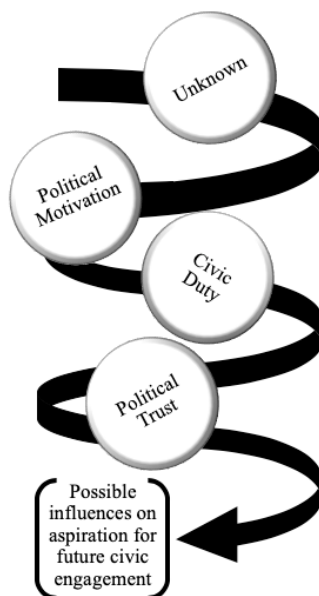
Accordingly, I identified whether or not the students involved in nonpartisan political activity remained driven by a sense of civic duty (Blais & Achen, 2019) and held trust in the

political system (Flanagan & Gallay, 2008) following their involvement. In the study's findings, I accounted for ways students characterized their future aspiration for involvement in civic life in relation to civic duty and political trust. I coded for ideas not captured by the theories described in the model, represented by the word unknown in the model. Finally, I revisit this proposed conceptual model in the data analysis and implications of the study.

Conclusion

This second chapter situated the study in the scholarly discourse. First, I framed the study by defining civic, democratic engagement, and political engagement. I categorized research on political engagement as partisan, activist, and nonpartisan political engagement. Next, I outlined the ways scholars studied college student nonpartisan political engagement leading up to the study. I began by reviewing the few existing studies on lived experiences of political engagement, then looked to nonpartisan political interventions in the classroom and in cocurricular activity. I closed by discussing campus-wide events and programs. By reviewing the ways nonpartisan political engagement efforts are represented in the literature, I established a conceptual foundation, while simultaneously drawing attention to the need for more research. Next, I reviewed literature on informal political engagement experiences, representing the everyday interactions students in the study may encounter. I then reviewed theories related to my second research question, including political motivation, civic duty and political trust. In the final section, I established a theoretical framework for the study: A three-part model representing the campus political climate, lived experience of nonpartisan political activity, and student perspective by way of emerging adulthood theory. Finally, I offered a theoretical guide for my second research question, attempting to understand how students characterize their future aspiration for civic engagement.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The study prioritized the perspectives of college students navigating nonpartisan political engagement and sought to understand how their lived experience influenced future aspiration for civic engagement. A political scientist known for employing qualitative methods to study complex dynamics among the electorate stated, "Perhaps the main inputs to political preferences are not concrete facts from mass-mediated news, but instead lived experience" (Cramer, 2016, p. 446). Flanagan (2003) echoed these sentiments in the context of studying politically engaged young people, declaring, "It is incumbent on those of us who focus on this period of life to be more clever in listening to what young people have to say and in hearing the political insights in their conversations" (p. 261). The research methodology employed in this study encouraged students to share their lived experience and used reflection as a means to gather insights into their experience. The two research questions of the study are outlined below.

- RQ1: What are the lived experiences of politically engaged college students involved in nonpartisan political activity leading up to the 2020 U.S. election?

- RQ2: How do these experiences of nonpartisan political activity influence student aspiration for future civic engagement?

In the subsequent chapter, I outline the research design and methodology used to address these research questions. The chapter is organized in the following order (1) a review of the research paradigm; (2) an account of the methodological approach; (3) a description of the methods; (4) an explanation of the data collection process; (5) an outline of the data analysis strategy; (6) a narrative of efforts to promote trustworthiness and ethical research choices; (7) an articulation of the limitations of the study; and (8) a brief positionality reflection.

Research Paradigm

Although some scholars use the terms paradigm or theoretical perspective interchangeably, Broido and Manning (2002) framed the concepts in relation to one another, stating, "Research can be understood as arising from particular paradigms that inform particular theoretical perspectives" (p. 435). Paradigms offer an overarching philosophical stance from which theoretical perspectives follow. Consistent with this framing, Jones et al. (2014) referred to a paradigm as "a set of interconnected or related assumptions or beliefs" (p. 3). Generally speaking, the two overarching paradigms are the objectivist and the constructivist paradigm (Broido & Manning, 2002). Whereas objectivist researchers rely on certainty and control, constructivist researchers view the world as contextual. As a researcher, I operated from a constructivist paradigm, where "the researcher-respondent relationship is subjective, interactive, and interdependent" (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 436). My constructivist paradigm aligned with the research questions and goals of the study, requiring me to develop strong rapport with student participants to gain insight into their experiences.

The nature of knowledge and structure of reality, defined as epistemology and ontology respectively, underlie all research including the present study (Jones et al., 2014). In line with my epistemological stance, I believe knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participant. Jones et al. (2014) encouraged researchers to not only state their epistemology and ontology, but also to develop an awareness of "what it is they say they are rejecting" (p. 12). Therefore, I confront the notion of purely objective social science research. In all qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument and thus drives the direction of research goals, process, and interpretation (Saldaña, 2011). Even a researcher claiming to operate from an objectivist paradigm makes deliberate decisions in their research design, data collection, data analysis and

presentation of research findings. I described the study broadly as qualitative, which is "best approached provisionally since this mode of inquiry is emergent and evolutionary in its process" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 66). I established a methodology and subsequent methods for carrying out data collection and interpretation but remained responsive to the needs of the study to address the research questions. In every decision, the student participant voice and perspective took precedence to address each research question and underlying research problem.

Methodology

The methodology of a research study offers "a strategy that guides the actual research plan" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 75). In seeking a methodological approach, I drew from qualitative traditions to demonstrate the "expressive, symbolic components of constructing a political self in interaction with others" (Binder & Wood, 2014, p. 222). To gain insight into the complex dimensions of how students experience nonpartisan political activity, I engaged in conversations with students to co-construct the meaning of the data with participants. All themes were developed in consultation with participants. The lived experience tradition in qualitative research privileges the unique perspectives of human lives, "creating a space for storytelling, interpretation, and meaning-making" (Boylorn, 2012, p. 2). To understand how students characterized future civic engagement following the election, I encouraged reflection. I defined the methodology of the study as a qualitative approach influenced by narrative traditions.

In narrative inquiry, stories serve as the foundation of the research approach. Narrative inquiry was defined as "a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 17). The first research question sought to gain insight into the lived experience of a particular student involvement in a unique sociopolitical context. Clandinin (2016) claimed narrative inquiry as "both a relational methodology for studying

experience as well as an aspect of experience" (p. 17). Social science scholars conduct narrative research with one of two goals in mind, either descriptive, sharing the lived experience of participants, or explanatory, offering an answer to questions seeking to understand why particular phenomena exist (Polkinghorne, 1988). The study aimed to achieve the descriptive goal found in the narrative tradition, representing data as stories, while also sharing student profiles and weaving together perspectives of the lived experience.

Throughout the course of the project, students told stories of their lived experience. There is a distinct difference between a story and a narrative. Whereas participants tell stories, researchers seek to identify the "structures that storytellers rely on" (Frank, 2000, p. 354) in constructing a narrative. The scholar uses existing literature and social context to structure stories in a manner the storyteller may not give voice to in their stories (Riley & Hawe, 2005). In the study, I brought the data together and retold stories through a narrative presentation. In line with my constructivist approach, I encouraged student interaction with my representation of the findings. Narratives bring data to life in a meaningful and organized way, providing readers with a "linear story line" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 12). Story lines provide a memorable and insightful reading experience, offering a glimpse into the context of the lived experience. The study's research questions aligned with the use of narrative techniques to "account for particular episodes to more general life stories" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 163). I employed Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space to not only encourage students to reflect internally and externally, but also to consider "temporality–past, present, and future" (p. 50). Specific to the study, the narrative approach conveyed the meaning students made of their lived experience. Following the election, through focus groups, I asked students to reflect upon how they orient themselves to civic life following their nonpartisan experiences.

Research Methods

Hollander and Longo (2008) emphasized the value of underscoring student voice in scholarly research on political engagement stating, "We could not continue to talk about students, but we had to have conversations with students" (p. 1). The study relied upon three research methods: semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 college students involved in nonpartisan political activity leading up to the 2020 election to address my first research question. Interviews offer actual and affective insight into the lived experience of participants (Saldaña, 2011). I invited the same participants to join a focus group discussion following the 2020 election. I selected a qualitative tradition of lived experience as a means, "to evoke an emotional response from readers and scholars" (Boylorn, 2012, p. 2). In the following section, I detailed my participant and research site selection, sampling strategy, data collection, and data analysis strategy.

Participant and Research Site Selection

Participants in the study were politically engaged college students involved with nonpartisan political activity. I did not account for specific activities in which students participated, instead, I selected students who worked for the Campus Vote Project (CVP), an organization with a nonpartisan mission to increase political engagement of college students. CVP is involved with hiring, training, and advising over 340 college students across the nation to encourage voter participation and involvement in politics at the local, state, and national levels. The students therefore participated in a number of nonpartisan political experiences in a variety of state and institutional contexts. Although CVP was the organization students affiliated with, students in the study attended a diverse range of colleges and universities across the country. In detailing my results, I provided a profile of each student, including institutional characteristics,

and context using information provided through the intake form (see Appendix B) and through publicly available information.

I selected CVP as the research site for three reasons. First, the organization held a strong commitment to their nonpartisan political mission to support college and university campuses. As discussed previously, I hope the study demonstrates the role higher education and student affairs can play in the promotion of political engagement through nonpartisan cocurricular activity. Second, CVP maintained connections to a broad range of state and institutional contexts. The theoretical framework accounted for the environment as a key feature of student experience, so working with CVP allowed the study to investigate diverse institutional contexts at the same time. Finally, students affiliated with CVP received training and staff support throughout their experience. The organizational structure of CVP played an instrumental role in the participant recruitment strategy for the study.

Participant Recruitment

To narrow the pool of over 340 potential student participants, I requested nominations from the state coordinators employed by CVP (see Appendix A). These state coordinators served as advisors to the students participating in nonpartisan political engagement activity throughout a variety of state and regional contexts. In their role with CVP, the students were referred to as democracy fellows. The state coordinators conducted student training and held monthly check-in meetings with the fellows in their state or region. Additionally, the fellows were required to submit summative updates about their activities on a regular basis. As a result, state coordinators were uniquely positioned to nominate students who were particularly engaged. Seeking the insight from the state coordinators was critical as I wanted to avoid interviewing students who affiliated with CVP in name only and to acquire data from students genuinely engrossed in the

lived experience under examination. After receiving nominations, I invited students and requested they complete an intake form (see Appendix B). The form gathered relevant information about the student, including their area of study, year in college, and self-identified demographic questions. I also noted whether or not the institution received the voter friendly campus designation. I indicated relevance of recording the voter friendly campus designation in the study's findings. Also, given the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on student experiences, I also tracked the institutional response to the virus throughout the year.

I did not predetermine a specific number of participants before beginning data collection. Instead, I employed an emergent form of data collection where "the researcher identifies additional sites or individuals who hold the potential of yielding theoretically relevant data" (Jones et al, 2014, p. 114). As such, once I developed themes, I noted patterns of theme reoccurrence and interviewed additional students until I reached saturation. Scholars described saturation as the point "when the researcher begins to hear the same or similar kinds of information related to categories of analysis" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 114). Therefore, I ended interviewing when I collected enough information for development of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Next, I address two possible concerns regarding my sampling strategy: I share rationale for having an arguably small sample size and I defend my use of an emergent design.

Some methodological approaches offer guidance on possible ranges in numbers of participants, but not a definite number all researchers must adhere to in their study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The narrative approach to research, for example, often focuses on a small number of cases (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The small size of the sample allows the researcher to focus on the particular case or cases in depth. Jones et al. (2014) stated, "Regardless of methodological approach, sampling is usually a fluid, flexible, and ongoing process" (p. 115). Qualitative

research traditionally holds a practice of depth over breadth "to study a few sites or individuals but also to collect extensive detail about each site or individual studied" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 158). Small sample size is not emblematic of poor qualitative research. Instead of focusing on obtaining a certain number of participants, the sampling should seek what many scholars refer to as information rich cases: "What constitutes information-rich cases will depend upon the phenomenon under investigation, the methodological approach, and the questions designed to illuminate understanding of this phenomenon" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 107). Stating an arbitrary number prior to the start of a study would have undermined the depth of focus, concept of emergent design, and fluidity to adjust with each interview in this qualitative study. Prioritizing the theoretical value of strong, information-rich cases may yield greater understanding of a phenomenon. While quantitative research seeks to generalize and find correlative relationships between variables, qualitative research seeks to give a richness in shape, meaning, and perspective to lived experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The study offers a snapshot of an understudied student activity in a unique context, not ever likely to be reproduced exactly the same way. In detailing my data collection methods, however, I offer greater transparency and confidence in the veracity of the findings.

Data Collection

My data collection process allowed me to gain access to important information to address my two research questions. Consistent with my belief in the co-construction of knowledge, I treated "interviewees as experts" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 39). I built trust by sharing my admiration for their role as nonpartisan actors seeking to encourage political engagement in their community. I named the power dynamic inherent in research and I asked students to respond authentically to questions, resisting the urge to share what they thought I wanted to hear as the

researcher. I conducted semi-structured interviews with students from August through November 2020. I selected the semi-structured interview format to fit each student's unique personality and communication style. Following the election on November 3, 2020 I invited students who participated in an interview to take part in a focus group with other fellows.

I developed my interview questions using major concepts discussed in the literature review and theoretical framework (Appendix C). The interview questions allowed for flexibility by incorporating probes to gain clarity. Follow-up questions encourage the researcher to "pick up on cues offered by the interviewee" (Patton, 2015, p. 466). The loose structure of interview strategies used in assessing civic and political engagement encourages "freedom for respondents to develop their own thoughts and follow their own thought processes" (Bennion, 2013, p. 418). The interview questions were separated into three overarching interview sections: (a) political motivation and preparation; (b) nonpartisan political activity; and (c) civic duty, trust, and learning. I grounded each section in relevant concepts discussed in the existing research. The questions sought to encourage students to share stories of their lived experience.

Because I interviewed students situated in various physical locations across the United States, I conducted interviews via video conference hosted through a university maintained online platform. After informing participants I intended to record the session, I used the recording feature in the online system so I could focus fully on the interview and revisit the recording later for transcription and data analysis. Using audio recording allowed me to listen intently and increased the quality and responsiveness of my semi-structured interview questions for each interview. I stored the recording device and the data in a secure location. I used encryption for storage of digital files to ensure confidentiality of the student data. I employed an automated transcription service to produce an initial transcript but listened to all interview

recordings to ensure line-by-line accuracy. Listening to all interview recordings allowed me to be immersed in the data. Immediately following the interview, I shared the transcription of the interview text with participants, asking if they wanted to expand on any components discussed or to adjust statements to improve accuracy of their lived experience. My correspondence served as a means to continue to establish trust with participants while also providing space for reflection.

Data collection remained on-going and iterative. Following early data analysis, I used purposeful sampling "to locate participants who are going through some dimension or particular stage of the trajectory" of experience (Jones et al., 2014, p. 81). I maintained flexibility to find new participants among the nominated pool of students. Theoretical sampling remained "concept driven, not person driven" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 81). I did not set a projected number of interview subjects, as the goal was to reach a point of saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Instead, I gathered enough information to address both of the research questions. Throughout data analysis, I engaged in memo writing, a reflective process of writing ideas throughout the analysis (Jones et al., 2014). The memos became part of my data and were used for analysis.

Following the election, I invited students to participate in one of four focus groups, all conducted using online video conferencing. Although some students continued working through the fall and spring semesters, the major thrust of their involvement culminated on election day. Although video conferencing is a relatively understudied mode of conducting focus groups, evidence suggests participants actually prefer the convenience of the modality, affording a time effective way to access research participation (Archibald et al., 2019). The interactive nature of a focus group allowed participants to share openly, and also allowed "participants to highlight issues of importance to them" (Hennink & Leavy, 2014, p. 3). I sought to establish common understanding of the shared virtual space, and to promote interaction between participants

(Hennink & Leavy, 2014). I remained attentive to nonverbal cues, such as head nods, to invite others into the conversations. The use of "group probes" (p. 77), such as inviting participants to affirm or share differencing experiences or perspectives, allowed me to gain further depth (Hennink & Leavy, 2014). I also encouraged students to react in the text chat as others shared.

The focus group protocol (see Appendix D) encouraged students to reflect on their lived experience leading up to the 2020 election since their individual interview and to ponder the influence of their involvement on their future aspirations for civic engagement following the peak of their involvement. In addition to the interview and document analysis, I employed member checking throughout the research process to increase trustworthiness. I sent student profiles and findings to participants and incorporated their feedback. Data analysis, described in the next section, was ongoing and initiated at the start of data collection.

Data Analysis Strategy

I conducted this constructivist qualitative study on the lived experiences of students involved in nonpartisan political activity in an iterative manner. I began analysis of data as soon as I started data collection. I listened to audio recordings multiple times from start to finish and revisited transcripts to gain new insights. My data analysis comprised of a coding protocol and incorporation of narrative techniques for data analysis. I made constant comparison of data throughout the study, as "making constant comparisons is at the heart of data analysis and coding" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 79). I then employed line-by-line coding while engaging in careful and close reading of the interview transcripts. This detailed, line-by-line coding encouraged me to get close to the data (Glesne, 2011). Next, I used focused coding, whereby the codes represented "more integrative and theoretically rich categories" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 80). Finally, I drew larger themes from the categories. I sent excerpts of my draft analysis to students

to ensure I did not misrepresent their experiences. Student responses and feedback were incorporated. As shared previously, I described the project as a qualitative study informed by narrative techniques. Next, I outline the narrative techniques employed in data analysis.

Using the data from the intake form, I developed an initial student profile. In addition to the coding process, I employed narrative techniques in data analysis, examining stories of lived experience to develop an "evocative portrait of participants" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 130). Following the interview, I developed a narrative account for each student. Baughan (2017) detailed stages of narrative data analysis as "writing a short biography of each informant, exploring key questions in relation to these biographies and the transcripts, considering how narratives were told, rewriting comprehensive biographies, and developing overarching themes" (p. 5). I then mirrored these stages of data analysis to write about each student's lived experience, all while developing integrated themes. I used the narrative technique outlined by Riley and Hawe (2005), attending to the sentence structure of stories students told. I subsequently considered the meaning of each story as either "descriptive, consecutive, consequential, evaluative, or transformative" (Riley & Hawe, 2005, p. 230). Although narrative inquiry often incorporates a larger life history, the study and my use of narrative techniques provided depth and shape to the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement within the context of the 2020 election season.

I engaged in memo writing, also known as memoing, as part of the data analysis process. My memo writing yielded an additional data source and method of analysis for the study. The memos allowed me to capture my initial reactions. I used memo writing as a way to generate immediate ideas otherwise lost and underdeveloped: "By writing memos to yourself or keeping a reflective field log, you develop your thoughts" (Glesne, 2011, p. 189). In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument, so memos in turn become part of the co-constructed data. Memo

writing contributes to synthesis and recognition of patterns, as well as "seeing the bigger picture" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 90). The memos were instrumental in gaining new insights throughout the data analysis process.

To keep my data orderly and accessible, I used a secure data organization software, Dedoose. The software helped me to systematize data upon collection and later locate analysis during the writing phase. I used Dedoose for each stage of my line-by-line coding process. Finally, I employed axial coding, whereby "the investigator presents a coding paradigm or logic diagram in which the researcher identifies a central phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 87). Axial coding allowed me to make conceptual relationships between the data and literature.

Trustworthiness

As a qualitative study, I incorporated several trustworthiness strategies. Given the purposes of quantitative and qualitative research differ fundamentally, "It is only reasonable that criteria for evaluating research grounded in different epistemologies be different" (Jones et al., p. 30). After all, qualitative research seeks to address different questions than quantitative research. Glesne (2011) highlighted the differences in stating, "Unlike quantitative studies, which identify sets of variables and seek to determine their relationship, qualitative studies are best at contributing to greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes" (p. 39). The two terms, reliability and validity, are misplaced in a qualitative study, where "concepts are socially constructed" (Glesne, 2011, p. 49). Replicability of qualitative research is also unlikely, as the researcher is the instrument, time and context changes, and participants all offer a unique lens. Indeed, even the interpretation of the data is researcher dependent. In short, one cannot judge qualitative research by objective, postpositive notions. Because qualitative research cannot rely upon statistical analysis and tools from which the community can judge quality, scholars

advocate for specific techniques to meet what some refer to as "goodness criteria or trustworthiness" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 30). I emphasized trustworthiness because qualitative research, though not seeking objective truth, should elicit confidence in the findings.

All research benefits from adhering to general research guidelines (Jones et al., 2014). Beyond common strategies for evaluating quality, such as a demonstrated awareness of the topic and consistency in research question, data collection, and analysis, there are specific criteria driven by the selected paradigm. The goal of trustworthiness is to instill greater confidence in the findings (Jones et al., 2014). Thus, I utilized several techniques to increase trust in my research study. I worked diligently to establish rapport with participants, including an openness to their questions, transparency in the purpose of the study, and my adherence to nonpartisanship in carrying out the study. Member checking is a way to help a scholar ensure their interpretations in fact reflect the feelings of a participant (Jones et al., 2014). I incorporated member checking by sending my interpretations to students, ensuring I did not misrepresent student voice in my analysis. Students helped clarify ideas in this process. The use of the post-interview reflection, member checking, and memoing increased my ability to triangulate data. Triangulation is the use of multiple sources of data to confirm understanding (Jones et al., 2014). Finally, I understand there is not a predetermined amount of time necessary for data collection, but through descriptive data analysis, I hoped to demonstrate to readers the rigor with which I carried out the study.

Confirming findings with external reviewers, or experts in the field demonstrates a level of thoroughness in attempting to accurately represent findings. In addition to the review of my study by members of my committee, I invited a leading scholar in college student civic engagement, Dr. Matthew Johnson, to serve as an external reviewer. Dr. Johnson received access to the interview transcripts and my draft findings. He authored a memo accounting for clarity,

evidentiary adequacy, and representativeness of the constructed themes. I addressed each item in

the memo and participated in a verbal debrief meeting. The external review sharpened my

themes, clarified assumptions, and ultimately increased trust in the findings.

The manner the data is presented and how the author arrived at the results influences the

credibility of the research. Dependability of results can be judged by whether or not a researcher

outlines the steps and procedures taken to conduct the study (Jones et al., 2014). This

trustworthiness technique is not intended for others to follow the same steps to reproduce the

study, but rather allows the reader to gain insight into how the data were gathered and

interpreted. Connecting data with analysis and understanding from the field is a form of

confirming the results (Jones et al., 2014). The interpretation of data is a key step where the

researcher can enhance trustworthiness (Glesne, 2011). In qualitative research, the scholar does

not seek generalizability, but "transferability," whereby "findings are meaningful to the reader"

(Jones et al., 2014, p. 37). I situated my findings in existing theory or research, both in my

study's discussion and implications to ground the study in the broader scholarly context.

Ethical Considerations

Beyond obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I considered various

ethical decisions of planning and carrying out this qualitative research project. Because

constructivist qualitative research entails establishing strong rapport with participants, I called

attention to the power dynamic of the researcher and participant through conversation with the

students in my study. I encouraged students to speak freely, not simply sharing what they

thought I wanted to hear. Beyond informed consent, I explained to participants my attempts to

maintain anonymity, such as assigning pseudonyms and encrypting data. I used pseudonyms and

decontextualized information to provide greater assurance of the privacy of my participants.

In data analysis and writing, I resisted the urge to jump to conclusions too early, instead relying on "sufficient empirical evidence" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 171) to support my work. Jones et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of maintaining strong ethical considerations, especially for those claiming a constructivist approach. I demonstrated these ethical decisions throughout my data analysis by centering student voices through evidentiary examples. Additionally, as a constructivist study, researchers become part of the study, from data collection to analysis (Charmaz, 2014). As a result, researcher positionality is part of the ethical responsibility of qualitative research. In qualitative research, the researcher is also the instrument. The researcher selects topics, problems, and questions directly influenced by their paradigm and subsequent theoretical perspective, often unaware of their own assumptions (Glesne, 2011). The researcher's perspective shapes the kind of problems scholars attempt to address, research questions asked, and how they carry out the research. Qualitative research "requires the researcher to become embedded in the context" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 11) and to define their relationship with the topic, subjects, and environment. In an effort to offer a level of transparency to build trust in the study, I reflect on the roots and driving factors of my interest in politically engaged college students involved in nonpartisan political activity.

Positionality

Coming of age in Ohio, keeping up with local, state, and national politics felt like a natural part of the ebbs and flows my life as young person. Ohio was consistently referred to as a swing state, whereby the state and counties within the state vacillated between electing leaders in the Republican and Democratic parties, leading to frequent attention by politicians, parties, and pundits. Even before I could vote, I remember watching debates, discussing politics around the dinner table, attending political events, and volunteering for local campaigns. On September 11,

2001, I entered my eighth-grade social studies classroom where our teacher tearfully broke the news of an attack. I already followed current events and politics, but terrorism and the impending war in Iraq drew me in further. In high school, my peers and I were taught to *vote our conscious*, a line often used, though not exclusively, in Catholic communities to encourage discernment of issues and candidates. Attending a Jesuit high school, I immersed myself in community service throughout the city of Cleveland, bringing initial awareness of a complex, broken society.

I remember attending my first political science course at Emory University as a college freshman in 2006, hearing about how deeply polarized our country was politically, a fact I was well aware of due to my Ohio roots. In one specific class session, our professor taught us about swing states, described then as key political battlegrounds where candidates spend a tremendous amount of time and treasure to win elections. The professor pulled up a red and blue checkered map of the state of Ohio and zoomed in on Cuyahoga County, describing the location as one of the key counties, often deciding which presidential candidate wins the state and in turn a large number of electoral college votes in the national election. I knew Cuyahoga County well, home to my family and entire precollege experience. I began to comprehend how much my upbringing informed my understanding of and interest in politics.

Throughout college, I realized how fortunate I was to grow up where and how I did. My legal citizenship and my involvement with politics was assumed and also fostered by my family, community, and an excess of educational opportunities. My inherited privilege contributed to feeling I could join the political discourse prior to and during college. After all, many of the country's leaders looked like me: White, male-identified, able-bodied, Christian, and heterosexual. Throughout my educational journey, I practiced democracy with my peers by getting involved in student government. Meanwhile, my chosen area of study, political science,

fostered a deeper and more nuanced understanding of U.S. government and politics. The election of the first African American, President Barack Obama arguably clouded my reality of what political engagement looks like on a college campus. Members across the political spectrum could agree on one thing: Obama's historic ascendance to the presidency brought a surge of palpable energy among young people, even among those who did not vote for him.

The rift between members of the two major political parties took on a new complexity during Obama's presidency. I remained fascinated and frustrated by political polarization, both in government, my family, and my university. In response to my frustration, I advocated for and organized a program through Student Government called bridging gaps, designed to bring students together in a public space on campus to discuss controversial topics. I hold vivid, arguably romanticized, memories of the College Republicans and Young Democrats debating issues on the steps near the clocktower in the center of campus. I ran for student body president later that same year, advocating for greater campus dialogue across difference and unity. I found myself wedged in the middle on many issues, but I basked in the ideal of bringing people together to find common ground. After all, if these kinds of conversations could not happen on a college campus, where could people come together across political and social differences?

Another salient college memory stands out to me as influencing my view of politics. A professor invited us to investigate the university archives for a class project. The Civil Rights Movement, which always felt so distant in my history textbooks, came to life through old headlines and photos of student demonstrations showcasing some of the very same places on campus I came to love. Of course, many of the stories from the Civil Rights Movement centered on young people fighting for everyone's right to vote. In class, I learned about Freedom Summer, where college students from various parts of the country joined in a voter registration effort in

1964 Mississippi. Three young students were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan for trying to register African Americans to vote. I was inspired by the bravery of civil rights leaders and I remember asking myself, if I were alive during that period of time, would I have risked my life as a White ally? The reality of our nation's ugly past, too easily ignored through my lens of privilege, was continually humanized in my interactions with peers, representing a wide range of social identity perspectives. I learned about the continued discrimination and disenfranchisement of people based upon factors out of their control, from the color of their skin to their zip code. The free exchange of ideas, opinions, and yes, even the friction inspired me.

For this reason and many more, I entered the field of college student affairs administration, where I could encourage student development and learning in out-of-class experiences through campus life. After all, my learning came alive outside of the walls of my formal classrooms. Working in a variety of functional area capacities, from university housing to new student orientation, student conduct, financial wellness, student activities and leadership development, I facilitated examination of goals, exploration of values, and conversations about and across social differences. A decade into my career, although proud of my work to bring students together to learn, I realized I was complicit in assuming political engagement occurred organically on a college campus. As an educator, I did not do my part to encourage purposeful political engagement. I worried about students perceiving me as politically biased, so I avoided speaking about politics altogether. Only recently, as a doctoral student, I came to understand political engagement as something to be fostered as part of higher education's civic mission.

About two years ago, a close friend began working for a nonprofit committed to the nonpartisan political engagement of college students. I found myself fascinated by the students hired, trained, and advised by my friend and her colleagues. I learned about the way campuses

across the nation, often led by students working for third party organizations, sought to educate and convey the importance of political engagement in a nonpartisan manner. I attributed the lack of institutional support for encouraging nonpartisan political engagement as part of the reason these organizations existed in the first place. Of the six college campuses I have had engaged with directly as a student or employee, only one expressed a direct institutional commitment to educate students about political engagement outside of the political science department. I believe students involved in nonpartisan political engagement hold part of the key to helping reinvigorate higher education's commitment to the political dimension of civic engagement.

Partnering with a local nonpartisan political engagement organization on a prior campus, I learned how hard advocates work to fight for institutional support for educating students. Not only do students and grassroots leaders attempt to leverage institutional support, but they often encounter barriers in conducting their work. During the spring of 2019, for example, as a staff member I sought to collaborate with a local voting coalition to incorporate voter registration as a step in the new student orientation check-in process at the university. An outdated institutional policy for the student union building classified political activity as prohibited in the building's handbook. When interpretation of the policy was challenged, the question was routed to a senior student affairs administrator who backed the reasoning to block the incorporation of voter registration into new student orientation. Nonetheless, the encounter and resistance to promote political engagement left a lasting impact on my enthusiasm for this important work.

The low political participation rate of young people concerns me deeply. I do not think low political participation can be placed squarely on the shoulders of young adults. Instead, I acknowledge the very real, systemic barriers present to voters, especially first-time, young voters and those who feel marginalized by the U.S. political system. I therefore understand social

identity as a key factor in determining whether or not a young person believes the political system includes them. Furthermore, I contend our country's extreme polarization, particularly at the national level, deters many young people from developing an interest in politics. In not educating students about the importance of voting, how to vote, where to access nonpartisan political information about candidates, and taking action to foster a healthy campus political climate, higher education as a social institution is limited in the potential to influence the future generation. People lost their lives fighting for the right to participate fully in the promise originally espoused by our democracy and I believe higher education is obligated to play a larger role in encouraging political engagement.

Politically, I do not intend to disclose which party I typically agree with and vote for on election day. I do so in solidarity with the students who navigate the challenge of remaining politically nonpartisan in encouraging political engagement. I also do so for the sake of my current and future students. As someone who wishes to continue as a leader within the field of higher education, I would never want a student to feel they cannot approach me because of an overtly partisan stance. Of course, one may read my work and make assumptions about the political issues and candidates I support. Operating in a nonpartisan manner does not erase what it is I value. Similarly, I believe institutions and educators can and should make statements, written, symbolic, and through policies to reflect and honor their values and commitments. Sometimes making a statement of values means making what some may consider a political statement, perceived as partisan. I believe educators need to champion political engagement in a manner reflecting inclusion of all people. Encouraging political engagement in a nonpartisan manner is an enduring ideal, aligned with higher education's civic mission. Educators should encourage students to engage in our democracy, no matter how party positions shift and change.

Limitations

Reviewing the study's limitations prior to presenting the findings allows readers to account for them as they process their reaction to the study. The limitations also serve as opportunities for future research, later discussed in chapter 6. The four areas representing limitations included the sample's racial diversity and citizenship status, overrepresentation of cisgender female students, and confounding factors of a unique election season.

The sample provided rich examples of the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement, yet one limitation of the study was the lack of racial diversity present in the study. Just over a quarter of the participants held minoritized racial identities. As a result, I relied heavily on the perspectives of White students participating in nonpartisan political engagement. Findings suggested disparate experiences for students of Color. Additionally, the study did not account for the experiences of international or undocumented students. Undocumented students may not view nonpartisan political spaces as viable, instead choosing to participate in less revealing forms of political activity (Mendes & Change, 2019). Similarly, international students likely may not view political engagement in American democracy as relevant or inclusive.

The gender identity of participants also presented a limitation of the sample. From a gender identity perspective, all participants indicated they were either cisgender male or cisgender female. Although there is not a way to determine the collective identity breakdown of students participating in nonpartisan political engagement, the over representation of cisgender females matches prior research on college student involvement (Kenzie et al., 2007). Relying upon the nomination process also may have led to the unintentional exclusion of students not identifying within the gender binary, either because students may not have been recognized by the nominators or were fearful to participate in a study with someone they do not know well.

Finally, the findings represented students' lived experiences of nonpartisan political engagement in a truly unique election context, complicated by the dynamics of a global pandemic. Although I anticipated the findings would represent an incomparable snapshot of the student experience through the 2020 election, the 2020 election season was particularly exceptional given the additional layer of the global pandemic. Student participants spoke heavily about COVID-19 and the role of the virus and government and institutional responses as the major influences on their lived experiences. Without those disruptions, I wondered if students may have discussed other relevant experiences when not preoccupied with COVID-19. As a result, these findings may only represent some of the usual experiences of students involved in nonpartisan political engagement during an election not occurring in a global pandemic.

Conclusion

In Chapter 3, I began explaining the research paradigm as constructivist. Next, I shared the methodological approach as a qualitative study, using narrative techniques to portray student experiences of nonpartisan political activity. I then shared the research methods of the study. Using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, I studied students involved in the Campus Vote Project by way of nomination from the organization. I did not name a set number of participants but instead employed an emergent design, seeking saturation of themes. I engaged in data analysis immediately following interviews, and used memo writing to gather my thoughts throughout the process. I also used member checking to confirm understanding of student responses. I demonstrated the trustworthiness of the study through techniques such as triangulation, member checking, external reviewers, and clear explanation of each step taken in the study. I offered a positionality statement, whereby readers learned more about me as the researcher conducting the study. I closed the chapter by outlining the study's limitations.

CHAPTER 4: STUDENT PROFILES AND BACKGROUND

The study's conceptual framework, informed by the model posited by Thomas and Bower (2018), "considers the life experiences of people prior to coming to the organization" (p. 258). In the following section, I introduced each of the study's participants, including what pre-college experiences were influential in encouraging their interest in nonpartisan political engagement. I also shared how participants discovered the Campus Vote Project (CVP) and democracy fellow position once at their respective college or university. I included reasoning if the student shared why they became involved in nonpartisan work specifically. I separated the student profiles into a stand-alone chapter for organizational purposes and ease of reference. The profiles provided important contextual information to afford a deeper understanding of students' lived experience and future aspiration for civic engagement.

Student Profiles

CVP funded over 340 student leaders to serve as democracy fellows in 2020, providing support to students as they engaged in nonpartisan political activity on their respective campus communities across the United States. CVP fellows worked between 10 to 15 hours per week to encourage political engagement of their peers. The following 15 students were nominated by full-time staff members working for CVP, serving in the role of state coordinator. Students were nominated because of their demonstrated commitment to nonpartisan political engagement. Upon nomination, I contacted students to invite them to participate in the study. Students completed a consent and short intake form where they voluntarily disclosed some of the demographic information represented in Table 1. In Table 1, I included relevant information about the 15 participants. The presentation of Table 1 provides as an at-a-glance tool for readers as they review the findings and discussion presented in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively.

Table 1.

Student Participant Overview

Student Alias	School Alias	Major	Standing	Months with CVP	Age	Gender Identity	Racial Identity
Catherine	Ohio Commuter Public University	Political Science & Liberal Studies	Senior	36 months	18 – 23	Woman	White
Diane	Michigan Community College	Prelaw/Paralegal	Sophomore	21 months	18 – 23	Woman	Latinx
Dona	VA Mid-Sized Public	Political Science & English	Senior	10 months	18 – 23	Woman	White
Ella	VA Small Public University	Political Science	Senior	3 months	18 – 23	Woman	Black
Henry	N.C. Small Private University	Political Science	Junior	20 months	18 – 23	Man	White
Joan	N.C. Arts and Sciences & N.C. Research University	Political Science/Master of Public Administration	Graduate student	27 months	18 – 23	Woman	White
Judy	TX Large State University	International Studies & American History	Senior	10 months	18 – 23	Woman	White
Kelly	Texas Large Public	Government and Political Communications	Sophomore	10 months	18 – 23	Woman	White
Lyn	TX Large State University	Political Science and Economics	Senior	10 months	18 – 23	Woman	Asian American
Nancy	Michigan Associate's College	Business Administration	Sophomore	7 months	18 – 23	Woman	White
Naomi	PA Large Public	Political Science	2020 grad.	12 months	18 – 23	Woman	Asian American & White
Richard	PA Associate's College & NJ Research University	Psychology & Criminal Justice	Junior	14 months	24 – 29	Man	White
Roger	Ohio Public Research University	Media Production & Economics	Senior	9 months	18 – 23	Man	White
Sue	TN Public University	Elementary Education	Sophomore	9 months	18 – 23	Woman	White
William	MI Doctoral University	Political Science	Sophomore	13 months	18 – 23	Man	White

Students represented 8 states and 16 unique colleges and universities. They ranged in class year and stage of their educational journey. Although 9 students studied political science or government as their major or area of study, 6 students pursued other academic disciplines. Table 1 also displays students' class standing and length of involvement with the Campus Vote Project measured in months. Finally, I included students' age group, gender identity, and racial identity. The participants navigated 16 different institutional contexts, all with a variety of classifications, control, and size. The alias chosen for each institution indicated the state and control, either public or private. Three students attended two-year community colleges, holding slightly different Carnegie classifications from one another. Nine of the institutions were classified as Doctoral Universities with high research activity. Only one student attended a private institution and the other 14 students attended public colleges and universities. The enrollment ranged from 4,000 students to over 50,000 students, with five schools having an enrollment under 10,000 students and four schools with enrollment over 30,000 total students. The institutions were situated in eight different states across the country, with three institutions in each of the states of North Carolina, Michigan and Texas. Next, I introduce each participate in alphabetical order.

Catherine

Catherine was a rising senior at Ohio Commuter Public University (OCPU) studying political science and liberal studies. She identified as a White woman between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. She started attending OCPU as a dual-enrolled high school student in 2015 until she began as a full-time student in August 2017. Because she planned to live at home and commute to campus, she still wanted to experience elements of what she viewed as a traditional college experience. She began immediately to look for ways to get involved in campus life as a

first-year student. Her first involvement was with the student government, which was actually how she found her way to CVP in November 2017.

Catherine's interest in politics was heavily influenced by her pre-college life. She indicated her parents always exercised their right to vote and discussed politics, but their involvement did not extend beyond voting. One aspect of her pre-college years she remembered the best were political discussions held around her family's dining room table. Catherine's Mom had one rule, namely "if you want to join the political discussion and have an opinion, you have to do the research." To prepare for family discussions, her mom would sit down with her at their home computer and they would research topics and form opinions on issues and candidates.

Catherine discussed the influence two presidential elections had on her political engagement, the 2008 and 2016 elections. During the 2008 election, she was particularly captivated by the presidential race between Barack Obama and John McCain. Living in a very rural place, she described her peers and social groups as, "extremely conservative." The 2008 election was the first time she recalled gaining an interest in politics. At the time, Catherine found her opinions did not align with many of her peers, so she would spend a lot of time reading about issues to engage in conversations about politics. Prior to 2016, she envisioned herself in foreign service, dreaming about representing the United States as a diplomat. Following the 2016 election, however, she felt dejected, saying, "there's no way I could ever represent a country with these kinds of morals," implying dissatisfaction with President-elect Trump's record and rhetoric. Catherine distanced herself from politics for a short time but, "realized that working in the system to make change was more important than protesting the system." She learned about CVP because at the time, her mom was working for her university's service-learning office. The director decided only student government students could apply for the CVP role at her college.

After just a short period of time with CVP, Catherine said her admiration for democracy returned. Specifically, she said her involvement with CVP "brought my love back to American elections. I have to have faith in this idea of democracy. I have my faults with it, of course." She described her involvement in CVP as a true learning experience, gaining many new skills. Catherine believed political engagement was most effective because she approached other students as an understanding peer. She said part of the magic of the role is that "we are a friend, we are a peer, we are a buddy of voting rights. We are that bridge between things." Catherine felt energized by helping to demystify political participation for her peers.

Diane

Diane was a first-year student at Michigan Community College (MCC), intent on a pre-law academic track. She identified as a Latinx woman between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. Before coming to college, Diane had three different experiences in K-12, all offering a distinct socio-political view of the world. She first attended a private school she described as "sheltered," where she said messages were passed on to her and her peers, receiving edicts such as, "this is why we vote this way." She later transferred to a charter school, where she said she came across thoughts and opinions that were a lot more open minded. Moving from one school to another created dissonance. She described encountering differences between the prevailing values at the two schools as a confusing time in her life. She transferred again to a smaller, but much more racially diverse school where she started to gain an awareness of her own cultural background and the history of race. Once in high school, Diane said taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses in history, government, and comparative government sparked her interest in politics, specifically stemming from her interest in civil rights. Being around peers who were interested in discussing politics and government in her AP courses made a huge difference in her enthusiasm.

Diane became involved through CVP in February 2018 by way of her involvement in two student organizations at her college: pre-law club and a UNICEF chapter. Her friend Susan led both of these student organizations and was also a CVP fellow. Susan mentored Diane and "decided she would take me under her wing, and when she left, I would take over pretty much everything she was doing." Susan told their faculty advisor for CVP about Diane and soon after, Diane was invited to lead the college's voter engagement efforts. When Diane started working with CVP, she benefitted from a shared semester where Susan was still at the college. She said nonpartisan political engagement provided her with an outlet to, "see change" instead of simply talking about wanting to make a difference.

Diane described the benefits of being nonpartisan as follows: "I have more of a reach if I'm not from a political party. People are more willing to talk to me. People are more willing to listen to what I have to say because they don't feel like I'm going to preach at them what I want them to vote for." Diane felt working through partisan spaces drew folks who were already partisan and therefore already interested in voting. Conversely, doing the work from a nonpartisan standpoint allowed her to reach folks with less formed opinions, or who were disconnected from politics altogether.

Dona

Dona was a senior at Virginia Mid-Sized Public University (VMPU), majoring in political science and English with a concentration in American literature. She identified as a White woman between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. Before college, Dona said her parents and family did not discuss politics, but the absence of political discourse in her family allowed her and her siblings to formulate their own political ideas. In high school, her AP U.S. History course raised her political awareness, and she focused her attention on the 2016 presidential

primaries. For a final senior capstone project that required an internship, Dona worked for a partisan organization. For the service component of the capstone project, she founded a political awareness club at her school. Dona said the service project was the first time she engaged in nonpartisan political dialogue and voter education. In fact, Dona registered nearly every eligible member of her senior class to vote. As opposed to her partisan internship, she felt more connected to her classmates through the political awareness club. Another salient but searing pre-college memory influencing Dona's involvement was residing near Charlottesville in 2016, the location of the infamous White supremist march and associated violence. She witnessed the incidents firsthand and felt concerned about the status of democracy.

When Dona moved to college, she began as an intelligence analysis major, with a concentration in data science. She received feedback from faculty members that her work was, "too political." The major's focus was preparing materials for policy makers, but she realized she would rather be on the side of making determinations about policy. She changed majors to political science, which better suited her academic interest, but felt like she was not getting the most out of the academic experience by not actively practicing politics. She became involved with student government and other civic programs. She said the civic engagement department hosted on-going political engagement programs, and she "started attending organically." Dona learned about CVP through the department and became a fellow in January of 2020.

When asked why she felt drawn to a nonpartisan role, she said her experience in the partisan space in high school made her realize how limiting the work can be when working for a particular candidate. She attended a traveling town hall for Senate candidates, and that's when she realized organizing in politics did not need to be partisan. The nonpartisan space allowed people to ask thoughtful questions, engage in discourse, and perform "a public good."

Ella

Ella was a senior studying political science at VA Small Public University (VSPU). She identified as a Black woman between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. She learned about CVP from a faculty member who encouraged her to apply. She liked their nonpartisan mission, saying CVP, "wants to educate and get people to vote." Ella felt her peers were more likely to respond when not approached from a partisan lens. Ella had been involved in nonpartisan political engagement as a democracy fellow for only a total of three months at the time of her interview.

Ella's interest in politics began at a young age, specifically leading up to the election of President Barack Obama in 2008. Ella, only 7 years old at the time said her entire family was drawn into this historic moment. She said she would never forget her "Nana calling as soon as the balloons and confetti dropped" on election night. Her Nana was crying happy tears because she never thought she would live to see a Black president. As a Black woman, Ella heard stories from her family members, like her father and grandmother, who went on about how they never thought they would witness anything like this in their lifetime. Ella said her parents really wanted her to understand what was going on. She recalled her mom making her watch the entire inaugural address. Growing up during the Obama Presidency, her parents would pass on articles, books, and speeches for her to read. Ella was involved in her local NAACP chapter in high school and shadowed a local judge before college. She said, "I shadowed her for the last two years of high school, which made me want to submerge myself in public service." These experiences demonstrated the importance of community and set a strong foundation for college.

When Ella arrived at VSPU, she felt intimidated to do much outside of her sport, but after her first semester, she reached out to the NAACP chapter and became involved. Ella found inspiration through a female activist, Jess Glass who said, "you don't have to believe in politics,

but you have to believe in policy." Ella referenced how important nonpartisanship was to achieving trust in the community. She witnessed partisan organizations reaching out and only speaking with folks who wanted to engage in partisan politics, a practice she found to be less fulfilling than engaging all of her peers. In addition to 2020 being a busy year with the election, Ella planned to graduate a year early in May 2021.

Henry

Henry was a junior at N.C. Small Private University (NCSPU), majoring in political science with minors in history, civic responsibility, and social innovation. He identified as a White man between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. Prior to coming to college, Henry said he kept up with current events, but was not necessarily thinking about studying political science until late into high school. Everything changed in 2017, when a shooting occurred near Henry's house. Two news reporters were killed while they were delivering the news. He recalled the feelings of fear when getting off the school bus that day. Police swarmed the area, and the city was on lockdown as they tried to find the shooter. Henry felt shaken by the experience of violence within his community, and decided, "it's not enough to just sit on the sidelines and watch." He drew a direct connection between policies decided by elected officials and the very real impact politics can have on local communities. Soon after, Henry learned about a man who worked at the news station who had lost his girlfriend in the shooting. As a result of the violence, the man decided to run for a public office. Henry sent the candidate a message on Twitter expressing interest in helping with his campaign. The candidate invited Henry to serve as his assistant. Henry described being part of the campaign season as, "one of the most exhilarating things I've ever done." The candidate was subsequently elected. The experience of getting involved with the campaign solidified Henry's passion for politics as an avenue for influence.

When Henry started college, he became involved in engaging his peers through a partisan political organization, promoting the election of candidates who supported particular social issues. He said he struggled with the partisan approach because the organization he worked for asked volunteers to strategically target specific student subpopulations. He was driven to increase the political participation of his peers, but found that, "it was very hard to get a working relationship with administrators when you had that partisan badge on." He was therefore drawn to nonpartisan work, saying, "I wanted to make sure I was a part of an organization that valued every voter, no matter who they decide to vote for every election cycle." Around the same time, N.C. Small Private University was recognized by the Campus Vote Project as a Voter Friendly Campus, a distinction that caught his attention. Because of the designation, the campus had a tie to CVP. Henry joined CVP in March 2019 as a democracy fellow. CVP's mission empowered him. He said, "We are registering every voter, no matter who you are."

Joan

In August 2020, Joan started her first semester of graduate school at North Carolina Research University (NCRU). She identified as a White woman between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. She graduated from North Carolina Arts and Sciences (NCAS) in May 2020, so her experience of leading nonpartisan political engagement in the context of the 2020 election spanned two institutions. Like other students, Joan's interest in politics began prior to college.

Joan came from a small town, she emphasized, "nobody really knows where it is," and could not recall much political activity occurring around her. Joan did not mention when politics became interesting to her, but in high school she remembered trying to engage her peers in conversations about politics. Reflecting on her efforts to start formal political engagement activities in her high school, Joan said these efforts were received, "with a very stark 'no thank

you' from administrators." Despite this resistance, she began college knowing she wanted to study political science. In fact, she selected NCAS because the year prior, the university was recognized on a website as a top school, "to make a difference." Joan attended college between 2016 and 2020, she indicated as significant because of two very important bookends in her understanding of politics: "My college experience started with Trump being elected and ended with the Coronavirus." When she arrived at the college, everyone seemed to hold political opinions, but she was frustrated by the lack of action. Aside from a protest here or there, she felt like her peers were not taking steps to proactively engage in politics.

Looking to get involved with something, she joined the political science club at NCAS. The club's advisor was also her favorite political science professor. She did not join the club out of a deep-rooted passion for elections, but rather to just find something to get involved in. The club's advisor learned about CVP and invited Joan to apply for the democracy fellow position her junior year, August 2018. She continued her involvement in CVP through three years of college and carried on into graduate school. A major question driving her involvement throughout college was why her peers were so passionate about the issues but did not do what she saw as the critical act of voting.

She started to do political engagement work leading up to the 2018 midterm election. Something her campus and the political science club was just starting to get involved with was voter registration. She described the political climate at NCAS in terms of avoiding partisanship, a common response she received was, "Oh, I don't want to do Republican and Democrat things. I don't like that. I don't follow politics." Joan described nonpartisan voter registration as a way to generate interest in politics from students and her administration alike. Although she held

strong partisan convictions, she was committed to working from a nonpartisan mission because she could bring more students in due to the trust forged from the transparent approach.

Judy

Judy was a rising senior at Texas Large State University (TLSU) studying international economic development, American history, and minoring in political science, Spanish, and legal studies. She identified as a White woman between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. A major personal health concern motivated her activism and civic engagement. In January 2019, she suffered a grand mal seizure and later learned she had epilepsy. She noted this abrupt change in her health status, "completely changed everything about my life." Judy could no longer enjoy simple freedoms, like driving herself. She described an acknowledgement of her unearned privilege during this time and began to empathize with folks in society who face challenges, marginalization, and barriers outside of their control. She began to realize how important politics was to decisions made regarding those living on society's margins.

The roots of Judy's political engagement began in high school. She described herself as, "a closeted gay kid with a horrible family situation and a lot of economic insecurity." As a result, she rarely spoke up, feeling "the moment you speak out, you have something that can be used against you." Growing up, her mom was in and out of hospitals, only further straining her family under medical debt. Her father lost his job and just around that time, she herself started having medical issues. Her political awareness did not occur at home, but in school. She said her high school experience highlighted the socio-political strife and division in the country. For example, her sexual orientation was accidently disclosed by a friend in the hallway and then rumors began to circulate. She and her friend founded a Gay-Straight-Alliance (GSA) and some anti-LGBTQ organizations sprung up in response. In another salient experience, the day after the 2016

election, she recalled a football player pulling a student's hijab off in the hallway. The division playing out in her high school over LGBTQ rights, coupled with witnessing marginalization of her peer because of their religious beliefs, further motivated her interest in civic engagement.

One of the first and major draws for Judy to not just follow politics, but to actively engage in political organizing occurred when a beloved local business was under the threat of eminent domain by TLSU. The business held sentimental value for Judy. Her parents actually met at the restaurant decades earlier, and years later, her brother and sister-in-law would frequent the establishment. To make matters even more personal, the business was where Judy took her girlfriend on their first date. She felt the issue of eminent domain was one many of her peers could really get behind. Although the university ended up buying the business out for, "millions underneath the owners' hands," she gained skills in political organizing and activism. Even though her activism did not save the business, Judy viewed the eminent domain issue as a turning point in the political climate of her campus, one typically apathetic to politics.

Judy became involved with student government, passing some bills to garner the attention of the university administration. She still felt restless about her campus political engagement and sought external opportunities to develop professionally. Her search outside of her campus led her to the Civic Ambassador Program and New Political Forum at the Annett Strauss Institute. She sought these professional development opportunities at the Annett Strauss Institute because she felt like her own campus was politically apathetic. She described the campus political climate as follows: "We had low voter turnout rates, we had low voter registration efforts, and we saw very little civic engagement." Judy learned about CVP through one of the people involved with the Institute. She applied to and joined CVP as a democracy fellow in January 2020. She felt strongly about the nonpartisan mission of CVP. She went so far

as to refer to partisanship as, "selfish" and "inherently privileged," whereas she felt a nonpartisan approach allowed her to incorporate, "different perspectives and different people" into her social circle. By associating with and working for a political party, Judy felt partisan politics automatically closed people out of the conversation who could otherwise be engaged.

Kelly

Kelly was a second-year government and political communications major at Texas Large Public University (TLPU). She identified as a White woman between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. When asked about pre-college influences on her interest in being politically engaged, she said she could not pinpoint one exact moment. Her family talked about politics, listened to National Public Radio (NPR), and discussed current events. She said, politics "is kind of everywhere if you don't ignore it, and I feel like I had no reason to ignore it." She became involved in activities like debate and model congress in high school. She recalled a pivotal conversation with a peer prior to college in 2017. She told her friend she could not wait to get involved in politics in college and her peer asked, "Why are you waiting? Are you sure there's nothing you could do right here?" She looked up congressional races and volunteered to canvass for a political candidate. She enjoyed the experience, but when asked why she no longer works within a particular political party or for a candidate, she said she did not want to simply talk with people she agreed with, but rather, to do something active like getting peers registered to vote.

Kelly found her way to CVP by way of an existing student organization on her campus, TLPU Votes. Instead of joining a partisan organization where they just, "talk politics," she said, "I wanted to do politics." Nonpartisan political engagement seemed like the perfect fit. She said she found TLPU Votes the summer prior to starting college when she looked up the various opportunities to get involved in. The student organization was highlighted on a blog and when

she visited their social media, they seemed like an organization she would enjoy. When she came to campus that fall, the organization had a kick-off event featuring free food and entertainment. The event was well attended and even had a television film crew present. The fanfare over political engagement and being connected to other students who wanted to make a difference hooked Kelly from that point forward.

She applied to be a democracy fellow in December 2019. The position was the first time Kelly had to write a cover letter and resume, pointing to some of the professional skills gained by applying. She knew about CVP because someone she knew took on a full-time job working for the organization after college. Interestingly enough, she was not originally offered a paid fellow position. CVP asked her if she would be willing to volunteer for a semester. Just a short time into that semester, however, she was invited to serve in a paid position to help organize the Texas Voting Summit for college students. Later on, she received a democracy fellow position to do political engagement work on the TLPU campus. Kelly said her commitment to nonpartisanship stemmed from the fact that being nonpartisan allowed her to partner with the university and to access school sanctioned events and to enter classrooms to do the work. She said, "I am aware that being nonpartisan is an essential part of us being able to make that impact." In her view, the institution was afraid to do anything appearing partisan.

Lyn

Lyn was a third-year senior at Texas Large State University (TLSU) studying political science and economics with a certification in legal studies. She identified as an Asian American woman between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. Her political awareness awakened as a high school student in 2015, following the *Obergefell v. Hodges* landmark civil rights Supreme Course case, guaranteeing the right to marry to all people, including same-sex couples. Lyn was

16 years old at the time and said, "I didn't know that it affected me yet, but it was the first time I realized that there were going to be things in my life that I wasn't gonna get to have or I was going to get to have because of the law or because of politics." Lyn started becoming interested in keeping up with current events and politics, but noticed her peers were not interested because they could not see the relevance of politics in their lives. Everything changed two years later, on February 14, 2018 when a high school student opened fire on classmates and teachers at Stoneman Douglas High school, leaving 17 people dead. Lyn saw young people from Stoneman Douglas speak out and she felt called to do the same.

Despite the physical distance, Lyn drew direct parallels between her community and their community, finding similarities in the socio-economic, racial, and political composition of the towns. She witnessed students from Stoneman Douglas, many Black and Brown, many involved in activities like speech and debate, and she said she saw herself in these students and their emerging movement. Lyn described life as a daughter of immigrants, wherein following the Parkland shooting, "A switch kind of flipped for me where I was like, this isn't my American dream. This isn't what my parents came for." Lyn and her friend got together and decided they wanted to do something. What started as an organized walk out for just her high school caught the attention and interest of students from neighboring schools, all over the city, representing thousands of students. On March 19, 2018, over 3,000 students walked out of their schools in protest at 10:00 a.m., finding their way outside where Lyn was part of an effort to help new voters get registered. Facing threats of expulsion from her own school and even death threats from hateful members of the community, Lyn did not tell her parents about her involvement until they saw her on the local news. Lyn later co-founded an organization to encourage youth involvement in local politics near her hometown.

In doing gun violence prevention work with youth in her town, Lyn recognized, "many of my peers, especially in Texas, especially in the kinds of communities that I belong to, didn't have access to the ballot." When Lyn arrived at college, she continued her involvement in voter registration, getting involved with a partisan political organization. National attention landed on Texas in 2018, as the well-known Republican incumbent, Senator Ted Cruz faced off against his Democratic challenger, Congressman Beto O'Rourke. As a first-year student, Lyn emailed every professor at her university, asking them if she could visit their classroom to register students to vote leading up to the 2018 midterm election. The last-minute campaign caused quite the stir, especially because the organization she was associated with had a partisan mission. Her emails elicited a response from the Provost about Lyn to all faculty warning them not to work with her since she was affiliated with a partisan group. When asked what drove her to send these emails, Lyn said, "I feel like every 18-year-old who's involved in politics feels this way, that if I don't do this, democracy will die." Despite the Provost's warning, many faculty members responded. After developing a system for managing the requests, Lyn organized volunteers to assist with presenting to classes. She broke the record for the most voters registered in one day by a single volunteer in the state of Texas.

Later on, Lyn served as student body vice president, but soon realized her passion still rested with more direct forms of civic engagement work. She found out about CVP because of her involvement with student government and started as a fellow in January 2020. She was passionate about encouraging young people to register and exercise their right to vote and she hoped that doing so through a nonpartisan organization would garner more university support for the work. Lyn found nonpartisan work to be particularly essential, especially in the heavily conservative county and state she operated within. With experience both doing partisan and

nonpartisan voter engagement work, Lyn said association with a particular candidate or campaign was not as effective as being able to say, "Hi, I'm Lyn, I'm a nonpartisan voter registration deputy." Ultimately, Lyn felt being nonpartisan allowed her to get into a lot more spaces and to reach more people than if she approached the work from a partisan lens.

Nancy

Nancy attended Michigan Associate's College (MAC), planning to graduate in spring 2021 with her degree in business administration. She identified as a White woman between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. Nancy said her interest in politics started at a young age and really emerged when she was in 5th or 6th grade. The 2012 election stood out in her memory because of how engaged her family was in the election. She said she was too young to really understand what was going on in 2008, but the 2012 election was influential to her thinking. She specifically recalled watching the debates at her grandparent's house. When Nancy went to high school, she wanted to talk politics but did not feel like she fit in with the Young Republicans or the Young Democrats. She described herself as an American first and voter second. Instead of getting involved with political organizations, Nancy became involved in student clubs and volunteering.

When Nancy arrived at MAC in 2019, she decided to get involved in cocurricular activities because she was taking her courses online and she wanted to get connected to the community. She joined student government, Women in Business, and Phi Theta Kappa, an honors program. Nancy learned about CVP from a few of her advisors in winter 2019. After the third time someone brought it up to her, she went online and applied. Nancy said she was drawn to the organization because of the commitment to being nonpartisan, and her own personal identification as, "a very centralized political person." Notably, Nancy began with CVP after much of the country and her college had entered quarantine in the middle of spring 2020.

Naomi

Naomi graduated from Pennsylvania Large Public University (PLPU) in May 2020, earning a degree in political science, with minors in communication arts and sciences and civic and community engagement. She secured a job in a role directly related to her passion for civic engagement. She identified as a biracial woman between the ages of 18 to 23 years old.

Before college, Naomi attended a Catholic high school in a small conservative town, where they had a requirement for volunteer hours. In addition to her involvement in the community, she graduated high school in 2016, leading up to the 2016 election. Subsequently, this was the first year she could vote in an election. Naomi described the excitement of voting for the first time. She said she worked hard to formulate her own opinions about candidates and issues, "trying to not be influenced by the people around me and trying to think through things myself." When asked about what drew her to study political science and related fields, Naomi said she learned about political science by reading the college catalog and said her high school involvement in community service and volunteering lent itself well to this area of study.

As Naomi advanced into her major courses in political science, she realized she did not want to become a politician nor a lawyer, causing a bit of a personal crossroads. A friend told her about a special program in Washington D.C. offered by her university where she would take courses in D.C. while serving in an internship. After reading about various organizations, she reached out to CVP and they offered her an internship at the national headquarters. In fall 2019, Naomi went to D.C. and worked for CVP as an intern, charged with learning about ways to better support the democracy fellows. Following her internship, Naomi continued her involvement but transitioned back to campus as a democracy fellow in 2020. Naomi's pathway to nonpartisan political engagement therefore stemmed from her curricular path at the college,

115

specifically from the D.C. program. Although she graduated in the middle of the 2020 election cycle, she remained engaged, taking on a position at an organization devoted to democracy.

Richard

Richard was a junior studying psychology and criminal justice at New Jersey Research University (NJRU) and a recent graduate from Pennsylvania Associate's College (PAC). He identified as a White man between the ages of 24 to 29 years old. He was raised in Ohio in an ideologically diverse family he described as follows: "On one side of my family are Protestant Reagan Republicans. And another side of my family are Russian Jewish Communists." As a result, he said he was exposed to a diverse mixture of political ideas growing up, including the notion people should not just critique the way things are, but rather, people should be engaged to change things. He moved from a rural part of Ohio to an urban place in Maryland, a move that highlighted stark political contrasts. Prior to beginning at PAC, Richard was involved in organizing in partisan spaces for close to a decade. Unrelated to politics, he was part of a punk rock band and did not attend college right out of high school. These life experiences shaped his learning about the world in tangible ways prior to starting college. Three major factors drove Richard's interest in political engagement, namely mental health outcomes, prison reform, and policing. He viewed voting and political engagement as directly related to health outcomes.

Once at PAC, he assisted with his college's National Voter Registration Day in 2018. He found out about CVP in September 2019 through the on-campus department that hosted the event and where the democracy fellow position reported. He was drawn to political engagement in a nonpartisan space where he said he was happy he did not need "a party apparatus I'd have to respond to." His earlier experiences in partisan spaces turned him away from working from a partisan lens on a campaign. Comparing his experience with those working for partisan political

candidates and organizations, Richard said, "the difference between organizing for a political party and organizing in a nonpartisan space is the number of doors that get slammed in your face." In his experience with partisan work, he said a lot of people simply did not want to be told who to vote for or what to think. He enjoyed organizing through a nonpartisan lens and the Director of the campus department invited Richard to apply to become a democracy fellow. Richard started his work with CVP in fall 2019, but he would go on to graduate from PAC in May 2020. He continued working with nonpartisan political engagement at PAC through the 2020 election because he maintained employment there and felt a disconnect at NJRU.

Roger

Roger was a sophomore majoring in both media production and economics at Ohio Public Research University (OPRU). He identified as a White man between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. Growing up, Roger was attracted to comedy, holding dreams to one day make entertainment his career. Leading up to and following the 2016 election, Roger said he witnessed many comedians who began to discuss politics more, influencing how he consumed the news. He described a shift in his own mindset from, "I want to be funny and famous," to a desire to "make a difference." To Roger, politics seemed like a place he could contribute and thrive.

Roger's personal experience of voting for the first time in the 2017 primary and election made him feel intimidated and completely unprepared to vote. He recalled feeling "mortified." Neither did he know much about any of the candidates, nor did he recognize the functions of the various roles represented on the ballot. He described the feeling as similar to, "taking a test I didn't study for." That summer, he heard a local candidate needed help making a video, so he thought he could put his skills to use and contribute. Roger described involvement with the campaign as a pivotal moment in building his excitement for politics.

Roger became a resident assistant and during training in August 2018, he learned about a student organization at OPRU devoted to nonpartisan voter engagement named OPRU Votes. When learning about the organization, an idea occurred to him about using his skillset in video production to produce content to help demystify the ballot. He thought about his first experience voting and how he could have benefitted from instructional videos. Roger approached a senior member of OPRU Votes and told them about his negative experience with voting for the first time and possible ideas to help other new to voting. Sooner after, he was creating videos about how to register to vote, what items were on the ballot, and about the various government positions and their functions. In short, Roger's interest in politics, personal experience with voting, and role as a resident assistant all brought him to be involved with OPRU Votes. He also became involved in other political campaigns in the broader community and participated as an intern for his city's office.

In the winter of 2019-2020, members of OPRU Votes received an email invitation inviting students to apply for various paid positions, ambassadors, fellows, and other leadership roles. He applied, was accepted, and began as a CVP democracy fellow in early 2020. Roger tied his motivation for involvement in nonpartisan political engagement to a larger vision for democracy. He viewed adhering to a single political party as short-sighted. In his opinion, whereas political parties morph and change over time, democracy should endure for generations. Roger expressed his belief that, "it is more representative of democracy to get more people into the door and then to give them the information they need to make the choices that best help them." He felt his role as a fellow was not only designed to encourage more people to participate, but also to point voters to trusted information about candidate records and platforms, typically their congressional records and other factual sources like candidate websites and

platforms. Roger was particularly drawn to the idea of bringing new people into civic participation, referencing the idea that voting is habit-forming.

Sue

Sue was a sophomore at Tennessee Public University (TPU), studying elementary education with a goal to teach English as a second language (ESL). She identified as a White woman between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. Sue was very involved in her Christian church and associated ministries for the homeless, preschool, and student worship. Sue learned about CVP through a history professor at TPU. She was not originally supposed to enroll in the course, but she ended up switching to an honors history class, studying post-civil war America. At first, Sue felt overwhelmed by the rigor of the class. The course focused quite a bit of time on the suffrage movement, and this is where Sue learned and wrote about the 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment. In January 2020, the semester following her time in the class, Sue ran into her professor in the Honor's building and she invited Sue to apply for the open CVP democracy fellow position. Sue said, "I had no idea what she was talking about," but she trusted her professor's advice. The professor served as the advisor for the American Democracy Project, a nonpartisan political engagement effort in higher education organized through the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). Sue was drawn to nonpartisan political engagement because, "it doesn't have a specific political motive." She started with CVP in early 2020, participating in the Tennessee Voter Summit for college students.

When asked about influential pre-college experiences that may have contributed to Sue's interest in nonpartisan political engagement, she recognized two main inspirations. First, Sue spoke about her family's influence. Her parents took her and her two siblings to the polls up until she started college. She said, "I think seeing my parents vote, and asking them questions, not

119

necessarily who are you voting for? But why do you vote?" had a strong influence on Sue. Her family's religious beliefs also meant her family spent time discussing and encouraging Sue to invest time learning about political issues and how those, "align biblically." In addition to her family's influence, Sue discussed the role of her high school courses and extracurriculars on her passion for politics. She spoke about her U.S. History course in 11th grade, American Government and Politics course in 12th grade, and experiences on student council as the student body president. These curricular and cocurricular experiences animated Sue's interest in being politically informed and interested in encouraging others to be engaged as well.

William

William was a sophomore at Michigan Doctoral University (MDU) studying political science. He identified as a White man between the ages of 18 to 23 years old. When asked about what, if any, pre-college experiences influenced his interest in nonpartisan political engagement, William identified a key involvement from high school. He described the role and work of the unique student group as follows: "We ran programs around certain traits, like courage, or curiosity, or leadership. And then we also ran programs that were about conflict resolution and finding a way to solve issues you may have with other people." The experience with this organization taught him about the importance of coming together across differences for the sake of a stronger community. In listening to William, I gained a sense of his genuine passion for helping others and working for a purpose greater than himself. Eventually, his passion for community-building made him consider the role of politics in shaping a better world.

Upon entering college, William knew he wanted to get involved early on and joined student government. Within his campus' student government, there was a committee that worked on political engagement activities, such as voter registration and assistance with absentee voting.

William was drawn to this committee because he thought civic engagement was a great way to help students. By being involved in student government and on this committee specifically, he learned about CVP. Another student on the committee provided William with a recommendation and William was eventually brought on to serve as a democracy fellow in the fall of 2019. William appreciated the ability to reach pockets of campus life he otherwise would not have been able to connect with if not for his nonpartisan stance. William felt partisanship closed the door on certain demographic groups at MDU, indicating the increasingly divided electorate based upon social identity. When asked how he would describe his role, William said, "I don't know that I would say I'm an educator, but I try to help others understand what's important." He felt the role with CVP provided him with the tools to engage his peers effectively.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced the 15 student participants at the center of the study through descriptive profiles. Within those profiles, I included their motivations for participation in nonpartisan political engagement. I then detailed key demographic information about the students and shared their self-described pre-college experiences informing their interest in nonpartisan political engagement work. I also briefly introduced the variety of institutional contexts in which students operated. This chapter provided necessary context and framing prior to discussing the findings of the study. While beneficial to understanding students' lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement, the next chapter directly presents findings of the study's two research questions.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

Individual interviews with the 15 participants occurred between the months of August and November 2020. The interviews lasted approximately 75 minutes on average. Following the election on November 3, 2020, I conducted four separate focus group interviews with the same participants, each lasting an average of 90 minutes. The 27 hours of interviews generated 378 single-spaced pages of transcribed data. In the following chapter, I reviewed the study's findings with respect to the two research questions.

- RQ1: What are the lived experiences of politically engaged college students involved in nonpartisan political activity leading up to the 2020 U.S. election?

- RQ2: How do these experiences of nonpartisan political activity influence student aspiration for future civic engagement?

Aligned with the study's constructivist approach, the chapter begins by framing the students' involvement in their words, specifically defining civic and political engagement. Next, I organized the presentation of the findings according to each of the two research questions. First, I began with findings associated with RQ1 where I reviewed six co-constructed themes to illuminate students' lived experiences in the context of the 2020 election. I then reviewed findings for RQ2 about how these experiences with nonpartisan political engagement influenced student aspiration for future civic engagement.

In Their Words: Characterizing the Work

Previously, I created Figure 1 to situate nonpartisan political engagement within the broader scholarly discourse. The framing provided necessary insight into the topic, but my research design called for an understanding of how the participants defined and related to the terms civic and political engagement themselves. Student input about their relationship to these

terms provided additional context for addressing my research questions. Generally, the participant responses matched the relationships articulated in Figure 1, with some important nuance. Students felt their peers, faculty, and staff associated them with voter engagement. Joan for example, said she became "known" on her undergraduate campus as, "the voting person." When questions about voting came up, students, staff, and community members were pointed in her direction. Other participants shared a similar phenomenon. Simply put, students embraced their nonpartisan role to promote student political participation. In the next section, I share the ways students framed their work within the context of the terms civic and political engagement and then offer four ways they characterized the roles they assumed in their communities.

Framing Civic and Political Engagement

When asked about how they would characterize their nonpartisan work, students felt their role and activities were portrayed by both terms, civic and political engagement. Nancy explained, "political engagement and civic engagement can be used interchangeably. They're not always the same thing, but they can be." Diane also referenced the interchangeable nature of civic and political engagement. However, the terms held distinct meaning for participants. Joan explained, "people use civic engagement and political engagement interchangeably, and I don't believe that they're the same thing. I think that they're two circles and they overlap sometimes. Maybe they make a Venn diagram, but they are different things." Kelly asserted, "We don't do any civic engagement that's not political engagement." Some of the participants felt strongly however, that the term civic engagement was frequently used to describe their work, when in reality, political engagement was more accurate. William said, "The stuff that I'm trying to do, we use the term civic engagement because it seems a little bit less argumentative almost. Because when people think of politics, they tend to think you're just yelling at each other."

123

William's response represented a proactive approach that participants used in framing their work in reaction to negative public sentiment toward politics. Building on this notion, Kelly expressed the need to use the term civic engagement when describing their work to administrators, faculty, students, and stakeholders so as to not drive them away. She concluded her sentiment by saying, "I feel like civic engagement is what people who are doing political engagement use when they don't want to use the word political." In summary, students considered all political engagement as civic engagement but used the terms interchangeable given their audience.

Despite general congruence, three of the 15 participants disagreed with the representation of some forms of civic engagement existing outside of political engagement. Namely, these participants characterized everything as inherently political. For example, Lyn said, "I never see anything as not being political. The shirt I'm wearing, the people who made it. It's political." In Lyn's characterization, there would be no civic engagement not also considered political engagement. Several students emphasized political knowledge or keeping up with what is going on in the community and beyond, as a key part of political engagement. On the other hand, most students attributed more community and volunteer activities with the term civic engagement.

In situating partisan and nonpartisan work, several participants described civic engagement as a seemingly more nonpartisan term. Naomi acknowledged the idea that everything is political but was sure to differentiate partisan from nonpartisan political work, saying, "Political doesn't have to mean partisan because politics touches every single aspect of your life, whether you know it or not." Also grappling with the distinction between nonpartisan versus partisan, Joan articulated her thoughts about civic engagement, saying, "I don't know if it's always nonpartisan, but it's a more nonpartisan term, where your goal is to help everybody no matter what your ideology is. It is more community based." As evidenced by this quote, most

students seemed to be working out their definition of the terms civic and political engagement in their answers yet held some assumptions in line with scholarly understanding of the terms. What was clear, however, was students viewed both civic and political engagement as terms depicting the activities they participated in as part of their role. This confirmation was particularly important in addressing the study's second research question which sought to understand student aspiration for future civic engagement following their involvement.

One Role, Many Hats

When thinking about nonpartisan political activities, the first thing to come to mind for participants was voter registration. In addition to voter registration, however, I accounted for over 80 unique activities, roles, or actions students in the study took part in. Describing the various activities fellows managed, Catherine said, "I think we wear so many hats, we are activists, we are organizers, we are educators. And it really does depend on the situation we're in. We're just going to carry our backpack full of hats to change as we go." Sue said she appreciated the flexibility CVP gave them to decide their approach to the work, emphasizing the fact that no single community is the same, so students may need to approach the work in a different manner to meet the needs of their students. Beyond the activities carried out, students spoke about general and overarching ways to characterize their work. The four approaches were: peer educator, voting advocate, campus organizer, and learner.

Peer Educator

The first and most referenced role was that of being an educator. Because she was the first person to bring nonpartisan political engagement to the N.C. Arts and Sciences campus, Joan said, "I felt like I was an educator." Offering similar views, Judy said her work was related to the common saying, "it's not just giving a fish to someone, it's teaching them how to fish." In

this sense, she felt like a core responsibility was to give students access to voting and also to ensure they had the know-how and confidence to follow-through with their intention. Students believed the system of voting was overly complex and intimidating. Judy felt that because of the political climate in Texas, especially in terms of what she perceived as voter suppression, the only thing she could do was educate students about how to navigate a broken system and how to advocate for themselves. Naomi emphasized the educator descriptor because of her role in creating materials for students to read and learn from. In a similar sense, the term educator resonated most with Kelly, where she said, "a lot of what we do is think about how do we make this clear to other people? How do we break it down in a way that is digestible?" Ultimately, the key for most students was influencing behavior, one of the most challenging educational goals.

Notably, some students were cautious to associate with the term educator. The hesitancy was rooted in their perceptions of what an educator does. Roger, for example, believed the key to being an educator was trust, and as a peer, he did not know if people considered him an authority. He pondered his own point about educators, saying, "Anthony Fauci is not trusted despite his credentials. I don't know what makes an educator in the 21st century of the internet." Later, Roger warmed up to the peer educator title as a way to describe his work after listening to others in the focus group. Students who were hesitant to associate with the word educator felt unworthy of the title. Most students, however, described ways they assisted their peers in learning about democracy, not just in a theoretical sense, but in the application of knowledge.

Voting Advocate

Students who approached the work from an advocate lens viewed much of their responsibility as advocacy for nonpartisan political engagement, specifically for voting. Advocating for college student voting occurred on an individual level and in the participant's

efforts to institutionalize the work at their college or university and to build stronger relationships between the local community and the institution itself. William said, "You are limited in the reach that you have if the administrators and institution as a whole isn't willing to help you. So, my biggest focus has really been trying to institutionalize voter engagement." William specifically referred to himself as a "voting activist." Several other students discussed the ways they advocated for greater access and presence of voter education and voting itself, through a campus polling location. Overall, the perceived lack of institutional support on their respective campuses made students consider their work as a form of advocacy. Henry and Judy had direct encounters with local voting administrators, where they were actively challenging discrepancies they learned about through their involvement. I share more in depth about these challenges later in the following chapter.

Campus Organizer

Another common way the students characterized their work was as an organizer. Kelly described organizing as finding, "people that are at all interested in helping out" and working, "to direct them to have a bigger impact." Catherine's understanding of her role stemmed from her experience working as a campaign organizer for a political candidate. Whereas a political campaign organizes folks at the regional, state, and city levels, organizing as a democracy fellow occurred within the academic disciplines at the college, student organizations, and other pockets of campus life. She said, "I saw what campaign organizers do. I would probably most widely apply the term organizer. What we're setting up here, very much resembles a political campaign." Dona also took on an organizer role, reaching out to different student constituencies. For example, she derived a lot of traction by working within her university's Greek system and with student athletes. The role of organizer took on a new meaning in the 2020 election through

the use of online and digital tools where students needed to re-learn how to organize their peers in a new way.

Learner

A key theme throughout students' descriptions of the work they did was that of being a learner. Of course, when they first started in their roles, they needed to learn from CVP staff, campus advisors, and peers. After becoming a democracy fellow, Richard said he liked having, "the opportunity to educate myself with materials that were provided." Almost every student also spoke about the experience of keeping up with their learning: following election law and policy developments, learning about new ways to engage their peers, and keeping up with politics in general. Roger said, If I'm going to be an educator, I have to keep learning." In this election cycle in particular, students had to learn new ways to engage, either online or navigating COVID restrictions. If they did not learn to adapt, they would not have been able to achieve their goals.

Keeping up with politics stemmed not just from their general interest in politics, but also from the idea of knowing how to continue to show up as a nonpartisan actor. When peers asked participants about issues, the fellows wanted to be knowledgeable about what was going on and how to discuss issues in a nonpartisan manner. Sharing why she kept up with the latest political news both locally and nationally, Sue said, "I inform myself a lot of what's going on, that way I can go about doing the work in a nonpartisan way and not put my own biases in there." In other words, Sue's efforts to stay up with what was happening politically was part of her strategy for maintaining a nonpartisan approach. Additionally, knowing about current issues and political items on the agenda, also enabled them to connect with peers about ballot items, not for the purpose of persuasion, but to encourage participation. Learning both about the system and current events helped students make connections with their peers.

Agents of Democracy: Perspectives and Priorities

Participants worked hard to engage their peers throughout the 2020 election season. Catherine said, "We are agents of change and agents of democracy. We try to help everyone exercise their right to vote." In the next section, I detail perspectives and priorities shared widely by participants, organized by the following themes: navigating uncertainty and disruption, commitment to nonpartisanship, turning to digital and online engagement, persuading peers to participate, resisting threats to democracy, and seeking institutionalization of political engagement. Constructed in consultation with participants, each theme provided insight into the students' lived experience. The themes were informed by my conceptual framework, specifically accounting for the influence of the political, human, cultural, and structural elements of the campus political climate and associated theories offered in Chapter 2.

Navigating Uncertainty and Disruption

Next, I share a chronology of student experience through the 2020 election, highlighting the ways students reacted to and navigated a precarious period of time, characterized by uncertainty and disruption. Almost all participants referenced a strange relationship with time itself, attributing their feelings to living through an election during a pandemic. Richard shared his experience with uncertainty, saying, "I feel like I have dissociated from time. I don't know where this year went." The country's reaction to the pandemic amplified these feelings, whereby events, transitions, and life in general were placed on hold or delayed. Early in the data collection process, I realized students thought about their nonpartisan political engagement work in two frames: pre-pandemic and life during the pandemic. The nature of students' lived experience changed dramatically in relation to the context of socio-political events leading up to the election. Although my research questions did not seek to understand students' experiences of

a pandemic, their lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement could not be fully explored without conveying the uncertainty and disruption of the election cycle.

January to March: The Shadow Casted

Some students began to learn about COVID-19 as early as January 2020 but moved forward without interruption for at least the first two months of the calendar year. Dona said, "We just did normal work in those two months. We did educational programming, class visits, voter registration tabling and there was an overall positive reception." Prior to the pandemic taking hold, participants used in-person events, leveraging fanfare, and free food to entice peers to stop by or attend. Participants derived energy and enthusiasm from in-person interactions while presenting, tabling, and hosting events. Several students focused a lot of time and effort engaging their peers leading up to the presidential primaries early in the spring semester. These early spring efforts aligned with attention focused on the primary season but also corresponded with holidays, such as President's Day. Diane, for example, carried out a special series of events during what she referred to as "President's Week" in February. The program concluded with a voter registration drive where she registered 500 students to vote. Diane felt fortunate to have hosted the program in person prior to widespread lockdowns. Richard and the Pennsylvania Associate's College (PAC) voting coalition began making plans in late February in reaction to "the shadow casted" from the emerging pandemic.

Many of the participants, however, were able to experience their typical campus life up to their spring break. Roger said a lot of his efforts in the spring centered on the primary election, which occurred during Ohio Public Research University's spring break. The timing influenced his message to encourage, "everyone to be very intentional about how they wanted to vote, where they were going to vote, and getting them to vote early." The coincidental timing worked

to Roger's advantage but still felt disconcerting to him. Kelly planned and attended debate watch parties for the Texas primary. She said, "It felt very much like a calm before the storm. And then, obviously, BABOOM. The whole pandemic hit." Kelly's expression matched what other participants felt, namely, that the pandemic came out of nowhere.

Eventually, institutions closed indefinitely for seated classes, campus activities, and residential living experiences. When TN Public University's campus closed with two months left in the semester, Sue and her peers were at a loss for what they should do in the meantime. CVP designed online sessions where students from across the state could collaborate about ideas for engaging peers through the end of the spring and into the summer. From writing a letter to the editor, to designing social media posts, Sue felt like the connection to CVP helped facilitate continued ideas for how she could carry on her political engagement work. Understandably, several students said they simply dropped what activities they were doing in the spring. Dona said, "We weren't really fully engaged as we could have been, because we were all just thrown for a loop." Similarly, Catherine said her university had just returned from spring break and they realized they would need to cancel plans. She felt like her organization, "100% dropped the ball," because they were a new team and did not have plans in place for online work. Disappointment was softened for students with supportive advisors. Diane, for example, said her advisor suggested they take the rest of the semester to recoup and make a plan for summer.

April to July: Disappointment and Social Unrest

The wide range of cancelled political engagement events was disappointing. Joan was looking forward to hosting a "Student Rights Week," featuring an event on the U.S. Census with special guest speakers. Kelly had a fundraising event cancelled, followed closely by the Texas Voting Summit which was delayed and then moved online. Catherine organized a local "Meet

the Candidates" event which was cancelled. As part of their commitment to CVP, students submitted campus voting plans toward the end of the spring. Kelly said the pandemic made this the "worst possible time to make a campus plan because we were all in that weird limbo of this isn't happening." As a result, many students included plans for programming to be held online and in-person in the fall, depending on how their institutions responded to COVID.

Disappointment from cancelled events extended to major life experiences. Three participants graduated in May 2020: Richard, Joan, and Naomi. Richard transitioned to N.J. Research University, Catherine to N.C. Research University, and Naomi to a full-time job in civic engagement. Students glossed over these accomplishments in interviews, reflecting the lack of closure and disruption of a milestone. By summer, participants had a chance to catch their breath and to reconnect with their peers virtually. They monitored their campus's response to COVID, scanned the evolving political landscape, and then plotted their approach for the fall semester. William said they "realized that in-person voter registration may not really be an option," and that campus events would be tricky to pull off, so they started to consider ways to engage online. Still others, learned their institutions were planning for in-person fall semesters, so they began to chart ideas for in-person and hybrid scenarios. This focus on summer planning was short-lived, as attention shifted to national events.

In addition to the death tolls rising due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several students referenced the horrific death of George Floyd at the knee of a police officer and the ensuing social unrest as a call to action for those involved in civic engagement work. Dona, for example, participated in Black Lives Matter protests. She saw a lot of her organization's t-shirts promoting voting, which made her feel a sense of pride. Nancy moderated a panel on racial justice at the Michigan Voting Summit. Nancy said it was important for she and her peers to, "engage in the

social climate going on." Kelly's student organization raised over $2,000 for Black Lives Matter causes. Demonstrations broke out across the country, and students felt like the uncertainty they lived through had reached a tipping point. Participants recognized their limitations in addressing racism in their roles, but many spoke about racial unrest as a call to reframe their priorities.

August to November: Navigating Institutional Responses

The response to COVID-19 from institutions greatly influenced the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement, resulting in participants remaining fully online, or returning to a regulated physical campus. In Table 2, I outlined institutional and student responses to the pandemic. For some participants, their school's response meant returning physically to campus. For others, the institutional response meant staying home. Still, several students were somewhere in-between, living near campus but not frequenting the campus for activities outside of class.

August was a particularly stressful month for participants. In addition to responding to their institution's plans, sometimes announced last minute, they recruited and trained new volunteers, and implemented whatever efforts they planned to enact during the three short months leading up to November. Students also responded to state and national discourse and changes due to the pandemic, including revised voting laws. Richard said he, "contacted local election officials to consult about voting changes, such as a new law allowing people to register to vote 15 days prior to the election." The stress compounded this election season, with uncertainties about the vote-by-mail system. Kelly said, "Now with the mail being so slow and being irregularly slow, we can't give guarantees to students." Given the additional stressors, she said it felt like they were, "building a plane and we're about to take off, but the runway is just gonna cut and not let us take off." Even without a pandemic, students would have faced a tight timeline before election day. Layering in the pandemic and complications resulting from the

pandemic, stress was at an all-time high. Most students pivoted to a highly digital and online format, which I discuss in depth later in this chapter. Even so, several students had significant in-person experiences.

Table 2.

Fall 2020 COVID-19 Response

Student	Institution	Institutional Response	Student Location	Students' Course Modality
Catherine	Ohio Commuter Public University	In-person and online offering	Did not live on or near campus	Mix of in-person and online
Diane	Michigan Community College	Started in person, but moved online	Did not live on or near campus	All online
Dona	VA Mid-Sized Public University	In-person and online offering	Lived on or near campus	All online
Ella	VA Small Public University	In-person and online offering	Lived on or near campus	Mix of in-person and online
Henry	N.C. Small Private University	Fully in-person	Lived on or near campus	All in-person
Joan	N.C. Research University	Started in person, but moved online	Lived on or near campus	All online
Judy	TX Large State University	In-person and online offering	Lived on or near campus	Mix of in-person and online
Kelly	Texas Large Public University	In-person and online offering	Lived on or near campus	Mix of in-person and online
Lyn	TX Large State University	In-person and online offering	Lived on or near campus	All online
Nancy	Michigan Associate's College	In-person and online offering	Lived on or near campus	All online
Naomi	PA Large Public University	In-person and online offering	Did not live on or near campus	Graduated May 2020
Richard	NJ Research University	In-person and online offering	Lived on or near campus	All in-person
Roger	Ohio Public Research University	In-person and online offering	Lived on or near campus	Mix of in-person and online
Sue	TN Public University	In-person and online offering	Lived on or near campus	Mix of in-person and online
William	MI Doctoral University	In-person and online offering	Lived on or near campus	Mix of in-person and online

Students with in-person campus life operations adapted their work as best they could. The 2020 Constitution Day program on at Tennessee Public University, for example, looked and felt very different to Sue. Although the 2019 event was a "bigger production," Sue was certain this year's event reached more people because the program was designed to engage students passively. In 2019, students and staff members took turns reading parts of the Constitution aloud throughout the day at different times, but this year, they developed large lawn signs with different Articles and Amendments of the U.S. Constitution printed out. Sue explained, "We found ways around the pandemic. We're trying to still be safe and keep everyone safe." Participants promoted public health as part of their work. At Michigan Associate's College, for example, Nancy distributed "MAC Votes" branded masks to her peers. As much as students attempted to amend in-person activities to mitigate the virus, COVID-19 still dominated the fall.

Several participants had personal encounters with the virus. Dona described her campus experiences as follows: "VA Mid-Sized Public University has had a huge outbreak since the beginning of the semester. I had to quarantine two to three times. Every single one of my friends has had it (COVID-19). And not by the virtue of being irresponsible. It just spreads." Prior to contracting COVID-19 herself, Dona said she lived with a lot of, "existential anxiety." Sue and Henry contracted COVID a few weeks prior to the election, Judy said a member of her organization lost both of his parents to COVID, and Lyn said members of her family became sick. Reflecting on the experience of contracting COVID and living in quarantine on campus, Henry said, "whoever told you that it's like the flu was lying. It is not like the flu, it was awful." Students lamented the social isolation experienced at various points when required to quarantine. Most students moved their activities online, which I discuss later in this chapter, but a few participants had extensive in-person experiences in the fall.

Some students believed their administration's insistence in having an in-person experience was politically driven. Judy, for example, said her peers were, "energized through fear and anger and a collective confusion and disheartenment." She felt that the decisions to bring students back and a lack of planning resulted in a more politically engaged student body. Yet, disruption continued to be the norm. Judy worked with residence life to distribute voter registration and mail-in voting forms at move-in, but staff backed out last minute, a move that frustrated her. Texas Large State University had a mix of in person and online courses, so she approached her university for approval to present in classrooms. Her advocacy led to some classroom presentations, though not as many as would have occurred pre-pandemic. Similar to Judy, explaining his university's decision to still host a welcome week program, William said, "if the university thinks it would look good for them to do it, they'll do it in person." He described seeing peers after being in physical isolation for so long as "shocking," not because of overwhelming numbers of people, but just the juxtaposition to months spent apart. William did his best to ensure in-person events were as safe as possible following university protocols.

Henry's campus, a small private university seemed to have a fall semester most resembling pre-COVID campus life due to strict rules, contact tracing, and COVID testing. Recalling what it felt like to work a voter registration booth during welcome week, Henry had a hard time connecting with new students, saying, "It doesn't feel genuine when you're meeting someone through a mask and you're probably not going to recognize them anyways." His first week back after being in quarantine occurred on National Voter Registration Day. Despite feeling stressed about catching up in classes, he helped register over 200 students in that one day.

Students experienced a lot of stress trying to get students registered prior to their state's registration deadline. Kelly said, "I got very emotional yesterday when I realized we only have

136

17 days until National Voter Registration Day." Nancy said she had to change up her approach about where she would physically come into contact with students. Although she did not live in on-campus housing, she felt like she needed to go to the college residence hall, otherwise her contact rested with those few students who had in-person courses. Even with the endless disruptions and uncertainty, students worked tirelessly to engage their peers.

November 3, 2020: The Endless Election Day

Election day, November 3, 2020 evoked a range of emotions from participants. Ella said, "we've been boots on ground, even through this. I was happy to get out there. I was happy to participate. I was happy to get my community and my peers educated. But the entire time we were out here, I'm just like, oh my gosh, I can't wait until this is over. I was so anxious." Ella's reflection resonated with other participants. The bitter polarization coupled with disruption, uncertainty, and the new ways participants needed to adjust to engage their peers led to exhaustion. Despite the fatigue, students felt a sense of pride on election day. Sue said the highlight was witnessing her peers get excited to vote, many for the first time.

Participants said the presence of young people volunteering at polling locations was a marked difference between prior elections and the 2020 election, a direct result of the pandemic. Nancy said seeing young people work the polls felt motivating. In prior elections, young people would often not be represented among poll workers, but this particular cycle, participants were instrumental in encouraging others to volunteer. Nancy personally recruited students to volunteer and actually volunteered herself, counting absentee ballots. Joan worked with department heads at her university to see if they would be willing to allow students to miss class to volunteer.

On election night during a typical year, many of the students would have hosted election return events on their respective campuses. None of the students organized anything formal this

election. In addition to the challenge of COVID-19 and digital fatigue, students also felt too many emotions were tied to the results to host a nonpartisan event online. Participants returned to home to decompress. Most students anticipated a delay in results for the presidential election. Kelly said the delay, "wasn't unexpected, but still felt kind of weird." Henry said even prior to the election day, "We knew it was going to be this way. We knew we were not going to have a result." Although many of the students were prepared for this reality, the delay and uncertainty in the presidential race still felt strange. On top of fielding questions from peers, some of the students were still actively involved at the polls into the next day. Nancy, for example, was up until 5:00 a.m. the morning following election day counting absentee ballots. The election itself felt extended due to delayed results. Just two days after the election, Joan said, "This election day has been one long day." William responded, "It's the 9th month of the Iowa Caucuses."

Participants in all focus groups felt a sense of relief following election day, but especially once the results were announced by media networks. Even though results for the presidential election and other key races were not yet announced during her focus group, Judy said, "I am extremely relieved. Last night, I got the best night of sleep of my life, I swear. Because it just meant a deep breath to finally take after." Judy's remarks resonated with other students who also felt they had been distracted by the uncertainty. Although relieved, participants felt uneasy about how things were unfolding with an incumbent president unwilling to accept the results. Catherine said, "I'm still mentally exhausted from a lot of it. I think the back and forth with transition of power and stuff is still quite exhausting, and it's a frustrating situation." Similarly, Sue said, "I'm feeling slightly relieved but still kind of anxious to see what's going to happen because there's a lot still up in the air. And that makes me anxious." Students still held faith in the process.

Participants reflected on this chaotic election season with pride in their work and hope for the future of democracy. The focus groups provided needed debrief space for students. Nancy said, "Alex, this is definitely therapeutic." Participants celebrated the record high voting rates among young people. Judy felt the historic turnout among college voters was an indication, "They're starting to truly come into their civic duty and citizenry by voting." Catherine said people underestimate the challenges in doing the work: "When I say, 'We've registered 1000 students to vote!' They're like, "only 1000? It's not that hard. Get your stuff together.' But I am really proud of that 1000." Despite the challenges, students displayed an unwavering investment. Participants spoke about expecting the unexpected. Catherine said, "You're gonna have super odd things that come up that you were not prepared for." Participants encouraged future student leaders to plan as best they can for uncertainty and disruption.

Commitment to Nonpartisanship

All participants held strong convictions about the importance of upholding nonpartisanship. In the subsequent section I outline features of student commitment to nonpartisanship: mitigating bias and personal beliefs, facing hostility, and stress-testing the limits and duties of nonpartisanship. William said, "We want an environment where everyone feels open to discussing their political beliefs, regardless of if you disagree with me or not." CVP set a strong example for students. Although Diane held strong personal partisan views, she sought support from her state coordinator at CVP to ensure everything she did aligned with their nonpartisan mission. When Diane first started, her mentor urged her "to remember you can't let your political affiliation get into it." In a practical way, Joan said the title, democracy fellow, helped facilitate the idea that she needed to carry out her role in a professional manner. Joan's go-to phrase throughout college was "I don't care who you vote for, I just want you to vote."

Commitment to nonpartisanship was an organizing frame for students and highlighted tensions inherent in the lived experience of their work in the 2020 election season. After highlighting a negative encounter, for example, Ella said, "I'm not coming to you as an Independent, a Democrat, a Republican, I'm coming to you as another American, educating you and telling you what you can do to get out there." Steadfast in their commitment to nonpartisanship, students pursued their work with intentionality.

Mitigating Bias and Personal Beliefs

Part of committing to nonpartisanship meant recognizing and moderating personal bias. Catherine said, "Everyone has bias in whatever they do. And it's important to acknowledge that by everyday waking up and acknowledging, I have to put my feelings aside." Being reflective was an important strategy for Catherine to hold herself accountable. Naomi said, "I think, even as nonpartisan as you try to be, sometimes your beliefs definitely do come out a little." She felt naming her own internal bias was an important part of using restraint. Students spoke about the challenge of managing personal beliefs but grew stronger exercising nonpartisanship over time.

Beyond restraint, participants sought accountability in a variety of ways. First, they recruited volunteers from a diverse range of partisan backgrounds. Catherine said her organization sought, "equal representation" of political views. This approach helped facilitate a level of responsibility within the organization. Students also worked to identify and reach various sub-populations. Judy, for example, deliberately sought out student groups she was not part of herself. The participant's openness meant they often interacted with peers who did not share their politics. Lyn, said she helped classmates who she knew, "for a fact they're going to get to the ballot box and vote against my best interest." Kelly frequently reminded herself the commitment to nonpartisanship mattered because there were many organizations advocating for candidates

and issues from partisan corners, but hers was the only group working from a nonpartisan lens. Nancy and Catherine expressed confusion over why anyone would think they held a clandestine agenda to only engage certain students. Nancy said, "I don't think people understand that when we're doing nonpartisan work. We're not like, 'oh, how can we like secretly reach people that lean this way?' No, we just want to reach people." Nancy emphasized the challenge in engaging students on her community college campus who range from 18 years old to well over 30 years old. Kelly felt perhaps nonpartisanship sounded too idealistic for people to believe.

Participants fielded a wide range of reactions from peers, but they were thoughtful to not allow their bias to show. Students were often asked throughout their service what they thought about various partisan issues or candidates. William discussed the dynamic as follows: "There's definitely people that will try to get you to admit what you believe in one way or the other. And I'm not going to do that. Because it's more important that I uphold the nonpartisan value of what I'm doing, rather than challenge you on your beliefs." Responding to similar questions, Lyn referred peers to nonpartisan websites where they could learn more for themselves. Roger recalled a time when he was helping someone register to vote and the peer said to him, "It's an important election." He agreed and said in reply, "Hopefully people think every election is important because it's going to affect you some way." Responding while working came easy, but participants encountered blurriness while off duty.

When participants were in their official capacity, they maintained nonpartisanship, but most students felt comfortable expressing their views with friends and family, and even within the community. William said, "When I'm around my friends and family, I definitely take off that CVP hat and I am as partisan as I have to be, because I'm not working in an official capacity." Richard felt nervous to engage in nonpartisan work initially, but upon getting involved, he said,

"I have no doubt I have good judgment, and I have the ability to temper myself in responses."

Part of Richard's confidence came from knowing he could express himself freely when not on

duty. In a symbolic way, Roger's student organization had a branded apron with their

organization's logo helping him think about being explicitly nonpartisan when working in-

person events. Students had mixed approaches to maintaining nonpartisanship online.

Judy emphasized the importance of engaging through politics in her personal life,

whether among friends, on social media, or within the community. She felt strongly that a

commitment to nonpartisanship did not mean disregarding personal beliefs. In response to an

incident on social media, Dona said all members of her organization changed their personal

Twitter bios to read, "opinions are our own." On the other hand, Richard deleted his personal

social media accounts during the fall. He said, "I felt like my personal opinions delegitimized my

own platform." Some participants attempted to be nonpartisan at all times. Kelly, for example,

described extending her nonpartisan stance into her personal life. She was cautious in voicing

opinions about issues and candidates out of fear she would be accused of being partisan. Kelly

felt she needed to, "go to the extreme of not ever putting anything out there." She also described

her commitment as wanting to be seen as a "legitimate spokesperson" and trustworthy.

Facing Hostility

Despite upholding high standards of professionalism in maintaining a nonpartisan

approach, participants confronted hostility. Dona explained, "I think something that's notable is

how things have become more and more polarized as the year progressed, especially towards

people doing nonpartisan civic engagement work." Some students experienced disrespect from

their peers for caring about politics at all. Lyn explained, "Whenever you're doing some kind of

social service, people really look down on you. And they treat you as if you're lesser than them

for caring." She recalled a friend sending her a screenshot of a Snapchat photo someone else took of her presenting about voting with the words typed on the photo, "Look at this bitch." She said there were times she felt demoralized. Lyn offered an analogy, saying, "There's a difference between me registering people to vote, or someone who's trying to sell you something at the mall. But that's what a lot of people treat me like sometimes." Similarly, Richard referred to being perceived as a "try hard" among peers, fearing people might look down on him.

Naomi encountered peers who aggressively questioned her nonpartisan commitment saying things like, "If you don't believe in the party that I'm registering for, are you gonna throw out my application?" Naomi responded, "legally, I cannot do that. And also, I'm approaching this from a nonpartisan standpoint. So, I would not do that." Richard said peers frequently asked him things like, "What's your angle? Why do you care?" Catherine recounted several similar instances where peers refused to believe she was nonpartisan, asking questions like, "who did you vote for?" and, "why are you doing this?" She said these interactions, though uncomfortable, were ones she was prepared to respond to with grace. Catherine said, "I'm supposed to give you access to this information, the documents you need to form and develop your own opinion." Peers often approached the participants with caution. Joan said people would react to her with hesitation, but then when they realized she was not pushing an agenda, she witnessed relief.

Alternatively, Diane said on more than one occasion, people assumed her political affiliation when she interacted with them on campus. She said students reacted to her, assuming she was there to support a certain party or candidate, "even if I haven't said anything to them." In one particularly abrupt interaction, she asked a student if they were registered to vote yet, and they responded in an aggressive manner, "Yep. And I'm voting for Trump!" Startled, Diane responded, "Okay, that's good, that's great. I was just asking." This incident made Diane

question herself, "Do I have a certain tone when I'm talking about voting? Is it me that's making you think this?" She felt she could not have possibly changed her approach. Diane said she told peers who questioned her motives, "I just want to make sure you are able to practice your right to vote." Diane was not the only student who shared a particularly hostile encounter.

When asked about her most salient memories, Lyn shared about presenting to an off-campus fraternity in January 2020. A friend of a friend reached out and asked her if she could come on a Sunday night to register members to vote. To her knowledge, the university had banned the fraternity years earlier due to charges of sexual assault. When she arrived, she noticed most, if not all of the men were White. As a female and daughter of immigrants from India, she felt uncomfortable but not deterred. What surprised her, however, was that a number of the men were wearing Trump t-shirts and the signature red hats with the MAGA (Make America Great Again) acronym. Although she could not be certain, she felt like this was intentional. She saw a lot of eye rolls while she was presenting. When she finished speaking and started passing out voter registration cards, someone started a chant, "Trump 2020, Trump 2020!" The room erupted in chorus. The environment felt hostile but not necessarily unsafe. She said, "it just made me feel…not good about myself." Despite the negative experience, Lyn said she did not regret registering the fraternity members to vote. Lyn emphasized, "registering people to vote doesn't just mean rescuing people you like." As Lyn demonstrated, students' nerves were tested at times.

Roger felt particularly frustrated when a peer texted him saying, "COVID was a good thing because it was a chance to eliminate the weak from society." Roger's immediate thought was to never speak to the peer again. The student reached out weeks later, however, asking how to update their voter registration address. Roger described the conflict he experienced:

144

The demon in my brain was like, I could voter suppress this one person. And I could make a difference? But then I was like, no, 'this is how you do it. This is how you change your address.' It was hard. I need to make sure everyone votes and whatever democracy decides, democracy decides. I think that was the right decision to make.

The situation tested Roger's commitment to nonpartisanship in a way he had not anticipated.

For the most part, students had positive interactions with faculty, but sometimes they felt unexpected intimidation. Judy recalled the actions of an economics professor who tried to challenge her efforts to present in classrooms. The professor wrote an email to other faculty members saying she was, "trying to disrupt the status quo and to bring about hostility." Another professor in the department informed her of the email, only furthering Judy's resolve. In another example, Catherine recounted an incident where her professor allowed her to present to the class, but then proceeded to discredit her work. The professor told the class, "Voting is a waste of time." He then debated Catherine about the merits of voting. She was flabbergasted by his brazenness saying, the experience "was pretty degrading." Ultimately, the professor relented, and Catherine passed out voter registration cards. Later that same day, the professor apologized and visited her organization's booth to register to vote.

Several students experienced hostile reactions from members outside of the immediate college or university community. Dona for example, witnessed parents and alumni respond on multiple occasions in a partisan manner to nonpartisan social media posts. She said, "That's not what it's meant for! Just vote. And it's not students taking it out of hand. It's outsiders." Participants also experienced hostility from parents while working new student orientation. Catherine recalled a confrontation with an angry person who approached their voter registration table and called her and her peers "idiots." Catherine said she was regularly "told off" while

registering people to vote. Richard said some people questioned his motives unprompted and would sometimes, "throw in some colorful language." Ella described two hostile encounters with community members. In one instance, a woman accused her of being partisan, to which she responded, "ma'am. I'm an American talking to another American, asking you to be engaged, to do your civic duty, and to just go and vote." Another time, while student poll working outside of city hall on election day, a lady came up close to Ella, pulled down her mask, coughed, and walked away without saying a word. Ella said, "It's so funny to me now, but I was just disturbed. I am not one to allow people to get under my skin because that gives them power. But in that moment, I was frozen." The interaction highlighted the vicious behavior present during the 2020 election and politization of COVID and associated behaviors.

Participants said they felt like everything became viewed as partisan, even something seemingly not connected to politics, such as wearing a mask. Nancy discussed the challenge of crafting social media posts about mail-in voting and over-thinking how the posts could be interpreted. She said, "When you're talking about voting options, you want to make sure that you don't seem like you're pushing for people to vote one way or another." Catherine affirmed Nancy's sentiment and said she needed to "walk on toes" on social media. As opposed to being able to read body language, Catherine said, "It was 280 characters on a screen." Tensions and anger seemed to peak for participants on election day itself.

Henry served as the chief judge at a polling location, an experience that highlighted the turmoil present in the 2020 election. He said, "We had an individual come into the polling precinct and scream at us that we are subverting democracy." Henry and the poll workers were intimidated by the incident, but he sought to boost morale of the team. He recalled his response:

I had to remind the people that were sacrificing a 16-hour day that what they're doing is important and what they're doing matters. And we were playing a small role in the cornerstone of our democratic experiment. And I had to keep reminding them how awesome that is, what an awesome responsibility, and that no matter who walks into the polling location and yells at us, it doesn't matter. Because our systems work.

Late in the day, he received alerts of threats to poll workers in the area, some even needing police escorts to deliver results. Despite these intimidating circumstances, Henry said, "I believe in the integrity of our elections. And I think being a poll worker strengthened that resolve."

Students assessed their role in the politically chaotic environment. William said, "You start to wonder if your nonpartisan activism really has a place in a country that is so politically divided. Because just doing something as simple as trying to register students to vote, you become a partisan hack because you want people to vote." Students felt their actions to encourage participation were increasingly considered partisan. Judy represented this sentiment, saying, "I believe that everyone should have the right to vote, period. And the fact that alone is political just shows that nonpartisan doesn't exist." Henry also spoke to the issue saying, "I don't think voter registration should be (partisan). It is, but it shouldn't be." The assumption, even among some participants, was that voter participation benefitted one side. Roger asked members of his focus group to share their political affiliation. The group was equally split between Republican, Democrat, and Independent students. Rogers said, "I'm glad to know that campus voter turnout has a wide appeal on both sides of the aisle, because everyone votes." Participants lamented the polarized political climate but suggested this as more of a reason to be involved. Referencing the hostility experienced, participants encouraged future students to keep going. Ella said, "even though you might have a discouraging day, people are being a little rude, you get that

one person that takes you there. Tomorrow's a new day. That's what I tell them just don't stop."

Although participants maintained a commitment to nonpartisanship, they felt conflicted at times.

Stress-Testing the Limits and Duties of Nonpartisanship

Students grappled with the nonpartisan nature of their roles. Joan said, "I think that being a true nonpartisan activist gives you an identity crisis at some point. I always think of the Desmond Tutu quote of, 'if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.' It is hard to find the line where it is ethically okay to be nonpartisan." Similarly, Dona said she sometimes questioned whether nonpartisanship was the best approach, but ultimately, getting her peers involved outweighed, "engaging with those I disagree with."

Of the 15 students in the study, Lyn seemed to be most conflicted about the nonpartisan nature of the role, especially during the primary season. She said, "It felt really pointless to do nonpartisan work. It felt like we were telling people, both sides were valid." After Super Tuesday on March 3, 2020, Lyn paused her involvement with CVP. As she watched COVID-19 spread uncontrollably, however, she felt she had to do something, saying, "I got that same thought back in my head that I did when the Parkland shooting happened, where I realized I have the choice to be an active participant, or I have the choice to sit back, see what happens and be upset about it." She further explained, "in a perfect world, I would not be doing nonpartisan work. I just don't think it's the best thing to do. Because I feel as if being nonpartisan means that you're okay with the status quo." Yet, Lyn saw the merits of nonpartisan work and carried forward.

Participants maintained nonpartisanship but several students felt unafraid to take a stand on racial injustice and upholding democracy. Dona discussed the murder of George Floyd as a moment when her organization chose to speak out. She said, "when you play this both sides game, it's very harmful to our democracy and to those whose lives are being marginalized." In

response, I pressed Dona about her use of the words, "both sides." She associated the phrase with remarks Donald Trump made following the 2017 White supremacist march in Charlottesville where he said, "There are good people on both sides." Living near the events in Charlottesville, Dona said the failure of the President to denounce White supremacy left a lasting impression. In 2020, after George Floyd died, she and her peers demonstrated, fundraised, and spoke out on injustice. She said she was accused of "being liberal," to which she replied, "being not racist is a liberal trait?" Dona felt it was important to support racial justice in the civic engagement space.

Even the participant most notably concerned about being perceived as partisan reacted to the growing outcry over racism. Kelly described her organization as a nonpartisan and nonadvocacy organization. She said, "We have just chosen strategically that we can't ever suggest making things better." Their self-imposed metric was, "Could someone else misconstrue this as partisan?" Her organization's nonadvocacy stance came into question after George Floyd's murder. They decided to raise money for Black Lives Matter organizations and charities. Kelly felt comfortable doing this because they were not supporting a specific candidate or party.

Lyn also spoke to the precarity involved with being a nonpartisan actor in a world where marginalized communities are negatively impacted by inaction. She said, "Neutrality is dangerous, nonpartisanship is dangerous. The status quo is dangerous right now for marginalized communities. And if we pretend there's a middle ground, you just keep compromising on someone's life." In a similar way, Joan started to question what nonpartisanship meant during this election season. She said, "there's a difference between being nonpartisan and being neutral." Similarly, Henry also felt conflicted in remaining nonpartisan this election cycle because he believed, "issues were on the line that aren't debatable." He combatted the internal conflict he felt by continually reminding himself of the importance of their work.

Catherine indicated the challenge she and many others faced in upholding nonpartisanship this election season came because of the divisive nature of the election itself. Immediately following election day, Judy described what it was like when results of the presidential election were delayed. She responded to peers, saying, "I'm not saying that Trump hasn't won. But I'm saying that we don't know the results." William felt their role as nonpartisan actors had to evolve in response to unique circumstances: "This election solidified my feeling that we, as nonpartisan activists have to be inclusive of everyone's views, but we don't have to be inclusive of the views that would purposefully disenfranchise other people." Students felt their role as nonpartisan actors became even more essential due to the climate and questions about the legitimacy of the system. I offer more detail about students' experiences resisting threats to democracy later in this chapter. Their work grew increasingly complex in an online environment.

Turning to Digital and Online Engagement

Next, I share perspectives and priorities participants held in a virtual environment: Optimism in the face of challenge, developing new strategies with intentionality, feeling connected but lacking connection. Students had to adjust every aspect of their life to a virtual format. Fortunately, students felt like they had been acclimated to collaborating in an online environment with CVP prior to the pandemic. Sue described the sudden move to virtual: "It was very weird at first because I'd use Zoom for CVP meetings. But then I started using Zoom for every aspect of my life. We watched church online at home, I led a small group of 10th grade girls at church on Wednesday nights. Every aspect of my life was kinda consumed by Zoom." The pandemic forced students to reinvent how they did their work.

When schools first closed in the spring semester, Richard said, "We quickly realized there had to be some way to develop a virtual message." Similarly, William shared, "We have to

do everything we can to engage students, because that's what they deserve, whether that be in a pandemic or in a normal year when we can interact with them in any way." Most participants started with CVP prior to the pandemic, so they described abrupt changes in the nature of their work. Nancy and Ella began their role after the pandemic took hold, so they only knew the work as trying to reach their peers through digital and online tools. Ella expressed her feelings about the fall, saying, "This has been the toughest semester for everything. I hate COVID." Despite the challenges, Ella said, "I'm not going to complain, because we're in a unique situation." Even though some schools had elements of a residential experience, most students discussed moving most or all of their efforts online.

Optimism in the Face of Challenge

In discussing the challenges and opportunities brought on by COVID-19, Roger said, "This is a heartbreaking global event, but this is a very exciting moment in history, where we have to strip down what are we trying to do and how can we do it despite the circumstances." The move online meant a complete retooling of their approach. Catherine acknowledged the challenges, but promoted a positive mindset to volunteers, saying, "It sucks this semester. Your classes are infinitely harder. We don't get to talk to people. We don't get to go outside. Internet sucks. But you're going to be happy. If you show up to this, you're going to smile, you're going to make jokes, and you're going to bring the joy." Optimism did not mean students embraced every minute of the heavily digital and online experience. Still, students found great meaning in their work. Ella said the experience was, "invigorating," and reflected with pride saying, "whoa, I've literally been a part of history this entire year." Although Ella felt she missed out on aspects of her senior year, she said, "Who else can say they went through an election year their senior year, during a whole worldwide pandemic?" Technology made the students' work possible.

Before the pandemic, the participants described political engagement as grueling, so once the pandemic struck, they felt even more taxed. They adjusted their strategy, keeping up with changes from their college or university, state directives, and even voting laws. Participants navigated unchartered territory in a heavily virtual space. Roger reflected on what it was like to do most of his work remotely, saying, "the only thing that I initially notice is that I feel busier. I'm being asked to do more stuff than usual." Ella described the work of nonpartisan political engagement as, "never-ending. And I don't mean that in a negative way. There's always something to do somewhere. There's always work being done behind the scenes." Lyn discussed digital fatigue, saying, "Who in the world wants to do extra things? It is so difficult being a student right now." The stress was amplified because students relied heavily on digital tools for their work. Judy said, "so much has changed and I think a lot of people have gotten burned out by change and I know that I am kind of facing that burnout right now." Despite the additional stress brought on by COVID-19, students tried to learn new skills and perspectives.

Prior to the pandemic, Catherine hosted and moderated various programs to encourage dialogue across political differences through the National Issues Forums. She said moderating online was the biggest challenge she faced, yet the most rewarding thing she did. She explained:

I've moderated quite a bit in the past. I thought I was ready for zoom moderating. I was wrong. We had our Meet the Candidates night. I think we had eight candidates come on. And as the most senior student working in voting rights on our campus, I was tasked with being the moderator. And just the difference of trying to read a room when you can't see anybody's face, trying to pick out the most appropriate and timely questions from the audience, trying to keep all the speakers on task was really weird and difficult in a Zoom atmosphere. It's definitely a new task and a new skill I had to learn and one I didn't

realize I needed. And going forward, I really think I'm going to lean back on that and

realize this was such a skill building time, even though I was stressed and almost in tears.

Catherine gained skills she hoped to carry forward into her future. Reframing challenges brought

on by the virtual environment was important for Catherine and other participants.

Developing New Strategies with Intentionality

Students considered the different ways to carry out their roles in a virtual and online

environment. Kelly said she spent a lot of time initially brainstorming options to safely hold

events in person because they were, "living in a fantasyland that we did not want to be online."

Eventually, she realized a fall semester online and was unavoidable. Many students moved all of

their efforts to a digital and online format even if their campus had an on-campus presence. Kelly

said, "we are now committed as an organization to doing everything virtually, because we don't

want to put our members at risk." In-person programs did not simply move to an online format.

Participants scaled back the number and duration of formal events. William stressed no

matter how gripping the topic, he and his team thought carefully about whether or not their peers

would be willing to spend more time in front of a screen after attending classes online. William

described COVID-19 as presenting new barriers to already difficult work, saying, "We had to get

more creative than we did before, and the physical restrictions forced us to think outside of the

box and to interact with students in a way that we normally wouldn't." In some ways, however,

online meant an advantage to regulating their messages. Similarly, Catherine said, "Our students

are busy, they are not going to jump on a Zoom call to talk about abortion, they don't have the

time. They don't have the mental energy left." As a result, she said they were very selective about

the nature and length of online events. Catherine's strategy also focused on appealing to faculty

members to incorporate information about voter registration into their courses. Participants

struggled with finding a balance between offering online events without overwhelming their teams and being realistic about what students would be willing to attend. Naomi said, "We had also discussed doing the event that we were planning online, but the benefits of it just didn't really seem to be there for us." Whereas they could entice students to attend in person programs with free food or giveaways, the virtual events simply did not have the same appeal. Instead, students used the digital tools available to them to work around the pandemic. Sue's organization planned to attend one of the Presidential Debates being held within driving distance of her university, but because of COVID, they were unable to go. Instead, Sue said they planned a virtual watch party using Discord, an interactive online streaming platform.

Students who previously presented in the physical classroom, soon found themselves signed up to present over Zoom to courses meeting synchronously. While he enjoyed being able to present from the comfort of his living room, Roger said he struggled to juggle screen sharing, presenting, and monitoring the chat. The original draw to this role was creating digital content and videos to help students understand the process, so Roger felt like his skills were being put to good use. Kelly, who pre-pandemic spent a lot of her time presenting to classrooms and registering students to vote, continued to engage students on Zoom. For faculty members unable to find time for a presenter, she developed a "Civic Champion's program, to send professors more options of what they can include in their class." She also designed an asynchronous online module that professors could upload. Participants also honed new strategies to reach their peers.

Students participated in digital organizing through phone calls or text banking. Ella said she and her friends used phone banking but soon realized they had more success with texting. In addition to being convenient to train volunteers on text banking, the method seemed to work well with her peers. Ella chuckled as she said, "It's too easy because Gen Z, I hate to say it, we're all

about our phones. We're all about technology." Emphasizing the importance of relational organizing, students contacted their friends to encourage them to get registered to vote and to make a plan to follow through with their intent to vote. They trained volunteers to reach out to their fellow peers via phone and text to encourage voter registration. Nancy said they relied heavily on what she referred to as, "couch parties." She described couch parties as an organized activity where, "you sit down and you go through your (phone) contact list and you ask, 'are you registered to vote?' And then you send them some information." Students used other digital tools, like a mobile application to support their digital organizing efforts. Kelly said one of the challenges about a text banking event they held on National Voter Registration day was that the peers they helped had to take an extra step to print and turn in their application.

The heavy reliance on digital outreach meant students spent a significant amount of time crafting messages, designing materials, and then selecting communication channels to distribute information. Early on, Joan said she spent a lot of time on social media because she felt stifled in what she was able to do. She said, "More people are on social media, more people are on TikTok and Instagram and Facebook. So that's how we're reaching people." By the middle of the fall semester, however, her strategy shifted. Expressing frustration, Joan said, "if I see another 'register to vote' social media post, I'm going to explode! I can't imagine someone that doesn't care." She moved away from social media as time went on. Like Joan, other participants recognized social media as an outlet for engaging peers but realized limitations of the medium.

Feeling Connected but Missing Connection

Social media offered students the opportunity to share information, but in a more passive way than if they were interacting in person. Sue said because of the pandemic, they reactivated their Twitter account and posted more frequently on Instagram and Facebook accounts. She said,

155

"Social media, it defines our world right now, which can be unfortunate in some situations. But when you're wanting to promote nonpartisanship in the political world, that's a good tool that we have under our belt to be able to share with others." Even though social media offered an outlet for connection, participants felt less connected to peers. Richard summarized his feelings about engaging on social media, saying, "Hitting the like button is way different than having an in-person conversation." He felt like social media had not been designed to facilitate "social interaction," emphasizing, "there's a difference between belonging and interaction." On top of the lack of connection, students began to feel overwhelmed by social media.

The move to a completely virtual format for many of the participants meant they were unable to physically see the immediate impact of their efforts. Nancy said, "If we were on campus, it would be so much easier to reach students. We could set up a table outside of the student lounge by the cafeteria and by the bookstore." Whereas in person, participants could witness students complete their voter registration, online efforts left them wondering if their work was paying off. Kelly said she struggled with not being able to do the work in person. She said online, "we have to rely on students to navigate a much longer process, a much more drawn-out process, which can be very difficult." As a result, the process of voter registration also grew more uncertain. Diane lamented the move to virtual because she felt far more effective with her in person efforts. Although they could see their registration numbers online, in person interactions allowed her to answer questions in real time. The virtual outreach also did not always feel substantive. William said in the virtual space, "it always feels like you're not doing enough." He explained further, "A lot of people have felt since March time has been standing still, but also a lot has happened since then." Demonstrating this dynamic, Joan said she stayed

up much later into the night working on items but did not feel like she was doing as much. The reliance upon online and digital tools diminished participant's sense of accomplishment.

Worth noting, CVP operated online prior to the pandemic, so in some respects, the students felt better prepared to lead, collaborate, and attend courses when the pandemic hit. Kelly said, "We were doing Zoom stuff before it was Zoom world. I think that's been really valuable because it makes me reflect on how my campus is unique and makes me reflect on what ideas we're not considering just because we've never done them before." Roger said he actually felt more connected to CVP as a result of the move online. He participated in discussion blocks the organization hosted to help students keep up with emerging trends, like informing their campuses about mail-in voting. Richard said a positive that emerged from the heavy virtual world was that "People are more willing to meet, they're more willing to engage." He said sometimes online etiquette could be frustrating, such as when people forget to mute or unmute themselves, but overall, he found the move online to facilitate a lot more collaboration among administrators.

Though students appreciated the ability to connect and conduct business virtually through video conferencing and other forms of digital communication, they missed the sense of community offered through in person encounters on their campuses and within CVP. Participants lost valuable mentorship from faculty and staff advisors. Sue said, aside from a couple of online check-in meetings, she had not seen her faculty advisor in over 7 months. She would have interacted with her advisor a lot more if they were in person. Richard felt the reliance on video conferencing "depersonalizes people, because we don't really have that in person view. I can't shake your hand. I can't elbow bump with you. And that lack of interpersonal experience is really degrading my ability to reach students." Students were connected, but missing connection. Ella said initially, she and her peers felt like they were, "robbed of the experience of getting out

there." Although she altered her strategy and engaged in a lot more digital engagement, she said, "part of me was always thinking what we could be doing." Kelly said, "I feel very excited when I talk about all we are doing, but then I get kind of sad too." The feelings of loss were prevalent, yet students shared many stories of the efforts and how they encouraged political engagement.

Persuading Peers in Political Participation

This section is organized by key experiences participants had persuading their peers to learn about and to participate in politics: Empowering the unseen and disillusioned, recognizing privilege in nonpartisan work, and encountering barriers to student voting. Participants contended with many of the often referenced and disputed phenomenon about young voters, such as apathy, disconnection due to age, perceived lack of knowledge about politics, and other factors limiting youth participation. Describing a view shared by several participants, Naomi said, "I think young people care a lot, but sometimes they don't know what to do with it. And I think that being engaged is a great first step." Students in this study made inroads with their peers, but the work required patience and persistence.

Empowering the Unseen and Disillusioned

Some of the participants referenced encountering peers who felt indifferent about politics. The reasons, however, were rarely that their peers did not care about the world around them. Joan highlighted what many of her peers viewed as a generational challenge, hearing comments like, "The boomer generation is going to overpower us anyway. So why am I wasting my time?" Joan learned different ways to counter these sentiments and to convince students to participate. She believed young people do not vote at the same rate as other age groups because they do not feel represented. She referenced her peer's high energy and engagement on social media and through activism as evidence that students do care about their communities. Similarly, Ella said

she encountered many peers who said things like, "My vote doesn't matter." Participants, therefore, viewed part of their role as helping their peers feel seen.

Diane empathized with peers who felt disconnected from politics because she had long felt ignored by adults when expressing her own political ideas. She said a similar pressure influenced her friends to say things like, "I'll pay more attention when I'm older and are taken more seriously." Diane responded to these kinds of statements by saying if young people voted more, they could not be ignored: "Elected officials are going to see us and think, I actually have to listen because this person decides whether or not I have a job." Lyn described a similar logic, indicating young people feel, "invisible" to politicians. Several participants also said students believed they were not credible or informed enough to vote. Participants encountered peers who feel like politicians do not think about young people. In these instances, participants exercised restraint by not advocating for one party over another. One of Richard's most salient experiences occurred in a one-on-one conversation he had with a peer. He described the encounter as follows:

> I was talking to a student who never voted in their life. And the student was talking to me
> about how they get sick and tired of hearing about how they need to vote, because at the
> federal level, my vote, as they said, 'ain't shit.'

Richard asked the student about what part of the city they lived in and the condition of their street. The student said, "I hate it. Used needles. The storm drains are dilapidated. And on top of that, the police don't show up." The student said if they called the police on someone using drugs, the authorities would show up and possibly hurt the person instead of helping them. Richard then asked the student if they ever voted for local officials, such as city council members, district attorney, or police commissioner, to which the student responded, "no." Richard went on to explain that many of these elected officials influence how communities

respond to drug use and policing. He did not tell the student who to vote for but instead encouraged the student to study the candidates and to vote for how they think issues should be handled. Richard then provided nonpartisan voter information about candidates, saying, "The two things this person mentioned to me were on the ballot in the previous election and in the upcoming election. It was like the stars aligned perfectly." He made politics tangible for the student and as a result, the student registered to vote.

Related to, but distinct from not feeling seen, participants also encountered peers who were simply tired of the polarization and bitter nature of politics. They were often on the receiving end of dissatisfaction from her peers about the options to vote for, especially at the national level. Joan said many of the students she interacted with said they did not approve of either party. She answered their critique by saying, "But there is somebody that represents you more." Participants also encouraged students to hold elected officials accountable once elected. Naomi for example, often spoke with her peers about actions that could be taken beyond voting, such as writing to government officials. Naomi explained, "I think there are just a lot of issues young people really care about. So, I think it's important for them to advocate for those issues." Participants often encountered peers who were politically energized but resistant to voting. Kelly said, "I think this is the first time where I really felt challenged to consciously defend electoral politics as a method of change. On the left, I saw a lot of people who I've met at TLPU who are very skeptical of the idea that change comes from electoral politics." Similarly, Diane felt many of her peers took to social media to express their outrage but did not feel like they had a voice at the table to express political opinions. Her peers were not thinking about ways they could get involved through town hall meetings, by writing politicians, or organizing peers to vote. She said, "we post it on social media or we create a hashtag, which is great because it causes

awareness, but in order to create structural change, you need to take all that effort and take all that action and emotion and go to the polls and vote." Participants sought to encourage action.

Despite their best efforts to encourage peers to express their own political ideas, participants encountered many students who still drew heavily from their parent's deeply held beliefs. If a student's parents discouraged their student from participating in politics, then the student would follow suit. Henry recalled a lengthy conversation he had with a peer. The student's parents were very cynical about politics and told their son not to vote. He implored the student, "If you don't participate, you're endorsing whatever happens. Your participation is you showing that you, one, care about the country, and two, that you care about the people that live here." Henry practiced patience in listening to the student and ultimately the student registered to vote. Peer-to-peer conversations about voting were transformative, but participants felt they could not do everything on their own. They needed to persuade friends to join them in doing political engagement work. Kelly said sometimes your own friends will question why you care so much. She recommended to practice persuasion with friend groups because, "They're the ones who you need to make sure you're persuading, you're talking to, and you're getting really good at breaking it down for people and helping them out. That really will prepare you a lot for the greater challenges you'll encounter." Participants worked hard to recruit peers to assist them.

Recognizing Privilege in Nonpartisan Work

Another challenge of learning how to persuade peers was in getting volunteers who want to engage others in politics, specifically in a nonpartisan manner. Students said they had a difficult time conveying their nonpartisan mission to students. Joan felt like nonpartisan political engagement, though critical work, did not have the same authority that attracts young people to other social movements. She said, "I think when historians look back on what's happening now

161

with young people, it's going to be the Black Lives Matter movement." Richard agreed to an extent but felt nonpartisan political engagement would gain more attention following the work of the New Georgia Project, a nonpartisan organization founded by Stacy Abrams, to support an expanded electorate in Georgia. Once participants convinced their peers to volunteer, they also had to encourage follow-through with their commitments. Richard said getting someone to show up to a meeting versus taking on work were two very different things because some people believe showing up was enough. Participants worked to ensure accountability within their student organizations, but understood their work held some inherent privilege. Kelly said nonpartisan political engagement required folks to have "a specific approach and attitude." Although participants received a modest stipend through CVP, most of their organizations or departments did not have funding to support other students to volunteer, only further perpetuating a narrative of privilege.

Discussed in Chapter 4, the majority of participants held privilege in their racial identity, wherein most students were White. Kelly said one big challenge of doing her political engagement work was the difficulty of bringing people into the nonpartisan space, especially students from underrepresented racial identities. She heard nonpartisan political engagement referred to by a peer as, "the domain of White women." She agreed with the statement to some degree because she felt White female-identified students hold privilege but also experience marginalization. With dismay in her voice, she said, "We don't have any African Americans in our organization. We just don't. I'll be honest." She believed students belonging to underrepresented racial identity group wanted to put their energy into other pressing matters on her predominantly White campus. Furthermore, she said, "it can be difficult when the message you're pushing is just deal with the process as it is. And when the process is stacked against

someone, it can be really hard." Kelly and other students believed nonpartisan political engagement was a privileged space because of the nonpartisan approach to the work.

Several students discussed gaining greater awareness of their own privilege through their work. Nancy for example, said she asked one of her peers if they voted in the primary election, to which the student responded, "I'm Black. We don't vote." Nancy said, "I was kind of at a loss for words." She did her best to try to convince the student that their vote did in fact count. Nancy believed part of her responsibility was to influence mindsets of people who, like the student, felt disenfranchised. In a different example, Judy reflected on when she went to a classroom to present to a group of textile majors. The majority of the students and the professor were women of Color. None of the students, many upper-level students, had ever registered to vote. The professor, who worked at the university for over a decade, said she had never been approached about voter registration. Judy said students asked, "questions beyond just the card itself," such as, "well, how do I vote?" Shocked and dismayed that people her age had never voted or did not know how, she described the experience as, "both invigorating and debilitating." Judy felt like the students' area of study, but also their social identities played a role in their relationship with politics. She said the experience highlighted her own privilege and the inequity present the system, wherein politics attracted students with the privilege of time and a sense of belonging.

Conversely, Dona felt a lot of the apathy she witnessed at her university was because students held the "privilege to not care about politics." She considered her involvement as an opportunity to interact more with diverse group of students, forcing her to consider why politics matters, especially for marginalized communities. Joan said racial injustice and the Black Lives Matter movement made her pause and recognize her position of racial privilege. She said, "I realized I was relying on my people of Color friends around me to educate me on what they

163

need, and that's super unfair." Richard said, "I'm the stereotypical White guy. I have to be able to use my privilege and my power and my socioeconomic status to empower people." He said his experiences at the community college made him realize people were treated differently and talked down to because of factors outside of their control. On a personal level, he felt there was a lot of stigma associated with age working in political engagement, a space he perceived to be built to support traditional-aged college students. In describing the community college environment at Michigan Associate's College, Nancy also echoed the unique challenges at community colleges saying, "We have such a wide range of students here. We have a high turnover rate because most people are only here for two years." Students worked to engage peers of all ages, but their institutional context played a role in the feasibility.

Encountering Barriers to Student Voting

Participants, holding knowledge of how politics worked, demystified participation for their peers. Roger said one of the most meaningful things he experienced was when a peer would approach him and let him know his outreach made a difference in their understanding of how to navigate the voting process. For example, a peer reached out to Roger and said, "I wouldn't have known the things that you told me to do to help me vote." More often, however, participants learned of barriers peers faced. First, participants recognized political participation was not often at the top of a long list of items demanding student attention. Naomi said students, "are busy with a full-time class load and working or extracurriculars. People have lots of other stuff to do. So how do you get them to care enough about something like this to come and learn about it?" Some of the Fellows addressed this issue by presenting in classrooms, or by tabling in different locations on campus. Diane said when she presented in classrooms, students woke up a little more, first out of confusion, but then seemed to welcome the interruption.

Some participants also emphasized need-based barriers to student voting. Richard, for example, discussed the complex dynamics and barriers to student participation. He said:

There's this idea that people at community college don't give a shit. But I would push back on that concept. It's not a question of political efficacy. It's a question of eating. It's a question of having a house. It's a question of being able to find a job. I really hate how people malign students for being disinterested. Last time I checked, my boss doesn't give me a day off to vote, and never has. And I've never had a job where I get a paid day off to vote. And I'm a White guy, so I've got the privilege. So that makes me wonder what happens with people who don't have my gender, who don't have my skin color.

His remarks indicated the need present at his college, experiences he encountered personally at one time in his life. Richard said, "Food security is mental health. Mental health is improved voting outcomes. Food security is democracy." Richard's personal experience with food insecurity made the topic particularly salient to him as he organized and supported his peers.

Several participants referenced the barrier of transportation and actually getting students to the polling locations. They advocated for polling locations on their campus or for transportation to the polls. Judy said the polling location near her campus was "on the chopping block" due to low turnout in the 2018 midterm election. Diane said many students, "can't take a whole day off to go 20 miles to some other polling location." Catherine said her campus was known for serving students with disabilities and therefore had a large population of students who use wheelchairs. Over the years, she learned about a lot of barriers students faced in physically reaching the polling location. Several students told Catherine "their wheelchair would not have enough battery to get them to and from the polling location and that the trip was not safe for them in general." In 2018, the university lost their on-campus polling location, but the poll

returned to the campus in 2020. The university did not advertise the polling location's return, nor did they provide transportation options, an issue Catherine felt worsened because most students lived off campus during the pandemic. Many of the barriers participants observed went beyond factors outside of the voting system's control, leading participants to actively address what they perceived as active threats to student participation in democracy.

Resisting Threats to Democracy

In the following section, I share the lived experience of students' efforts to uphold democracy: Countering voter suppression, supporting absentee and mail-in ballots, offsetting misinformation and disinformation, and observing the looming threat of White supremacy. Participants displayed an unwavering commitment to student voting in the midst of an unprecedented and chaotic election season. Ella shared a profound statement in her focus group to which others agreed, "Democracy works on paper, but it's people who go and corrupt things, and make them not work well." The 2020 election season became a complicated context for students to engage in. Next, I shared ways students resisted threats to democracy.

Countering Voter Suppression

While attending a state voter summit in spring 2020, Catherine observed a panel comprised of local election officials. One of her faculty mentors raised their hand to ask a question. The professor asked the panel, "is voting a right or a privilege?" An elections official responded, saying, "it's a privilege that can be taken away." The response, though surprising to Catherine, highlighted a tension the Fellows experienced: Either voting is a guaranteed right, as her instructor argued, or the right to vote is earned and maintained. Knowing about active attempts to disenfranchise voters, participants expressed general concerns about voter suppression. Judy and Henry shared firsthand encounters with attempts to suppress the student

vote. Although not every participant experienced overt voter suppression, the experiences were important to spotlight. Next, I recount Judy and Henry's advocacy for student voters.

Sneaky Suppression. Judy described the county where Texas Large State University resides as, "very sneaky" due to what she viewed as active attempts to suppress the student vote. She provided an example saying lawmakers "made the campus P.O. Boxes in one zip code and the student residence halls in another." If students used the incorrect zip code, their voter registration submission would be rejected. Given her understanding of the potential for mistakes, she made sure every registration she processed was completed correctly. As the election season unfolded, Judy learned about 30,000 students across the state of Texas and 1,000 on her own campus, "whose voter registration was denied the day before the voting registration deadline." To complicate matters, Judy said some of her peers did not receive a confirmation of their registration in the mail until after the election, even though they registered as early as September. She encouraged students to bring the voter registration receipts she distributed when students registered with them to the polls. Students would then be eligible to receive a provisional ballot, processed upon verification by election officials. Despite this proactive approach, Judy learned of several students who went to vote early and were told they could not. She said, "We even had students who did get registered to vote, who got their cards in the mail to prove that they registered, went to the polling location, and the polling worker said, 'no, you're not registered to vote.' You can't vote." Judy tried to reassure the students who contacted her. Around that time, a representative from CVP reached out to Judy to ask if she heard of students running into issues. She learned there were accounts of students being turned away from voting in several counties. She collected names and contact information of students she knew about and shared with CVP's

legal team. The last day of early voting, over 50 students were denied at the campus poll location. Judy described her reaction:

> After I started hearing about the inklings of voter registration mishaps, I decided I was going to keep every single damn receipt. I have a box of them in my desk. And I dug through and I found all 50 of those student receipts to go give to the poll worker. And the poll worker told me I was lying. And that I was faking it.

She then called CVP to assist. Of the 50 students being denied, most were approved to vote, but a few completed provisional ballots. Judy was frustrated but relieved by the support from CVP.

Intimidated, Not Deterred. Henry also had negative encounters with his local Board of Elections leading up to November. He said officials provided him with false information and tried to reject voter registrations on multiple occasions. In one example, the Board of Elections official told him students cannot be registered to vote in two states or under two different addresses. Henry knew the law detailed voters held the right to decide and that their most recent voter registration cancelled out the latter. A significant number of students at N.C. Small Private University were from out-of-state, but many realized it made sense to register using their campus address. He said some people felt strongly that students should be registering to vote in their hometowns. Henry believed registering at the campus made sense since students spend over 9 months out of the year there: "We drive on the roads, we pay taxes, we shop here, we eat here, this is our home." Ultimately, he did not pressure students one way or another. He said the first instance officials tried to reject registrations he brought in, he felt intimidated. He came to anticipate pushback. Another time, Henry was told students were using an invalid address. The official said forging information is a felony and, "you can go to jail for that." Henry knew he had the verified addresses for residence halls and contested. His efforts protected 72 registrations.

In another instance, ahead of the 2020 registration deadline, the Board of Elections refused to process over 40 voter registrations he personally administered. Henry recounted the story, saying: "I went down there, and I asked them what the problem was…And they could not really tell me. I called CVP's attorney and we got those 40 students registered to vote." He highlighted the story as an example of the assurance CVP provided him, especially when faced with legal questions. Despite the negative encounters, Henry still trusted the system. He felt some officials may have "ill intent," but overall, he sensed they misinterpreted policies. He did not want to paint a negative picture of all elections officials, emphasizing, "most Board of Elections officials are patriots. But you can inadvertently harm someone's civic responsibility of voting in that position, very easily." He felt proud of his efforts to uphold accountability.

Supporting Absentee and Mail-in Voting

With the arrival of the pandemic, came concerns about how to vote safely. Students worked around their institution's response to the pandemic as well as their state's plans for voting. Participants expressed frustration about changing election laws and procedures leading up to the election. In Texas, for example, Kelly said the courts were determining who was eligible to vote absentee, presenting students with confusing messages late into the cycle. Alternatively, in Michigan, Diane felt fortunate to not worry about the legality or mechanics of voting, because two years prior, a law was passed making it legal to vote by mail. Even so, Diane said voter fraud became a big topic among peers. She addressed students' fears by talking about how little historical evidence of voter fraud existed with mail-in voting.

Participants fielded pressure about the effectiveness of mail-in and absentee voting. Richard recalled receiving "a lot of questions about the veracity of the mail-in voting process." Concerned about delays, he strategized about their approach in messaging to students. He said,

"If everybody is gonna send in their mail in ballot at the beginning of October, it's going to be a real jump. So how do we let people know that they're less likely to have their vote counted if they're voting late?" As a result, he spent a lot of time encouraging vote by mail. Later into the election season, he saw mail delivery rates go down, so he worried about votes being counted. Due to the focus on mail-in voting this election, William advocated for institutional support for tangible solutions. He collaborated with the student affairs office to implement a free stamp program, so students were eligible to obtain a limited number of stamps. The stamps could not be advertised in conjunction with voting because the university's legal team feared repercussions. Once implemented, William said, "Who would have thought that anyone would be excited about postage?" Access to stamps removed just one more barrier to student voting.

Some of the participants had personal experiences navigating the complexities of voter registration and casting a ballot by mail. In addition to feeling extremely intimidated the first time he voted, Roger described his own registration process for the 2020 election as a "nightmare." He completed an application, but weeks later, the website said he was not registered. As a result, he went in person to get registered to vote, but the location was closed. Roger said he tried a few more times and eventually secured his own voter registration. Despite the challenges, however, students exhibited follow through. Kelly, who absentee voted over the summer said, "even the person who is supposed to be vote obsessed, somehow, it's still stressful, because it takes two weeks to get your ballot back. And then you have to send it in and hope it gets it in time." Not to mention, students needed to make sure they completed the absentee ballot in a manner that would be accepted. Naomi, for example, had to change her voting address this fall. She said the process was confusing and intimidating, even though she knew what to do. Although she followed the proper procedure, she received her mail-in ballot late. Worried her

ballot would not arrive in time, Naomi drove 8 hours to get home to cast her vote on election

day. Naomi said although she felt excited to participate, her experience showed "how kind of

slow and not that put together our mail-in voting system really is…and ill-equipped." This

experience also highlighted to her the confusion and frustration many students felt.

Offsetting Misinformation and Disinformation

Students took pride in serving in a nonpartisan role during a chaotic election season

where the very act of voting came under scrutiny. Roger felt their roles gained even greater

significance because of COVID-19 and the politicization of voting. He felt discouraged,

"especially due to efforts of politicians trying to postpone the election or trying to convince

people not to vote by mail." Students shifted their approach in response to threats of how

students were informed. Richard said, "One of the things that I am really focused on is

misinformation and disinformation. I'm really skeptical of social media." He described

misinformation as faulty information, but disinformation is faulty information spread

deliberatively. Richard articulated the value of a local presence to gain student trust, saying:

> How do we facilitate a message where we can connect students to resources that are
>
> pertinent, timely, and trustworthy? How can we ensure people that it's not Vlad Putin
>
> that's giving them the information, but it's actually someone local? And how do we make
>
> sure that a student, after receiving this information, has the agency to actually engage in
>
> what it is they were informed to do, whether that's to register or request a mail in ballot?

Echoing Richard's concerns, Sue said she encountered a lot of misinformation. She helped peers

enter the process and make their own informed decision with the best information available.

Several students were quick to point out concerns about conspiracy theories, rampant on

social media. To complicate matters, some of the concerning information, as Henry described,

was "amplified by the President of the United States." Following the election, participants were concerned about President Trump's denial of the results and lack of tangible evidence produced. Henry explained, "George Bush never called into question the election. He never said, 'I won Florida by a million votes,' as opposed to 500." Henry's experience as a Chief Judge of a polling location had a profound influence on him. He described his reaction to claims of voter fraud:

> If you have a concern about fraud, then be a part of the system and fix it. If you believe there's fraud, which there isn't, there were five safeguards, at least here in North Carolina, to prevent fraud. And we didn't go through one of them. There are so many systems in place: They scan the ballot, you have a paper ballot, you have a backup of that, in case I got hit by a bus on my way to drop off the elections, a second portion of the election results were with somebody else, other than me. There was just an overwhelming amount of safeguards in place to protect the integrity of our election. And I think undermining that is dangerous and misinformed. And unless there's specific evidence, just shouting it out is like sending a tweet. It's into a void and I think that not accepting the integrity of an election in the United States of America is beyond the scope of reality.

Students were concerned about possible abuses of power. Nancy said she actively addressed misinformation among her peers, such as the idea that President Trump did not have to leave office if he did not concede the election. Despite the questions raised, students felt the courts would ultimately verify the legitimacy of the results.

Observing the Looming Threat of White Supremacy

Students were particularly affected by the way White supremacy pervaded the national discourse and induced fear among the electorate. The topic of White supremacy came up throughout the interviews and the four focus groups. President Trump's remarks at the first and

172

only Presidential Debate where he told the infamous White nationalist group, the Proud Boys to, "Stand back and stand by," concerned participants. William said, "when we legitimize remarks like that and give them a full cycle of media coverage, and talk about them, and the people that completely dismiss them or defend him, it keeps that kind of rhetoric flowing through our country." Dona lived near Charlottesville in 2017 and had a visceral response to what she was witnessing unfold, not just in the 2020 election cycle, but the years leading up to election day. She shared her perspective, saying:

> August 12, 2017 is a day that I will never forget as a person who lived in Charlottesville. I don't know how much you know about white supremacist ringleaders, but the organizer of that rally went to my high school. His roommate actually worked for my dad. And their high up leader was my next-door neighbor. And across the street, my neighbor was the person in the Charlottesville police department in charge of the response.

She witnessed members of the Proud Boys pose for photos in front of her family's black neighbor's front yard, bearing weapons. Dona recalled Heather Heyer's death when a White supremist drove their car into a crowd of counter protesters in Charlottesville in 2016. The racism she witnessed was something she said she would never forget. In the context of the 2020 election, she expressed she was most hurt by the fact that people's "lives are being threatened by the normalization of White supremacy." By summer 2020, Dona heard members of her community outraged by the Black Lives Matter demonstrations. She entered into an argument with someone who kept referring to the Black Lives Matter protestors as violent, to which Dona defended their right to peaceful assembly. Later on, during the Presidential debate, Dona was moderating a live chat on a digital platform. She said when President Trump did not directly condemn White supremacy, Trump supporters made comments defending the Proud

Boys. A peer wrote, "Well, the proud boys aren't alt right, they're alt light." Flabbergasted, Dona responded, "bro, are you seriously trying to defend the Proud Boys?" Participants felt democracy was incongruent with words and actions in support of White supremacy.

The fear of White supremacist violence pervaded the student experience. Nancy referenced her state's governor, Gretchen Whitmer, who was under immense pressure due to her COVID restrictions and just prior to the election, the FBI foiled the plot of domestic terrorists to kidnap and execute her. Richard, questioned, "What happens when the Proud Boys, who were told to stand back and stand by, are told to go get them?" Judy said there were White nationalists and Nazis patrolling her town's center. There were reports of swastikas and Nazi propaganda near her university. Expressing concern about the state of affairs following election day, she said:

> We need to address all the things that went wrong. And one of those is the fact that we
> have this huge culture of like the QAnon conspiracy theories that believe these results are
> wrong and what they're going to do about it. Because part of these people are armed
> Proud Boys in my community, who are threatening to hold riots and march and start a
> fucking Civil War. There's a threat of violence that we need to address.

Their comments reflected the fears of attempts to destabilize democracy. Judy said, "In terms of our democracy, I'm a tad bit fearful. I am hopeful, but I'm extremely trepid in that hope." Students recognized White supremacy as a threat to the democracy they were building together. Participant interviews and focus groups occurred prior to the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, where a mob forcibly attempted to overthrow congressional certification of results.

Seeking Institutionalization of Political Engagement

In the next section, I discuss students' lived experience relative to the level of institutional commitment from their college or university: No formal association, recognized

student organization, sponsored student organization, various levels of operating with institutional support. The section concludes by outlining the support CVP offered. Participants worked tirelessly to make political engagement a priority for their institutions. Even though 11 of the 15 institutions represented in the study were recognized as Voter Friendly Campuses, as demonstrated in Figure 5, the majority of participants led without formal institutional support.

Figure 5.

Institutional Commitment to Nonpartisan Political Engagement
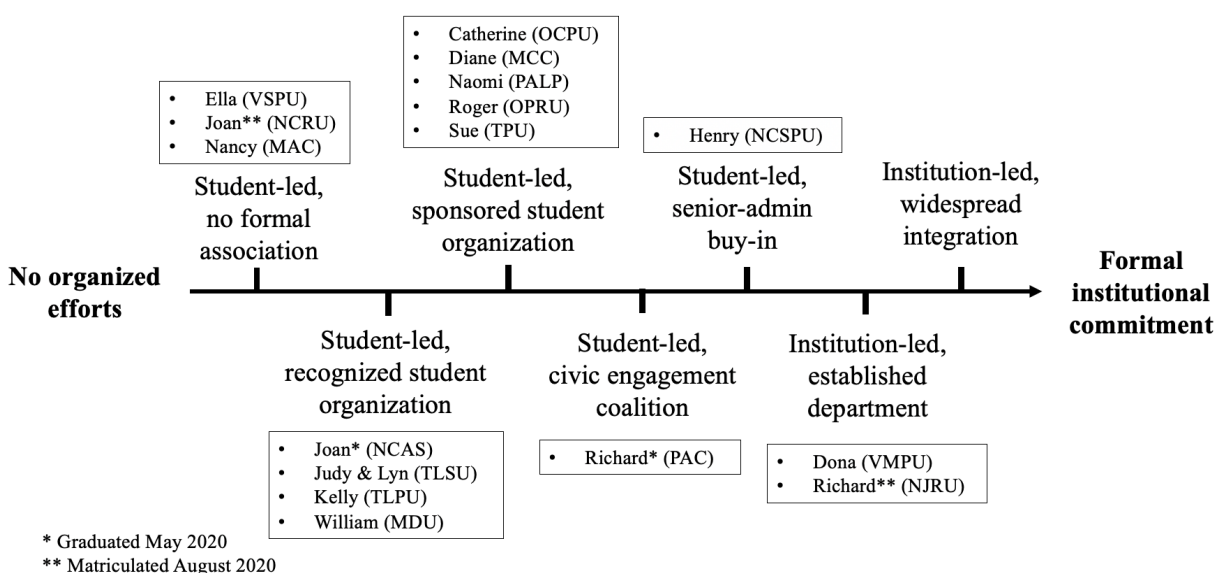
On one end of the spectrum, students had little to no formal association with their institution, and on the other end, a few students were advised by an established department with a mission to promote civic and political engagement. Some students received formal advising through a campus life or academic department and operated as a sponsored student organization. Still, other students led organizations that were not recognized by their institution. No matter where students were on the spectrum of institutional commitment to nonpartisan political engagement, students felt their institutions could be doing more to prioritize widespread support for learning. Participants frequently bumped up against the bureaucratic nature of their college or

university, most noticeably when advocating for institutionalization. As students made requests at various levels of the organizational chart, most students were met with indifference, or at times, active efforts to limit their reach. Catherine said, even prior to the pandemic, "The work takes up a ton of mental space and energy as well as physical time and energy and places a lot of strain on students doing this work." The level of institutional commitment greatly influenced the lived experience, characterized by the heavy burden students felt carrying on the work.

No Formal Association

Three students navigated the 2020 election at an institution with little to no formal institutional commitment. Ella began her work in August 2020, establishing the presence of nonpartisan political engagement work at VA Small Public University. Because there was not a recognized student organization, she partnered with student government, the library, or other student organizations to engage her peers. The lack of institutionalization created extra work, but Ella felt supported in those efforts, appreciating the open communication she had with her administration. She said, "It's really just the communication, asking what we can do, the parameters of what we can do, and of course COVID-19 restrictions."

Next, Joan had a unique perspective because she continued as a CVP fellow as she transitioned to graduate school in fall 2020. In her view, her graduate school, N.C. Research University had more prestige, so she assumed there would be more work going on than her undergraduate institution. To her surprise, however, her new institution had nothing in place to support student political engagement. Joan said when she started looking at her new school she said, "It's a big school. It's world renowned…There has to be institutionalized stuff here. There must be an office, maybe there's like a voting mobilization executive. And well, there's nothing here either." Just like when she started at her undergraduate institution, Joan knew she would

176

need to build from the ground up. She was limited due to COVID but started where she could have immediate influence, with her graduate program.

Nancy was the third student operating with very little institutionalization. When asked how well supported she felt, Nancy said, "I haven't had too much interaction with a lot of people (in the administration). But I do know that the support is there." Nancy felt like her college supported her work insofar as they tagged her organization on social media. Nancy advocated to have some timely emails sent on behalf of the administration to all students, but she her request was denied. Frustrated, Nancy questioned, "this isn't important enough to you?" Without a formal campus department, people sought out Nancy for questions about voting.

Recognized Student Organizations

Five students operated through a recognized student organization, meaning they led or participated in a student organization that was registered as an official student association with the college or university. Some students received formal advising from a faculty or staff member, though most did not speak about their advisor. At her undergraduate institution, N.C. Arts and Sciences, Joan said, "I became the voting person on campus. I'd get questions from the Assistant Chancellor, I would get emails from all these people saying, they were directed to me." She partnered closely with a political science professor throughout her time. Although the faculty member was helpful as an advisor, Joan said, "She is a professor. She gets paid to teach and to do research. She doesn't get paid to tell people how to register to vote. There should be someone who is paid to do that." Joan initiated the efforts on her undergraduate campus, so she felt particularly responsible. She panicked as graduation drew near and remembered thinking, "when I leave, nobody's here. I am the voting person." In her final semester, spring of 2020, Joan authored a campus voting plan, with institution-specific information on voter registration, event

logistics, and more. She said, "No one responded to my emails. No one would take a meeting with me. It was just something that people avoided." She finally secured a meeting with the Vice Chancellor. She said, "He seemed very on board with all the stuff I do, but then he said, 'go for it.' And I said, 'No, I want *you* to go for it!'" She continued to meet with the Vice Chancellor and other campus life professionals in her remaining months. She eventually connected with the service-learning office and hoped they could more formally support the next CVP fellow. Upon reflection, Joan said, "I think I fall somewhere in the middle of thinking it's now institutionalized, and then thinking that it's just going to disappear." Given all of her hard work, the thought that the work would not be maintained felt demoralizing.

William, also stressing the role of institutional support, recalled spending a lot of time cultivating partnerships with MI Doctoral University's administration. He felt administrators were particularly reluctant to promote voter engagement. He said, "one of the biggest obstacles to trying to engage our students is that the institution just seems like they don't want us to, or they seem like they only want us to when it will be trivial." He worked with administrators to get a notice about voting in the online course registration system. William's most ambitious effort was proposing no classes on election day. He described his presentation to the faculty senate:

> I gave the best argument I could explaining how important it was for students to be able to have the opportunity to vote. And a lot of the responses I got were just reasons why they couldn't do it. A lot of it really felt like they were just coming up with reasons to tell us no, or to tell us, 'Yeah, we'll look at it at a later time. We can't do it right now.' And I took that opportunity to tell them that we could have a 100% voter registration rate. We can put up thousands of fliers and tell students all the time to go and register to vote, and to be ready to vote, but none of it will really matter if they can't actually go and vote.

178

Although discouraged by the committee's reaction, he still felt hopeful for the future possibility of an election day without classes.

Lyn said TX Large State University's administration offered little support in her first couple of years. She felt the institution only went so far as to not be accused of not doing anything. In 2020, she learned about CVP's Voter Friendly Campus distinction and realized the recognition could entice the university. As the election drew near, she found avenues to partner with administrators in ways not previously possible, such as leveraging student communication channels. Although progress was made, she was concerned about the long-term commitment to make political engagement a priority. Judy, also at TX Large State University, spoke about the importance of connecting with faculty and leadership in various academic departments. Although she made inroads with the faculty, she struggled with wider institutional buy-in. She said, "I'm talking about the administration. I should be very specific…the higher up you go, the more they don't care about what exactly is needed." She felt the administration was not concerned about student political participation and in many cases made the work more challenging to accomplish.

As opposed to the other students working from a registered student organization, Kelly saw her institution's lack of support as somewhat beneficial to maintaining but not necessarily advancing her work. Her organization operated in constant fear of the Texas Large Public University administration and state government. She liked that the organization was student led, "Because, if we are all student led and organized, and we're not really relying on a lot of institutional support, then we can't be crushed, because you're not really giving us anything, so you don't have anything to take away." Kelly's organization had an advisor from an academic department but derived institutional memory from within the organization itself. She thought about institutionalization in terms of building a stronger student organization that could pass

along their strategy from student generation to student generation. The organization had earned

the trust of many individual faculty members. The week I interviewed Kelly, her organization

had 45 classroom presentations scheduled, where members attended via Zoom. She viewed their

organization as an influential force at her university and people often came to her and her peers

for questions, a dynamic she referred to as, "voting friend status." Specific to the 2020 election,

being the voting person came with additional stressors. Kelly worked hard to keep up outreach.

There was little escape from the stress, compounded by the lack of institutional support.

Sponsored Student Organizations

Five students led student organizations which were sponsored by a particular department

on their respective campus. Catherine indicated nonpartisan political engagement did not exist at

Ohio Commuter Public University (OCPU) when she first started. As time went on and she

advanced the campus efforts, she felt the work was only as embraced as certain administrators

allowed. Although she and her peers were associated with an academic department on campus,

besides office space and an assigned advisor, the support was limited. They did not receive any

funding and the department name could not be included on materials unless a special request was

made. One downside to not being institutionalized was the lack of institutional funding.

Catherine said, "You can't schedule a table, or you don't have the finances that week to go

replace the candy bowl or get a new tablecloth. And it's not fair that students are taking on their

own financial responsibility." Ironically, because they were not a registered student organization

on the campus, they could not take part in the three major student organization recruitment

events throughout the year. Catherine attempted to get OCPU into the National Study of

Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), but the administration turned her down. Catherine

said, "Who your administrators are really changes your path on how well you can institutionalize

because you can have as many students as you want doing the work, but if your administration says 'no,' as soon as those students graduate, the work has fallen through. It's gone." As her time at the university drew to a close, she worried her departure could mean a major step back in the progress made. She expressed general exhaustion from all of her efforts and little support.

Despite the absence of institutional structures and support, not all students viewed the lack of institutionalization as detrimental. Diane felt well supported at Michigan Community College, where the student organization received direct advising from a staff member at the college. She said her advisor's encouragement allowed them to focus on getting the work done and not worry about bureaucratic items. She said her advisor "spends so much time making sure our ideas come to fruition." Diane benefitted from an individual at the college who was passionate about her work. Similarly, Sue felt like her administration at Tennessee Public University wanted her student organization to succeed. She said her student organization's advisor was extremely supportive and helped them get connected to the right faculty and administrative contacts to advance ideas, such as a link to register to vote on their course management system. Overall, Sue said, "There's some work to be done," but felt supported.

When Naomi became involved, Pennsylvania Large Public University had few voting efforts institutionalized. Given the resources at the institution, she was surprised the university was not doing more. Naomi said, "when I started, things were kind of messy and I wasn't really getting a good response from faculty. To their defense, they were still unsure of what exactly they should be doing." Even with the strides the university made, Naomi said, "A lot of the work that PA Large Public University does with civic engagement work isn't with voting. Because no matter how much you say this is all nonpartisan, institutions have to be careful with what they're doing, because they can't come across as partisan." The cautiousness felt frustrating to Naomi.

Roger's student organization had strong advising through a department at OPRU. He said the dynamic of working with CVP felt, "like having two bosses." Roger said his on-campus advisor was better equipped to assist with campus-specific issues, but he appreciated the expertise of CVP. Even with consistent advising, Roger said he encountered a lot of "red tape." In one example, he attempted to have posters put up inside of the residence halls but was denied because of campus life policies. He said this made him "feel sad," especially because he was a resident assistant and viewed this as critical informational all students needed. Roger explained, "I don't think that we're necessarily unsupported," but being one of many student organizations, they were limited in their ability to do certain things that would be possible if the university took more interest.

Operating with Institutional Support

Only a few students navigated their role with formalized institutional support. Only one student, Richard, spoke about operating within a coalition of college and community stakeholders, a format that seemed to indicate a move in the direction of institutionalizing political engagement work. Despite some progress made in those coalition meetings, Richard described the administrators he interacted with at PA Associate's College as, "performative," taking action only when expedient. In a tangible example of the lack of support he experienced, he described his attempt to incorporate voter registration into his college's new student orientation. His supervisor told him this effort fell outside of the scope of his responsibilities. In defiance, Richard included voter registration as a part of the check-in to the orientation program anyway. He described his reasoning: "I didn't break any rule. And in fact, I made it easier for students to register. If anything, I made us more compliant with federal law." He was later confronted by his Dean about the incorporation of voter registration, but he refused to stop.

One student operated in a manner I categorized as gaining senior administrative buy-in. Henry said CVP encouraged him to not just think about the next voting registration drive, but also to work toward structural change. He said, "we want to make sure that for future students, that voting is a part of our culture for you to get involved in the process." He started by authoring a student voting plan for the campus and shared it with the student life department. He described similar experiences as other participants who attempted to institutionalize their efforts, first running into roadblocks. For example, he was accidently copied on an email chain where administrators immediately rejected his ideas. Henry summarized the sentiments as, "I think this has good intention, but I don't think we should do it." After months of feeling like he was not getting anywhere, he eventually took his ideas straight to the university president. To his surprise, the president responded enthusiastically to his proposal. He said, "I'm shocked. I still can't believe it actually worked and things are happening." One idea they implemented was to train full time and student staff who worked front desk operations around campus to register students to vote. Additionally, each student had an assigned success coach, a staff member who advised students. These staff members became trained to assist students with voter registration. Henry underscored the role of senior level champions to institutionalize political engagement.

Two students, Dona and Richard, attended schools with established civic engagement departments. Dona embraced the benefits of an association with a formal departmental unit. She indicated faculty members seemed more encouraging than administrators who were "supportive in name only, and don't like the boat to be rocked." Specifically, Dona felt like the administration was resistant to anti-racism efforts at the university. But she said the faculty and staff at the civic engagement center, "create bigger strategies, but they also let us (student leaders) have a lot of input." She forged personal relationships with the faculty and staff in the

department, which enriched her college experience. Dona spoke about the kind of educational programming she benefitted from, including ongoing scholarly discourse on contemporary issues. Despite having a center dedicated to civic engagement, she indicated the office's budget was actually smaller than that of her sorority's budget, indicating need for more resources to support the work. Richard's new institution, NJ Research University, had an established and robust department, but Richard thought his energy could be better put to use at PA Associate's College where he was still an employee and better understood the internal political dynamics.

Campus Vote Project Support

Because of the general lack of institutional support, many students referenced CVP as an important source of inspiration and backing. From onboarding to goal setting, and ongoing professional development, students spoke often of the organization's influence. Sue said, "they do a very good job of engaging voters and engaging people who are passionate about engaging voters." She described their guidance as a "trickle effect," whereby CVP offered motivation for fellows to amplify the work in their own communities. Students gained guidance, additional resources, and a network to other students doing similar work across the country.

Naomi said she appreciated the state coordinators because they, "are trained in each state to really know what they're talking about." Diane said her state coordinator was helpful because they, "gave us resources, helped us with ideas, and were someone we can bounce ideas off of." Some students had regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings with their state coordinator. Dona described everyone she interacted with at CVP as, "fundamentally nice people." Kelly said there were times she questioned how to access support: "I don't know what help I need. I don't know what's reasonable." Catherine said CVP assumed because their university was doing good work for a number of years, that she did not need support and she regretted not asking for help. She

said she was often praised for doing good work, but then said, "It makes you feel like you are a burden for asking for help." In addition to advising, students participated in monthly calls with other CVP fellows. Students described receiving emails in advance of these meetings with articles and videos to prepare. Sue said the emails helped her prepare for what she should be thinking about next. Given the chaos of the 2020 election season, students felt more confident in addressing misinformation and disinformation. Dona said the most helpful discussion block she participated in was about digital organizing. The meetings helped Lyn to question current frameworks for voting instead of just thinking about how to encourage students to vote. She also said the discussion blocks were the first time she connected with others doing similar work.

Students participated in state-wide voting summits, conference-style events with guest speakers, networking, and educational sessions. The Tennessee Voter Summit was the first moment Sue realized, "This is actually happening, and I'm actually on campus doing nonpartisan work!" Several other students referenced attending their state voting summit in person, though the majority were moved online. Through the Michigan Voting Summit, William interacted with the Michigan Secretary of State and other state and local officials. At that same summit, Nancy moderated a panel. Dona, who attended the Virginia Voting Summit said, "It was a really cool experience to see that students can be the ones to make a difference and be a respected voice."

When asked about the most meaningful part of their semester, Nancy referenced her ongoing Zoom calls within the state, where folks shared, "what we're doing, what's working for us, what's not working for us." These connection points helped Nancy and other fellows move ideas forward. In 2020, CVP implemented a Slack channel, a communication platform where students could share website links, questions, and more. Henry, referenced the Slack channel, saying, "now we can constantly communicate with each other, with fellows throughout the

United States." Richard felt like Slack had already helped him connect with folks he otherwise would never have communicated with absent the platform. Students referenced the support and community gained through CVP often, indicating the organization as more than just a funding source, but a key part of students' professional development. Students gained a professional network, experience, and affirmation about their future goals.

Participants wanted future students to realize the work is challenging, but worthwhile. William said, "Some days you wake up and you feel like your organization really isn't doing anything to register voters, or to get people thinking about politics in the first place." William's biggest advice was, "stick with it!" Catherine encouraged students to be wary of burnout and to "pace themselves." Roger also indicated, "the commitment is up to you," and this work does not need to be their top priority. He said, "We just need everyone to care a little bit." Next, participants emphasized the importance of collaboration. Kelly said students may sometimes feel like the only people at their university who cares, but to remember they are not alone. William echoed this sentiment saying, "This work doesn't have to be lonely. Sometimes it feels like it is, but it doesn't have to be. You can find a team." Naomi encouraged students to make use of the support from third-party organizations like CVP.

Aspiration for Future Civic Engagement

Despite the collective challenge of living through a tumultuous election season, all participants expressed ways their involvement in nonpartisan political engagement shaped their future aspiration for civic engagement. This section addresses the second research question:

- RQ2: How did their experiences of nonpartisan political activity influence student aspiration for future civic engagement?

In this final section, I share the factors driving students' aspiration for continued civic engagement, review key capacities learned, and describe students' emerging career outlook. To illustrate the organization of the following section, I developed Figure 6 below. The figure outlines the five factors driving student aspiration for future civic engagement, namely, desire to improve the system, personal commitment to change, trust in the system, and duty to try. Next, the figure displays the three areas of learned capacities influencing future civic engagement: Fostering civic values, civic literacy, and leadership skills. Finally, students' emerging career outlooks are discussed according to student responses.

Figure 6.

Influence of Nonpartisan Political Activity on Future Aspiration

Factors driving student aspiration for future civic engagement
- Desire to improve the system
- Personal commitment to change
- Trust in the system
- Duty to try

Learned capacities influencing future civic engagement
- Fostering civic values
- Civic literacy
- Leadership skills

Emerging career outlook and relationship to civic engagement
- Undecided but committed to civic life
- Legal routes
- Educators at heart
- Dedication to community

Factors Driving Student Aspiration for Future Civic Engagement

I recognized four overarching factors driving students' aspiration for future civic engagement: A desire to improve the system, personal commitment to change, trust in the ability

187

of the system to change, and a duty to be engaged. Some participants expressed challenges they had thinking about the future, specifically in relation to the pandemic. Discussing whether or not his involvement would influence his future aspiration for civic engagement, Richard said:

> I think it's possible this experience will impact me moving forward. After everything I've said, it might seem a little strange that I'm not sure, right? Because on one side, as I mentioned, my philosophical outlook has changed. And yet, I've also seen the limitations offered in this space. I think long term, that is very difficult for me to quantify. Especially given the state of the world, especially given the pandemic.

He felt like he could not attribute a long-term influence yet, but he emphasized, "In the short term, I am very impacted by my work and I am really engaged in advocating for students." As demonstrated by this reflection, participants felt their outlook changed due to their involvement.

Desire to Improve the System

The overwhelming sentiment following the election was the need to improve democratic systems and to restore public trust. William said, "There are some serious changes we need to make if we want to create an environment where everyone's vote matters, and where everyone can have an equal say in what's going on in their community, their state, and the nation." Lyn said she deepened her understanding of democracy. She reflected on her learning saying:

> Democracy is just so much bigger, but also so much smaller than I thought. And that's such a contradictory statement for me to make. But bigger in that it's not just me. You can make a difference. But I can't just do a thing. I can't email a professor at school and be like, that's it, I've done it! I have to be able to work with people. And I have to be able to make compromises to get a goal done. And it might not be the goal that I want. And it may not be the exact thing that I want to be done. But it is closer than if I didn't do

188

anything at all. And so, it's a lot bigger in that it takes a lot more people with views that are not exactly mine that I have to work with. But also smaller in that I have made a lot of people who are powerful really mad. And whenever that happens, I'm not frightened. It's just like, why are they upset right now? And it's because I'm doing the radical act of telling people to register to vote or giving people information of where their voting booth is. And so, that's the biggest thing I've learned is that I really can make a difference by actively participating in power structures that were never built for me. But also, I need to work with others and need to be able to create coalitions outside of my own purview.

In this nuanced and profound reflection, Lyn shared sentiments about her role in making our democracy stronger. She and other students felt they learned about not simply maintaining the status quo but looked to improve conditions for all members of our democracy.

Personal Commitment to Change

Participants operated in the context of a challenging election season with optimism and envisioned a future with hope toward brighter days. Roger described his motivation for civic engagement as, "a deep founded belief in leaving the world better than you found it." Sue derived motivation from thinking about their work within the arc of history. She said, "Women were not allowed to vote 100 years ago, and then here we are engaging other women and not just women, but everybody." Sue used her optimism to drive her efforts in the community. Sue said:

Pm a natural optimist, too. I think I will always have hope that something better is coming. And that something better will come. It's tough to see what's happening now and say, 'oh, my gosh, how is this ever gonna get better?' But as Ella said in the chat just now: It starts with community. And it starts with people like us and people who

genuinely want to make a change. And not necessarily people who have positions of

power, but just people who genuinely want to see a change in our community.

Students were not naïve about existing problems but held hope for the possibility for an

improved political climate. For example, Henry said he learned about the interconnected nature

of systemic issues like racism and poverty as they related to voting. Reflecting on the brokenness

of the system, he said, "although we have a lot of work to do, it means that we're moving

forward. And change happens slow. That's how the system was designed. Change is not gonna

happen overnight." The participants viewed politics as powerful vehicle for change.

Trust in the System

Students began their nonpartisan political engagement work with a certain level of

political trust, or at minimum, a sense that politics was worthy of time and attention. A few

students expressed dissatisfaction with elements of our democracy, from the Electoral College to

frustration over inefficiency in government, but overwhelmingly students believed in the

significance of exercising the right to vote and in actively participating. William believed in the

importance of voting, even in a broken system, saying, "There are some people in politics where

their goal is to drive you out. Their goal is to make you not want to participate. But they can only

succeed by counting on you being cynical about the process." Students felt they needed to defend

democracy and political engagement as a means for change with peers who felt the system was

broken. Kelly said she encountered peers who were, "very skeptical of the idea that change

comes from electoral politics." She agreed that aspects of our democracy were not working for

many Americans and struggled with the notion that she was inviting people to participate in a

less-than perfect system. She felt like she and her peers had to remain positive about the process

and not question the political system too much for fear of turning their peers away.

Participants understood why peers might feel their vote does not matter or that government does not function well, resulting in disconnection. Some participants were particularly attuned to the thoughts and feelings of people belonging to marginalized social groups. Judy said, "I also learned sometimes you have to work within a system in order to change it." Students understood voting as the first step in motivating change. Henry said, "it's not enough to just sit on the sidelines and watch as things continue to progress downhill. If you want change, you want change. And I decided politics was the mechanism to do that." Many of Joan's peers lamented politics, portraying the entire system as steeped in White supremacy. Joan said, "If we're going to dismantle White supremacy in the national government, we've got to slowly do it from the inside." She indicated the possibility of politics to facilitate change.

Following the election, students' political trust was shaken in some respects, but strengthened in other ways. Ella said, "I didn't lose faith in our democracy, but I lost faith in the people who were supposed to uphold it and run it correctly." Naomi said over the course of the past four years, she felt like, "we were losing our democracy." The turnout and results assured Naomi and instilled greater trust in democracy. Sue felt much of the panic over the results of the presidential election was a result in people not knowing how government works. Judy held trust in our system and the voters, but questioned our nation's ability to address the plague of racism:

> Parts of me, especially after yesterday, have so much more faith in our generation, in the future of democracy. In the people who are coming and rising to power. I have faith in us, and I have faith in the shape of what our democracy could become. But in our current state, I do not. Because I think we still have these cracks we refuse to address. And that we are just going to try and cover up with this facade of unity. It's not going to really be there, because we need to address these holes in our culture of racism, and socio-

economic divide, and this innate belief of American superiority, when it's not true. We

have an amazing country, but every country has the possibility of improving and America

really needs to stop seeing itself as the exception. We need to break down this role of

American exceptionalism because it is the root of White supremacy.

Student spoke about hopes for improving the system as a whole. They also expressed concerns

about pressing issues like the gerrymandering of voting districts to benefit one party over

another. Henry said, "Imagine what would happen if we had automatic voter registration in this

country. A lot of states do. What if you could vote anywhere? You don't have to go to a specific

precinct, go anywhere you want to vote. What if we expanded early voting in this country to

where election day is sort of the end? Which, this year, we kind of saw what it could look like."

The participants believed the system could achieve the world they envisioned for the future, but

as Lyn suggested, they needed to encourage voters to stay involved beyond elections.

Duty to Try

Several students spoke to their personal conviction to continue their involvement. Diane

said, "People have fought so hard and died for the ability to vote. And it is our duty." Political

engagement, and specifically voting, was described as not just a right, but also a responsibility.

Nancy said, "Whether they're interested in the left or right, that doesn't matter to me, as long as

they're doing their civic part." Judy said the increased youth voter turnout gave her hope that

folks were starting to consider voting as a responsibility. She said, "I think everyone should hold

the same civic duty that we do. That's something that has always struck me, that people don't see

civic life and voting and civic engagement as not just their right as a citizen, but their duty."

Students felt responsible for carrying on the work they started this selection. Henry said, "I am

inspired by the turnout and the engagement, especially among youth voters. And it just shows me

how much work we have left to do. And it doesn't stop with this election. It's a constant work in progress. And we're going to be in the fight." In addition to the factors grounding students in their aspiration for future civic engagement, they also learned capacities that would last long into the future.

Learned Capacities Influencing Future Civic Engagement

Students shared the ways their involvement in nonpartisan political engagement led to important learning about themselves and others, specifically in three areas: civic literacy, enhanced emotional intelligence, and leadership skills. Their learning influenced student aspiration for future civic engagement. Next, I distill the lessons students learned through their involvement and I relate their learning to a continued aspiration for future civic engagement.

Civic Literacy

Students spoke about their deepened understanding of government and politics, but also the way they will discern information about politics in the future. By practicing in a nonpartisan manner, Richard felt better adept at withholding judgement about politics. He learned to ask questions, saying, "My perspective has changed to where I am much more critical about the status quo, not so much one political party or another." He said he was also, "more critical of information," checking the sources and attempting to, "follow the money." Similarly, William said his involvement changed how he consumed and shared information. He said, "I'm less prone to just say what my opinion is. And I'm more objective and I try to look at what's really going on rather than just what I believe." He viewed these skills as essential to his interest in public service. The prevalence of misinformation and disinformation this election season made students wish to be involved as community members in sharing truthful information. For Sue, her commitment meant providing her future classrooms with the tools to discern information and

193

make up their own minds. Reflecting on her future students she said she would, "make sure they're getting their information from the right places." As evidenced by Sue's ideas, participant's excitement for civic literacy also meant sharing that passion with others. Diane said she learned specifically about the importance of local elections and encouraging others to invest locally in political life. Participants gained greater confidence to share their understanding of government and politics.

Enhanced Emotional Intelligence

Involvement in nonpartisan political engagement helped students develop valuable interpersonal skills for inviting others into the civic space. Diane believed the influence of her involvement on her future civic engagement was an ability to speak with others about politics and government without trying to persuade them to believe partisan ideas. She discovered a passion for encouraging others to vote. Diane said, "I love talking to people about why they should go and vote," something she planned to do from this point forward in her daily life. Diane also learned the importance of teaching people about the various elected roles and how these positions shape people's lives. Her perspectives about why people do not exercise their right to vote shifted due to her role. Diane encountered many peers who felt their voice did not matter. She said, "It's not me trying to get them to care. It's trying to get them to understand that I care about what you think." In short, she found new ways to listen to and affirm others.

Ella said fostering civic values really, "all stems from knowing people and knowing how to talk to people." Similarly, Henry said the experience helped him learn interpersonal skills, such as inviting conversation through curiosity instead of trying to persuade others to agree with what he believed. Ultimately, Henry found he could bring more people into the civic space without self-interested motives. Several other students also felt this election deepened their

commitment to civic engagement. Roger and Dona said their involvement reaffirmed their

interest in encouraging participation over partisanship. Lyn learned about the importance of

compromise and trying to understand someone else's point of view, even if they viewed the

world differently than she did. In a comparable sense, Ella said her involvement with nonpartisan

political engagement increased her capacity for empathy. Discussing lack of involvement among

her peers, Ella said, "A lot of people, they're not ignorant. It's just simply because they don't

know. Some people just don't have the resources or opportunities." Similarly, Kelly said she

learned about the importance of not looking at low voting rates as a motivation problem, but

instead to look at the barriers. William said he learned about the importance of actively inviting

others in and reaching out to people who might be able to reach certain populations, especially

social groups he does not belong. Students felt proud of the work they did, but thought it was

important to continue to do the work beyond elections, encouraging participation in other ways.

Leadership Skills

Participants exercised many skills under the broad category of leadership. From

developing communication skills, to leading teams, and problem-solving, Catherine felt she

would carry leadership learning with her beyond college. She said the skills she gained "are so

applicable in every part of your life, not just what you're doing in campaigns. But anytime you

work with more than two other people." She believed the skills she acquired were not simply

because she led the voting organization on her campus, but that members of her organization also

gained valuable experience. She said, "it's almost impossible not to build up these skills."

Participants described the resilience they developed in trying to bring ideas to fruition at

their colleges and universities. Kelly said the work to institutionalize political engagement

shifted how she thought about change. Instead of just thinking about big sweeping changes to the

system, she considered the kind of influence one can have, even in a broken system. She learned about the challenges of making change at an institutional level within a large bureaucracy. Kelly said being a democracy fellow not only gave her insight into the nonprofit world, but also allowed her to exercise leadership. She said, "I've been a part of leading people, doing it, and making it happen!" Her experience increased her confidence, saying she was eager to, "see what else I can do." Henry expressed a similar sentiment, saying, "I think that's one thing I've learned a lot about is that you can take on really big issues and fix them." Notably, Henry made inroads with institutionalizing his work.

Several students, directly or indirectly, spoke about their increased efficacy. Dona specifically felt like her work cultivated her courage to use her voice to advocate for issues she cared about. Catherine referenced not only an increase in her public speaking skills, but also in her courage, saying, "I never thought I would get to that point where I could stand in front of a room of 15 or 300 people and they'd laugh, and they'd clap, and they'd raise their hands and ask questions." Reflecting on her growth over her years of service, Joan said she felt confident enough in herself to show up to administrator's offices and to present solutions. Participants felt the capacities they developed in their roles would serve them well into their future careers.

Emerging Career Outlook and Relationship to Civic Engagement

Even as many participants sought clarification of their direction in life beyond college, every student expressed ideas directly related to their aspirations for future civic engagement. Participants drew connections between their experiences this election season and their thoughts about intended career choices. I organized students' responses as follows: Undecided but committed to civic life, legal routes, educators at heart, and dedication to community.

Undecided but Committed to Civic Life

Several students were less certain about the exact direction of their career path, but still indicated a commitment to either continuing their work in nonpartisan political engagement or engaging in roles and activities directly related to civic life. Nancy, for example, was not yet sure what she wanted to pursue as a career, but she was on track to graduate from Michigan Associate's College with her degree in Business Administration. She planned to transfer to a 4-year university and to continue encouraging people to vote, "As long as it's important to me." She said she will, "probably always be looking out for the work they (CVP) are doing even past when I leave the organization." She felt like she made lifelong connections through her role.

Roger was also not set on his career plans yet, but he was thinking about a career in government, perhaps bringing together interests in policy and communication at the Federal Communications Commission. He said, "The good thing about government and political work is it's everywhere." His involvement this election caused him to also consider graduate school, where he envisioned himself, "wrestling with things like, how do you combat misinformation in a good faith, nonpartisan way?" Roger felt particularly concerned about the state of political discourse. Reflecting on his future, Roger said, "When I go home from work, what are the things I will care about? It's helping people in the community feel like they're being heard. It's helping people in the community learn and gain new perspectives." He aspired to future civic and political engagement but not necessarily to maintain a nonpartisan approach long term.

Similarly, undecided about his exact career path, Richard said, "I feel more of a calling to get in the realm of public policy than I had previously." Given his experiences and passion for community, especially helping students make connections to the role of local government and policy, he aspired to a future lived as a civically engaged person. He was particularly passionate

about improving mental health support, an issue he viewed as directly related to civic life. As indicated earlier, Richard did not wish to draw a direct link between his involvement and long-term goals just yet, but his responses indicated a commitment to civic engagement broadly.

Naomi graduated in May 2020 and secured a job with an organization committed to studying and promoting democracy. She found the job through a referral by contacts at CVP. Beyond the obvious relationship between her current role and civic engagement, Naomi said her involvement made her think about long-term possibilities, such as a career in higher education, specifically in areas tied to civic engagement. Given how much she interacted with the institutional structures of her university, Naomi said her involvement influenced her interest in the collegiate environment. She thought working in an established civic engagement center would be meaningful. Naomi's involvement made her think about the importance of what she referred to as, "community-based politics," the idea that democracy is of, for, and by the people.

Legal Routes

Four participants projected after college, or soon after, they would attend law school. Each student indicated the influence their work this election had on their career choice. Two students spoke to the kind of law they hoped to practice, a direct outcome of their involvement. Lyn originally wanted to apply for law school this academic cycle, but worried about attending her first year of law school online. In the short term, she wanted to look for jobs in government and nonprofit organizations. She described her future in law, saying, "The biggest impact of Campus Votes and all of the nonpartisan and partisan stuff I've done is that I want to be a voting rights litigator." She explained further, "There are just so many frameworks that we accept in the voting rights space that have deliberately been built up in order to prevent people from voting." She wanted to actively challenge and improve conditions. Lyn felt particularly passionate about

enfranchising all felons because she thought no one should ever lose their right to vote. The second student, Henry said because of his involvement, he wanted to go to law school and become a voting rights attorney. He said, "I want to sue states that are in violation of the Voting Rights Act." In his view, if he had not been involved with nonpartisan political engagement, he never would have discovered his passion for providing access to the ballot. Henry spoke specifically about the influence of working closely with CVP on legal questions.

The other two students considering law school were less certain about their exact path. Diane, earning a paralegal certificate, wanted to work before law school. She did not specify the kind of law she hoped to practice but emphasized how much this election cycle made her think about the importance of government operating independent from partisan politics. Also drawn to law, Dona was still considering her immediate post-college plans, debating between law school and a one-year master's program. She was drawn to law school because she said, "it's one of the best ways to become a better public citizen." She referenced campaign law and finance as areas she was passionate about. Given the pressure of student loans, she also considered options, like working for a consulting firm. She chuckled saying, "Check with me in two years." Wherever she goes next, Dona anticipated being involved with nonpartisan political engagement.

Educators at Heart

Three students reflected on their involvement and their desired future role as an educator. Expressing a change in direction, Judy previously thought she wanted to attend law school, but the 2020 election season forced her to, "reevaluated her priorities." She decided to pursue a Ph.D. in History. Judy found her experiences presenting in classrooms and working closely with faculty to be influential on her decision. Reflecting on her new path, she said, "This election actually helped me discover what I want to do with the rest of my life. And that's to become an

199

educator and professor, and work in higher education to open this gatekeeping facility in our democracy." Judy viewed her future in higher education as directly related to democracy.

Sue had long planned to graduate and become a teacher, specifically in English as a Second Language, but she said her experiences this election made her realize that even though she was not going into a directly civic or political role, she would uphold civic responsibility by teaching. She explained, "without showing my future students who I am voting for, I can make sure that I'm teaching them things that are actually true." Sue emphasized the skills and perspectives she gained in the role that will help her be a better teacher but also a stronger community member. After a career as a teacher, she said she would consider running for political office, emphasizing the importance of, "people in office who actually care about our communities." Sue said her involvement deepened her commitment to making politics tangible.

Catherine said she initially thought she would like to work for a nonprofit, but her experience this election turned her away from approaching civic engagement from a nonprofit or activist lens. The notoriously long hours and low pay in the nonprofit sector made her yearn for more stability. She felt exhausted from peer-to-peer work, especially being the point person on her campus. She now hoped to become a professor because she wanted to continue working with students and to be a positive influence on their development. Describing her pledge to political engagement, Catherine said, "When I become a professor, one of the most activism things I will do is get every student in my class to register to vote." She felt like she had made the choice to become a professor prior to the 2020 election cycle, but her experiences reaffirmed her decision to apply to Ph.D. programs. In spring 2021, I learned Catherine was not admitted into a program but would be enrolling in a master's program in political science. This shift made her consider other possible routes outside of academia, such as public policy or political analysist roles. Of

course, the areas she articulated as possible alternative routes were directly situated in civic and political spaces.

Dedication to Community

Four students expressed interest in a variety of civic careers, all with a commitment to community. Even before beginning her work with CVP, Ella said, "I definitely knew I wanted to get in and start a change somewhere." When asked about her future plans, Ella said she would graduate a year early and be commissioned into the Army as an officer in May 2021. She anticipated serving in the Army for several years. After her service, she planned to, "get rooted in a community." She dreamed about immersing herself into a local community, getting involved in opportunities, like serving on a school board. She also dreamed about a future legal career, worthy of a Supreme Court nomination. Although she already knew she wanted to do work focused on civic life beyond college, she attributed CVP with influencing her outlook and skills, such as her increased empathy and ability to apply perspective-taking in daily life.

Next, Kelly wanted to continue her work in voter engagement beyond her time at TLPU. Longer term, she said, "I want to end up in political advocacy. It's just whether I'm going to be on the legislative side or the nonprofit side." She was considering graduate school, but no matter what, she wanted to continue to do voter engagement. Kelly envisioned herself working for an organization like CVP. Maintaining a nonpartisan stance in the middle of a chaotic election season, however, made her consider whether or not she would stay in a nonpartisan space or move to campaigns or issue-based organizations, allowing her to express her political beliefs.

Also wanting to stay involved with politics, William's goal was to eventually run for office. He did not say which office he would first seek, only that he viewed public service as his ultimate career path. He said, "I will go wherever I think that my skills would be used best, with

the goal of eventually running for office one day." He held a utilitarian view of his future career, seeking to do the "most amount of good." William said his experience influenced his ability to practice objectivity and analyze problems, instead of relying on partisan frameworks.

Finally, Joan, earning her Master's in Public Administration thought about two routes for her career. Originally, she considered making election administration her career path. By the time we spoke a second time for the focus group, Joan explained her choice to pursue a career in emergency management, saying, "I don't know if COVID had anything to do with that, because I kind of knew what I was going to do in like the February realm. And I think it just got solidified with COVID." Of course, working in elections would have been directly related to her role with nonpartisan political engagement, but emergency management would still allow Joan to serve the community. Furthermore, Joan talked about assisting as a poll worker in all future elections.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I detailed the findings of the study. I presented the six prevailing themes about the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement: navigating uncertainty and disruption, committing to nonpartisanship, turning to digital and online engagement, persuading peers in political participation, and resisting threats to democracy. Finally, I addressed the second research question, describing the students' aspiration for future civic engagement following their involvement during the 2020 election. I organized student responses according to factors influencing student aspiration for future civic engagement, capacities learned, and emerging career outlook. All participants in the study spoke to direct influences their involvement in nonpartisan political engagement had on their future aspiration for continued civic engagement long into the future. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings in the context of the scholarly literature and share implications for scholars, practitioners, and community stakeholders.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the lived experience of politically engaged college students participating in nonpartisan political activity. By gaining an understanding of the lived experience of students during the 2020 election season, I shared students' motivations for participating and retold stories illuminating the phenomenon. Additionally, the purpose of the study was to understand how students characterized their future civic engagement following the peak of their involvement. Better understanding what relationship existed between students involved in nonpartisan political activity and their future civic engagement provided further awareness into the nature of the students' lived experience. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the lived experiences of politically engaged college students involved in nonpartisan political activity leading up to the 2020 U.S. election?

- RQ2: How do these experiences of nonpartisan political activity influence student aspiration for future civic engagement?

To address the two research questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 students participating in nonpartisan political engagement in 8 different states. Students were nominated for their outstanding contributions through involvement with Campus Vote Project (CVP), a nonpartisan organization devoted to student voting. After the election, I conducted four focus group interviews to inquire further about student experiences and aspirations.

In this final chapter, I offer a discussion of the study's findings, making connections between students' experiences and the literature. The discussion demonstrates how the study builds off of or offers a new perspective for existing research, while also presenting new insights. I then offer implications and recommendations for scholars and practitioners alike.

Discussion

The goal of the following discussion is to provide readers with an understanding of how the study's findings aligned with or expanded scholarly understanding of students involved in civic and political engagement. I begin by reviewing Chapter 4, where I authored student profiles and shared student characterization of political and civic engagement. Next, I discuss the findings according to each research question. Congruent with the study's conceptual framework, I also reference elements of emerging adulthood theory throughout the discussion to make meaning of students' lived experience, accounting for the 5 features: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and optimism (Arnett, 2018). I close the discussion with a brief analysis of the study's findings using emerging adulthood theory.

Reviewing Student Profiles and Background

The participant profiles in Chapter 4 provided important contextual information. Within each profile, I revealed the pre-college experiences students shared as influential to their interest in politics. Every student indicated aspects of pre-college life instigating their predilection for politics. Within the study of college student development, scholars long understood pre-college factors to influence the student experience and involvement once in college (Astin, 1984). Aligned with research indicating the important role of family in processing political information (Kiesa et al., 2003), several students shared the ways familial experiences influenced their relationship with politics. Previous presidential elections were frequently discussed periods of awareness-building for participants, from watching debates, to going to the polls with parents, staying up late to watch television networks announce results, and much more. Although young people tend to be more politically aware during presidential election years (Wray-Lake et al., 2019), the participants shared an interest in and understanding of politics beyond presidential

elections. As opposed to prior research on civically engaged students who could not identify a political or social motivation for their involvement (Keisa et al., 2007), students referenced political motivators, including local and national events and tragedies.

More often than not, students became aware of CVP because of involvement in something else, like serving in student government or as a resident assistant, a finding aligned with longstanding research on involvement begetting further involvement (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Several students learned about the opportunity through an invested political science faculty member or invested student affairs professional. Students' openness to consider an opportunity with the CVP demonstrated strong political efficacy, the belief in their ability to participate in politics and the system's responsiveness to their participation, which connects to work by Barrett and Pachi (2019) who indicated the relationship between political efficacy and participation. Students felt there was a stark need on their campuses, with little work being done to engage their peers in politics, a direct reference to concerns expressed in the literature about the lack of general political engagement and education at colleges and universities (Colby, 2008; Finley, 2011; Saltmarsh & Hatley, 2011).

Participants found the existing political student organizations on their campuses to only be partisan in nature, and they did not want to simply join a group where peers with strong beliefs gathered to debate the nuances within the political party or partisan issue. Their intentional choice to join CVP countered two existing ideas in the literature about political engagement. First, by seeking to take action in the political realm as opposed to discussing politics as a form of entertainment, participants went against the trend of politically interested college graduates treating politics as a hobby (Hersh, 2020). Second, participants selected to be involved in nonpartisan political engagement to interact across political differences, a stark

contrast to findings suggesting college graduates recounted little interaction with those outside of their own ideological bubble while in college (Johnson & Peacock, 2020). Above all, participants were drawn to the idea of promoting political participation, no matter the party their peers supported. They were eager to encourage democracy, not just to talk about politics.

Participants also became involved with political engagement work because of their own experiences with the political system and feelings of intimidation. The participant's personal challenges with voting mirrored common hurdles faced by first time voters (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), such as feeling unprepared and unqualified to vote, however, these encounters also served as the catalyst for a desire to be involved in helping peers navigate the voting process. Some students recalled feeling unprepared to vote the first time, seeing roles they had never heard of, and candidates they knew nothing about on the ballot. These participants later helped peers to not feel intimidated by the process of voting, a finding directly related to prior research on the importance of cultivating noncognitive skills in youth voters (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). Using their own learning about the political system and confidence to navigate voting, the participants could encourage their peers to follow through with their intention to vote.

Discussing Student Understanding of Civic and Political Engagement

In accordance with the constructivist design of the study, I asked students to share their understanding of the terms civic and political engagement. Students used the terms civic and political engagement interchangeably, though they said political engagement was a better descriptor for their work through CVP. Their interchangeable usage of the terms civic and political engagement reflected the inconsistency found in the scholarly discourse (Finley, 2011; Jacoby, 2009). When students discussed their understanding of civic engagement alone, however, they shared ideas aligned with scholarly definitions situating civic engagement through

community-based values (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Jacoby, 2009). With regard to the second research question, students' future aspiration for civic engagement, I relied upon their understanding of the term civic engagement to mean a general commitment to community well-being and betterment. Their understanding of civic engagement as a broader, more encompassing term signaling community values and upholding the common good aligned with scholarly interpretation (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Jacoby, 2009). The framing between civic, democratic, and political engagement offered in Chapter 2, specifically Figure 1, provided a helpful reference to consider students' lived experience as well as their future civic engagement.

Students characterized their nonpartisan political engagement as navigating four distinct roles: peer educator, voting advocate, campus organizer, and learner. As offered earlier in the dissertation, peer educator roles in higher education typically reference students working in health education (Wawrzynski et al., 2011), but participant's self-identification with the term educator suggested consideration of their role as a form of peer education. After all, similar to peer health educators who were viewed as role models (Wawrzynski et al., 2011), participants assumed a position of trust in their communities. Next, as advocates and organizers, students encouraged voter participation through lobbying administrators and elections officials. Linder et al. (2019) found student activists participated in activism because of social identity, community, anger, and responding to local and national events. When reviewing participant's motivations for participating in nonpartisan political activity, all four of the reasons Linder et al. (2019) discussed were present. Also, participant's courage to push back against the culture of their institutions and voting systems signaled an activist mindset. Notably, however, participants advocated for peer participation within the recognized political systems, activism categorized as conventional as opposed to nonconventional (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). Finally, although students

participated in an activity outside of the formal curriculum, their identification with the role of learner aligned with prior research suggesting the important learning occurring in the co-curriculum (Strachan & Bennion, 2016; Strachan & Senter, 2013). Students described their work as a negotiation between the four roles of educator, advocate, organizer, and learner.

Discussing RQ1: The Lived Experience of Nonpartisan Political Engagement

The study's qualitative approach provided vivid details about the participant's lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement and how they responded to and learned throughout the process, projecting influences on their future aspirations. The study built off of existing research and understanding of politically engaged college students, which focused on the lived experience and outcomes of college students involved in formal political learning interventions (Beaumont et al., 2006; Hildreth, 2003; Longo et al., 2006). These few studies showcasing qualitative findings of the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement were conducted over a decade ago and focused on activities associated with classroom learning. Some of the more recent political engagement studies on experiential learning also relied on faculty-led interventions, aligned with course learning objectives, but used quantitative methods of inquiry (Bardwell, 2011; Mann et al., 2018). Hildreth (2006) stated, quantitative research may "miss the story in how students learn" (p. 286), and as participants in this study demonstrated, qualitative research provides rich nuance and understanding of learning from student political engagement.

The first research question utilized the conceptual framework I developed, as demonstrated visually by Figure 2. The model expanded Thomas and Brower's (2018) framework of campus climate for political learning and engagement in democracy (Figure 3, p. 65), whereby I accounted for the political, human, cultural, and structural elements of the students' environment. The use of the campus climate for political learning and engagement

208

framework provided a unique scholarly application of the theory to examine students' lived experience (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Through data analysis, I considered the political climate, defined as "a complex ecosystem of interconnected structural, cultural, human, and political factors that affect college student learning." (Thomas & Brower, 2018, p. 247). Students shared their lived experience, defined as both living through and responding to the events and circumstances they experienced (Boylorn, 2012). In consultation with participants, I co-constructed six themes to illuminate the lived experience of nonpartisan political activity in the 2020 election season: navigating uncertainty and disruption, commitment to nonpartisanship, turning to digital and online engagement, persuading peers to participate, resisting threats to democracy, and seeking institutionalization of political engagement.

Next, I review the study's findings to the first research question using the conceptual framework and related literature to guide the discussion. In the following section, I present the study's findings and discussion in relation to the political, human, cultural, and structural frames of the theoretical framework. Although the findings did not fit neatly within each of these four theoretical frames, discussing the results in this manner demonstrated the utility of the conceptual framework in making meaning of the students' lived experiences.

Political Frame: Navigating Uncertainty and Disruption and Resisting Threats to Democracy

Of the four frames found in the study's conceptual framework, the political frame arguably held the strongest influence on the lived experience of students involved in nonpartisan political engagement in the 2020 election season. The political frame accounted for external political forces and internal, institutional influences (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Prior to the study, I assumed a heavy influence of external political forces, especially given the particular era of political polarization (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; Hersh, 2020; Mason, 2013; Mason,

2018). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's response, however, the external political influence became the single most important factor influencing the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement. Two specific themes were best exemplified by discussing the context of the internal and external political forces shaping the students' lived experiences: navigating uncertainty and disruption and resisting threats to democracy.

Discussion of Navigating Uncertainty and Disruption. Through a chronological re-telling of the 2020 election season from January to November 2020, I presented a narrative account of students' lived experience of uncertainty and disruption in carrying out nonpartisan political engagement. The findings represented an organized, "linear story line" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 12) of their lived experiences. In the following discussion, I connect the finding of navigating uncertainty and disruption with relevant literature and situate the theme within the political frame of Thomas and Brower's (2018) model, specifying external and internal political dynamics.

In sharing how the 2020 election season unfolded, students experienced constant change, a direct response to external political forces (Thomas & Brower, 2018). In addition to the influence of a divisive election season, students navigated their roles in the midst of a global pandemic and widespread outcry against racial injustice (Ball, 2020). Students perceived COVID-19 as a politicized issue in the 2020 election, specifically in the manner the government responded to the public health crisis, an external influence on their experience. Students worked in a variety of state and regional contexts, and they believed their environment held a strong influence over their lived experience of nonpartisan activity. The finding of differentiated experiences based on state and regional context matched the literature, whereby scholars contended, "the region's civic health can affect energy levels on campus around elections" (Thomas & Brower, 2018, p. 257). The political frame accounted for the decisions made by

government entities and importantly, "how institutions respond to external forces" (Thomas & Brower, 2018, p. 257). Although an external political issue, COVID-19 subsequently also became an internal political issue in the manner participant's institutions responded to the crisis.

The decisions at the federal, state, and local levels (externally) influenced how the colleges and universities responded (internally), which in turn had a strong influence on the students' lived experience. Notably, students whose campuses opened for in-person classes felt their universities were responding to external political pressure. Students' intuition proved to be accurate. Evidence suggested many college and university responses to the pandemic in fall 2020 were driven not by understanding of the virus, but instead by sociopolitical pressures to encourage in-person instruction (Collier et al., 2021). The decision to bring students back for in-person experiences held real consequences. Three participants contracted COVID-19 and several more isolated for periods of time due to exposure. In what is already understood as a precarious period of time in students' lives as emerging adults (Arnett, 2018), uncertainty about the future only grew more unpredictable. Similar to what Hildreth (2003) found in examining the lived experience of a political engagement practicum experience, students in the study also felt frustrated by "expectations of what is supposed to happen versus what actually happens" (p. 17). Constant changes and adjustments to external forces meant participants struggled to make plans.

Students' feelings of disruption and uncertainty reached an inflection point as the country responded to George Floyd's murder at the knee of a police officer. Participants viewed the overt racial injustice as a call to action. Whereas prior literature indicated college graduates hold less tolerance for racism (Campbell & Johnson, 2018), participants in the study were particularly motivated to address injustice even while fulfilling their nonpartisan duties. Some students faced pushback from peers about their involvement in demonstrations and support for

the Black Lives Matter movement, a direct link to scholarly concern about the increased sorting and partisan divide among racial identity lines (Mason, 2013; Mason, 2018). Students viewed responding to racism as an issue people across the political spectrum should support, a belief present throughout their lived experience and included in the following discussion.

Students felt the lack of results in the presidential election and in several high-profile races across the country hardened the general feelings of uncertainty and disruption throughout the 2020 season. Although students experienced extreme examples of uncertainty and disruption, the theme aligned with prior research on the lived experience of political engagement, whereby students' experiences were characterized by unexpected and unpredictable events (Hildreth, 2003). Whereas civically engaged students in prior research found the unresolved nature of politics "offered little gratification," (Johnson & Ferguson, 2019, p. 518), students in the study felt optimistic about the future of democracy, even in light of their concerns.

Discussion of Resisting Threats to Democracy. Existing literature detailed the evolution of extreme polarization and negative partisanship leading up to the 2020 election (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019), yet participants in this study experienced forces seemingly beyond partisanship, represented by active threats to the institution of democracy itself. Students spoke extensively about mostly external forces, which made their roles particularly challenging in the context of a volatile election season. Students were often in the position of defending democracy through their conversations, messaging, and advocacy. The vast majority of student encounters came from political forces external to the college or university. Through this theme, I shared the lived experience of students' efforts to resist threats to democracy: countering voter suppression, supporting absentee and mail-in ballots, offsetting misinformation and disinformation, and observing the looming threat of White supremacy.

I hypothesized students would mention voter suppression in peripheral terms, such as referencing gerrymandering and other efforts they were aware of which made participation more difficult, but instead, I learned about firsthand accounts of what students and I characterized as active attempts to suppress the student vote. Inclusion of detailed descriptions of these experiences and students' attempts to challenge local election officials aligned with the qualitative design to "depict the types of interactions students have on their distinctive campuses" (Binder & Wood, 2014, p. 222). The examples moved beyond the typical barriers student voters face when voting for the first time, such as limited time (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), and instead confirmed the attitudes expressed by some lawmakers who express opposition to young people voting (Nolan, 2011). In addition to these stories, students shared ways they witnessed and resisted forces in opposition to democratic participation.

As a result of the pandemic, state governments scrambled to determine voting options for citizens. Participants defended access to absentee and mail-in voting, receiving questions from peers about how to safely vote. When presented with confusing information, people tend to seek out trusted individuals in their network to get more information (Sinclair, 2012). Consistent with Sinclair's (2012) assertion, participants received questions throughout the season because of the trust they established as nonpartisan officials in their communities. Next, related to their defense of mail-in voting, students worked hard to combat misinformation and disinformation. Although polling prior to the election indicated concerns about disinformation and voter fraud (Fessler, 2019), the intensity of the national discourse weighed heavily on students. As referenced earlier in the dissertation, politicians questioned the integrity of the U.S. election system and sought to make changes (Wines, 2019). Despite the doubt cast on the integrity of the system leading up to and after the election, participants trusted the ability of the system to withstand challenges, or

what scholars referred to as political trust, a belief in the strength of the system to work as intended (Flanagan & Gallay, 2008).

Students felt particularly concerned about the presence of White supremacy in political discourse and within their communities, a finding consistent with scholarly portrayal of the political climate leading up to the 2020 election. Beginning in 2016, for example, political scientists wrote about an increase in racial resentment among large numbers of voters and said, "Trump masterfully articulated and reinforced divides in the electorate but did not create them" (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019, p. 139). Participants felt they needed to push back against racism as nonpartisan actors and in defense of democracy, a finding associated with prior research of greater awareness of privilege as a result of college student civic engagement (Johnson, 2015). Findings of students' concerns about White supremacy also aligned with Hildreth's (2003) characterization of political learning as "emergent," and responsive to the environment (p. 8). Despite the ugly nature of the election season, students expressed continued commitment to civic and political engagement, a finding in direct opposition to recent studies demonstrating civically engaged students as generally disillusioned by politics and uncertain about how to engage (Johnson, 2017; Johnson & Ferguson, 2018). Instead, students filtered both internal and external political stimuli and pushed forward in their efforts to engage their peers.

Human Frame: Commitment to Nonpartisanship and Persuading Peers to Participate

Next, using the human frame, I accounted for student contributions to foster the campus political climate (Thomas & Brower, 2018). The efforts students made were particularly impressive, especially the manner students approached their roles as nonpartisan agents within a deeply divided country. Notably, the two themes best discussed through the human frame were, commitment to nonpartisanship and persuading peers in political participation.

Discussion of Committing to Nonpartisanship. Within the human frame, I accounted for, "the political behaviors, competencies, and attitudes of students that influence their learning and engagement" (Thomas & Brower, 2018, p. 258). Even given the anonymity afforded to participants, they spoke about the lengths they went to uphold nonpartisanship in their work. Encompassed in committing to nonpartisanship, students described three sub-themes: mitigating bias and their personal beliefs, facing hostility, and stress-testing the limits and duties of nonpartisanship. Next, I discuss each element in the context of the literature.

First, students spoke about a key component of commitment to nonpartisanship, namely, recognizing and mitigating their own personal political inclinations about candidates and issues. As shared previously, Sinclair (2012) found people tend to distrust the political motivations behind information. Further supporting Sinclair's (2012) finding, participants said they became trusted peers in embedded within their communities because they did not have a partisan motive and shared information freely. Participants made careful decisions, even in their personal lives, so as to not compromise their position of trust. The motivations to remain nonpartisan for the sake of gaining trust with administrators matched prior literature suggesting the importance of nonpartisanship for senior student affairs leaders (Morgan & Orphan, 2016).

Despite the students' professionalism and commitment to democracy over partisan motives, they faced hostility on a regular basis. As Hildreth (2003) found in studying students' lived experience of political engagement, learning "can be difficult, emotionally charged, and full of unexpected outcomes" (p. 3). The lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement in the 2020 election season certainly matched Hildreth's (2003) characterization. In addition to witnessing extreme polarization in tangible ways, students were sometimes also the target of hostility. Students exemplified the notion Mindell (1995) described as "staying centered in the

215

heat of trouble" (p. 7), engaging as a facilitator amid conflict. Mindell (1995) said a special kind of internal work was necessary to engage others when tensions run high, a practice several participants referenced when discussing their work. Students tried to stay up to date with the latest news and issues so as to be able to ensure their nonpartisan approach. Scholars discussed polarization as becoming increasingly tied to negative emotion, and associated with social identity (Hersh, 2020; Mason, 2018). The students of Color in the study seemed to experience the most extreme forms of hostility. Given the state of partisanship and negative polarization along identity lines (Mason, 2018), social identity very likely played a role in these particularly hostile encounters. Despite negative incidents, participants remained committed in their roles.

Given the hostility and polarized nature of the 2020 election season, students described the different ways they considered the roles and limitations of nonpartisanship, a sub-theme I referred to as, stress-testing the limits and duties of nonpartisanship. Participants struggled at times, knowing their nonpartisanship often meant remaining silent on issues they cared about. Students' support for and involvement in promoting an inclusive campus by speaking out against racism, reinforced previous research on civically engaged college graduates, who reported less tolerance of racists, racist language and racist behavior (Campbell & Johnson, 2018). As the election wore on, seemingly everything became embroiled in partisan politics, even aspects of life one would not expect, such as wearing a mask as a public health measure. When thinking about how participants grappled with the limits of nonpartisanship, I was reminded of the paradox of tolerance (Popper, 1963) whereby, "If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them" (p. 265). The statement highlighted the tensions inherent in freedom of speech and expression. The students' experiences

aligned with scholarly understanding of the polarized environment, characterized by negative partisanship (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). Students felt their work to encourage student voters became increasingly viewed as partisan as well. Even though students operated in an intentionally nonpartisan manner, their concerns about their work being perceived as partisan at times reflected conservative distrust of higher education (Pew Research Center, 2017), legislative efforts to make the process more difficult for student voters (Wines, 2019), and some lawmaker's hostile attitudes toward student voters (Nolan, 2011). Consistent with prior research about students who viewed political disagreement as a positive influence on motivation (Pattie & Johnston, 2009), participants also expressed a deeper commitment to politics despite their negative encounters. Knowing some people distrusted their work made students even more committed to nonpartisanship.

Discussion of Persuading Peers in Political Participation. College students are far more likely to exercise their right to vote and to participate in politics when someone invests in their learning and familiarity with the political system (Junco et al., 2018; Pritzhiker et al., 2019; Verba et al., 1995). Consistent with scholarly understanding of the importance of peer investment, the participants encouraged their classmates to learn about and participate in politics. Although participants did not know whether or not a peer ultimately exercised the right to vote, wrote a senator, or attended a town hall, they often received positive feedback in real time or could take pride in measurables, such as the number of students they registered to vote. Like students in Bardwell's (2011) study, participants felt energized by the prompt feedback present in nonpartisan political engagement. Participants referenced an understanding consistent with prior research which indicated the habit-forming nature of political participation (Thomas & McFarland, 2010). The human frame of the framework aided data analysis, whereby I accounted

217

for attitudes, behaviors, and identities (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Persuading peers in political participation included the following elements: Empowering the unseen and disillusioned, recognizing privilege in nonpartisan work, and encountering barriers to student voting.

Participants recalled interactions with peers who felt unseen and disillusioned by politics, which supported prior research suggesting college students and recent graduates, who despite their community involvement, felt disconnected from politics (Johnson, 2017; Johnson & Ferguson, 2018). Interactions with reluctant peers also aligned with existing understanding of youth political engagement more generally, resulting in the absence of young people's voices in public discourse and policymaking (Bennett, 2008). Participants encountered peers who felt their opinions did not matter due to their age and inexperience. As a result, participants related politics to students in relevant and tangible ways, a finding supported by Cramer and Toff's (2017) research that even when discussing facts, people filter perspectives through lived experiences. Consistent with Klofstad's (2009) findings about the role of civic talk, informal peer-to-peer conversations, in catalyzing civic participation, participants shared examples of ways they established trust to ultimately influence peers to be engaged in politics. Participants often heard from their peers they did not approve of the options of candidates on the ballot, especially at the presidential level. Their focus on the presidential race at the expense of all other items voted on in an election aligned with the scholarly concern, whereby many people treat politics as entertainment and are distracted by national politics at the expense of local participation (Hersh, 2020). Participants encouraged peers to consider political concerns at all levels of government.

Not only did participants come to view nonpartisan political engagement as a privileged activity, but several students also referenced a realization of the unearned privilege they personally held. Participants recognized they possessed knowledge and skills many of their peers

had not yet developed, such as the soft skills Holbein and Hillygus (2020) indicated as critical to participating in the political process. Realizing their privilege, students worked hard to share information and to empower their peers. Consistent with prior research on the role of social perspective taking on civic development (Johnson, 2015; Johnson, 2017; McIntosh & Youniss, 2010), participants gained more awareness of their own social identities and those of others through their involvement. Students struggled to recruit volunteers from underrepresented groups, indicting peers opted to advocate for the issues they cared about, a finding aligned with prior research indicating students join with others holding similar beliefs (Dodson, 2014).

Despite their best efforts, participants witnessed peers who struggled with a variety of obstacles outside of their control. Even if a student wanted to vote, participants noticed their peers were often hesitant to do so, not knowing where to begin. In addition to modeling behavior as a peer educator, the findings also reinforced the importance of cultivating noncognitive skills in young voters (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). Consistent with prior research, participants observed many of the commonly identified barriers student voters face, such as limited time (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) and difficulty navigating voter registration, identifying their polling location, and learning about items on the ballot (Plutzer, 2002). Also reinforcing prior research (Grumbach & Hill, 2019), participants encountered peers who lived in a voting location different from their home address, creating confusion and an additional barrier for new voters. Participants also encountered students who struggled to find transportation to and from their polling location. Some participants also met peers who faced basic need insecurities, such as housing or food insecurity. Staying engaged in politics was simply not something food or housing insecure students could prioritize. Although I categorized food and housing insecurity as

part of the human frame, these barriers to student political participation were arguably a result of the cultural and structural gaps (Thomas & Brower, 2018).

Cultural and Structural Frames: Digital and Online Engagement and Institutionalization

The cultural and structural dimensions of the campus political environment influenced students' lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement. The cultural dimension of the conceptual framework acknowledged, "no two colleges and universities are alike" (Thomas & Brower, 2018). I relied on cues and references students made toward their campus history, mission, norms, and values to account for the cultural frame. The structural frame of the institution also had an enormous influence on the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement. I accounted for organizational, curricular, cocurricular and spatial sub-dimensions represented in the conceptual framework (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Students attempted to influence cultural norms and structural support at their institution through institutionalization efforts. Because the two frames are so closely intertwined in how an institution shapes the norms and experiences of students, I will now discuss the final two themes through the cultural and structural frames: Turning to digital and online engagement and seeking institutionalization.

Discussion of Turning to Digital and Online Engagement. The spatial dimension, conceptualized by Thomas and Brower (2018) as the physical elements of the campus environment, was highly limited due to COVID-19. Students with in-person experiences described the difficulty of engaging in the physical environment, leaning heavily on digital and online engagement. Prior research demonstrated the importance of entertainment, such as music and food, to draw students into political engagement (Howard & Posler, 2012), yet the move to a highly digital realm in 2020 meant trying new approaches. Even students attending institutions with in-person classes moved many of their efforts to a virtual space. Next, I discuss students'

lived experience of digital and online engagement according to the following: Optimism in the face of challenge, developing new strategies, and feeling connected but lacking connection.

Students were not thrilled about moving the majority of their work to a digital or online format, but they faced the challenge with a spirit of optimism. They acknowledged the gravity of the global pandemic but expressed optimism in their ability to reinvent how to reach peers. When I realized the steady optimism all students held, I immediately thought of Arnett's (2018) emerging adulthood theory, whereby students between the ages of 18 and 29 often face present anxieties with an optimism unique to this life stage. Instead of viewing the challenges ahead as insurmountable, students used problem-solving skills to push forward. Students also seemed to pull from an intrinsic draw, consistent with the notion of civic duty (Blais & Achen, 2019).

Students developed new strategies to engage with peers digitally and online. Arnett (2018) indicated emerging adults consider ways their current experiences related to future opportunities in their career, a finding reinforced by students in this study. Participants trained volunteers to reach out to their peers through phone calls and text messages to encourage voter registration through phone and text banking. This digital outreach aligned with Sinclair's (2012) work on social pressure, whereby students were using their social networks, "individuals tied to them by social connections, such as friendships, family relationships, or work colleagues" (p. 3), and attempted to convert them to their political network. Students moved classroom presentations from in-person to synchronous online sessions. Prior research demonstrated the positive influence of a single classroom intervention on student voter registration and turnout (Bennion & Nickerson, 2016) and more recently, scholars found classroom interventions had a positive effect for students already registered to vote (Bergan et al., 2021, p. 19). Students measured their influence by the number of voter registrations submitted after each session.

Although participants embraced the digital and online efforts and said they were able to make a difference, the majority of students felt like something was missing. Students initially did a lot of work on social media, but soon realized how saturated the environment became leading up to the election. Participant's frustration over passive, or horizontal engagement demonstrated preference for what Harward and Shea (2013) described as a deeper, more complex vertical engagement. Students missed the interpersonal and community-oriented aspects of their roles within the physical campus. Heavy reliance on digital tools also limited valuable interactions with faculty and staff. The finding of feeling a disconnect online aligned with prior literature suggesting a difference between political participation occurring in person versus online. Whereas political participation online was associated with external validation, participation in person was associated with intrinsic reward (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017). Due to their limitations, students sought every available outlet to influence, including their own institutions.

Discussion of Seeking Institutionalization of Political Engagement. Students' lived experience was greatly influenced by the level of institutional investment and structural support participants received from their college or university. Students felt their institutions could be doing more to support political learning, a finding aligned with a central argument found in the scholarly discourse, characterizing civic engagement efforts as lacking an explicit and educational link to the political system (Colby, 2008; Finley, 2011; Saltmarsh & Hatley, 2011). Most students operated without formal support from their college or university and as a result, they advocated tirelessly to establish political engagement as a priority for their institution.

Variation existed in the organizational sub-dimension of the structural frame, represented by differences in institutional leadership, the nature of the hierarchy, and existing silos within the organizational structure (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Congruent with prior research where

222

politically engaged college students encountered institutional roadblocks and bureaucracy (Boeckelman et al., 2008), most participants in this study described institutional limitations on their ability to reach students. Students often felt like outsiders, encountering seemingly arbitrary rules or needing departmental support to accomplish even simple functions, like reserving space. The state context also influenced students' experiences, as some viewed their state government with distrust, a finding in line with criticism of student voters (Nolan, 2011; Wines, 2019).

In their role as democracy fellows, students were provided training, access to meaningful political engagement work, and support for their efforts, thus meeting the three elements McIntosh and Youniss (2010) recommended to connect political learning with experience. Without CVP, most participants would not have had the support necessary to thrive in their role. CVP provided on-going advising support, education, connection to a network of students doing the work, guidance on emerging trends and changes at the state level, professional development, and so much more. Students referenced the assurance CVP provided, especially when faced with legal questions. Consistent with prior research on students involved in leading political engagement activity, participants developed "a rich web of interpersonal networks" (Forren, 2017, p. 227), namely relationships with other students within their state. Despite the support students received from CVP, they were concerned about the lack of institutional support.

The majority of participants operated in the co-curricular realm of the structural frame and received some advising support from a faculty member or student affairs administrator. Just two students reported to a formally established civic engagement office. Some participants received more formal support, operating as a student organization that was sponsored by a particular department on campus. Students found their faculty to be far more supportive of their efforts than administrators, suggesting a disconnect between the shared norms to promote

223

political engagement. The presence of invested political science faculty members in the lives of several of the students in the study aligned with calls within the field of political science to support political learning outside of the classroom (Matto, 2019). Even with some support, students still often felt like the only people on the campus driving broader efforts to educate students about voting from a nonpartisan standpoint. The findings about institutional support, or lack thereof, built off of scholarly concern of higher education promoting civic engagement without attention to the political dimension of students' learning experiences (Colby, 2008; Finley, 2011; Saltmarsh & Hatley, 2011). Few students made progress in making political engagement a priority for their campus. Worth noting, the two students who made the deepest inroads with administrators identified as White men. I suspected navigating their advocacy roles as White men increased their confidence to approach senior-level administrators with ideas.

Discussing RQ2: Future Aspiration for Civic Engagement

I sought to gain insight into students' self-described aspiration for future civic engagement following their service during the 2020 election season. I constructed a theoretical framework to conceptualize student aspiration for future civic engagement (Figure 4, p. 68). The model posited political motivation, civic duty, and political trust as conceptual influences on student aspiration for future civic engagement. I also acknowledged limitations of existing constructs in the model. Findings from the study supported and extended understanding of the conceptual influences on future aspiration for civic engagement. All students discussed a future where civic engagement remained at the center of their lives beyond this election season.

Findings from the second research question, probing student aspiration for future civic engagement, offered insight not previously discussed in the scholarly literature. Whereas existing studies of civically engaged college students found students were disconnected from politics

224

beyond graduation (Johnson, 2017; Johnson & Ferguson, 2018), students deepened their personal commitment to the political dimension of civic life. The findings built off of prior research indicating nonpartisan involvement and close contact with elections, such as polling observations, encouraged college student interest in future civic engagement work (Mann et al., 2018; Trolian & Barnhardt, 2017). Whereas prior studies of civically engaged college students were frustrated by and uncertain how to engage in politics (Johnson, 2017; Johnson & Ferguson, 2018), students in the study felt even more prepared and motivated to participate. The focus groups served as important learning spaces for the participants, a finding supported by prior research on college student political engagement using reflection as a tool for learning (Bardwell, 2011). Next, I review findings relevant to the second research question: discussing the factors driving student aspiration for civic engagement, the learned capacities influencing future civic engagement, and emerging career outlook and relationship to civic engagement.

Reviewing the Factors Driving Future Aspiration

Students spoke to four specific factors driving their aspiration for future civic engagement: desire to improve the system, personal commitment to change, trust in the system, and duty to try. First, students held a desire to improve the political system following the 2020 election. They believed there were flaws in the system of American democracy, revealed by toxic polarization and degraded public trust in the integrity of elections. Next, students shared a deep personal commitment to improve the system. The first two factors, students' desire to improve the system and their personal commitment, suggested alignment with what Barrett and Pachi (2019) described as motivational factors shaping students' civic and political engagement, such as purpose and self-efficacy. From public distrust of the political system to the recognition of barriers including racism, poverty, and active attempts to limit participation, students were not

naive about the issues facing their peers and the broader electorate. Despite their desire to address problems in the system, students maintained strong conviction in the possibility of the system to work as intended. The findings supported scholarly understanding of political trust (Barrett & Pachi, 2019), whereby participants trusted the system's responsiveness to citizens. A major part of participant's conviction rested in trust in the possibility of change through democracy. Finally, students spoke of political participation as a duty, something they and all Americans should feel called to act upon. Participants met peers who doubted importance of just one vote, yet they encouraged peers by promoting what scholars referred to as civic duty, viewing voting not as a rational choice, but the right thing to do (Blais & Achen, 2019).

The findings represented influences for continued civic engagement, but also aligned with constructs discussed in the study's literature review. First, although political engagement does not usually provide certainty in knowing one's efforts made a difference (Colby et al., 2010), participants felt particularly fulfilled and motivated to be civically engaged. Given the hostility several participants experienced during their political engagement, I thought students would grow hesitant about their continued involvement. Instead, students felt even more compelled to contribute long term. Aligned with prior research on political motivation, participants felt their negative and positive emotions motivated continued political engagement (Colby et al., 2010). Students operated in a political climate characterized by distrust but concluded their work with continued trust in the system. Polling leading up to the election suggested deep rooted concerns about disinformation, voter fraud, and voter suppression (Fessler, 2019). The issues of distrust were not contained to one side of the political spectrum and students observed these threats to democracy as part of their lived experience. Findings suggested students held what Flanagan and Gallay (2008) referred to as a "disposition to trust"

(p. 15) the political system. As nonpartisan actors in a highly politically polarized environment, students concluded their involvement feeling that the system had maintained integrity.

Discussing Learned Capacities Influencing Future Civic Engagement

Participants spoke about capacities they gained through their involvement in nonpartisan political engagement and how they would carry those learned skills with them long into the future. Congruent with prior literature, the development of skills and awareness through political involvement generally corresponds with "an ability to engage in democracy productively after graduation" (Thomas & Brower, 2018, p. 258). Students shared about their increased civic literacy, defined by their more attentive understanding of government, politics, and discernment of information. Next, students spoke about a deeper interest in fostering civic values in others. As Klofstad (2009) found, students also learned the importance of informal conversations and the influence of civic talk on peer behavior. Students felt particularly passionate about encouraging participation, even beyond this season. Participants acknowledged low political participation was not simply about lack of motivation, but instead a result of barriers.

Finally, students discussed the various skills they gained through nonpartisan political engagement, leading teams, problem-solving, and more. The finding of skill development influencing aspiration for future civic engagement matched prior research on the lived experiences of political engagement, where students applied their learning in other spaces beyond the political experience (Hildreth, 2003). Similarly, prior research indicated students develop important skills necessary for being involved in political engagement (Colby, 2008). Participants viewed their experience, especially their encounters with bureaucracy in trying to institutionalize their work as important lessons about making change. As opposed to prior research indicating students had a difficult time understanding how to navigate institutional

227

bureaucracy (Boeckelman et al., 2008), participants in this study developed a strong sense of political efficacy, the belief in their ability to not just participate but to influence the system. The findings reinforced prior research demonstrating the existence of political learning, even in the midst of "practicing the messy, ever difficult process of democracy" (Longo, Drury & Battistoni, 2006, p. 315). Students indicated the development as skills as important to their future aspiration for civic engagement, now wanting to find ways to continue to build upon and use those skills.

Discussing Emerging Career Outlook and Relationship to Civic Engagement

An examination of participant's future aspiration for future civic engagement would not be complete without sharing their emerging career outlook and relating these ideas to civic engagement. Findings suggested every participant in this study held ideas about their future career directly situated within civic life. Several students were unclear about the exact direction of their career, but espoused ideas congruent with civic engagement. The majority of students selected a career pathway either in law, education, or a field directly related to civic life such as working for a government agency or getting involved in politics with a long-term goal of running for political office. Although little research exists on students' future aspirations for civic engagement following involvement in an activity like nonpartisan political engagement, the findings from this study demonstrate a promising connection between the learned experiences and intentions to contribute positively to civic life in the long-term. Whereas prior research indicated recent graduates "struggled with how to advance their civic identities…within a turbulent political environment," (Johnson & Ferguson, 2018, p. 526) participants expressed future aspirations as civically engaged persons with confidence to navigate the political system. Albeit the majority of the students in this study were not recent graduates, their articulation and planning would appear to hold beyond college. Also, while prior research indicated young

people generally express a disinterest in entertaining a future career in politics or government (Lawless et al., 2015), participants envisioned careers either directly involved in politics, or were able to draw a direct connection to their future aspiration and civic life. The findings aligning career aspirations in areas congruent with civic engagement suggested students' involvement in nonpartisan political engagement reinforced, built upon, and sometimes directed students' aspiration for future civic engagement.

Examining the Findings Through Emerging Adulthood Theory

All students in the study were between the ages of 18 and 29 years of age, representing the unique stage of life Arnett (2018) referred to as emerging adulthood. Each of the features of the emerging adulthood (EA) were present and provided a more nuanced understanding of the findings in the context of the students' lives in this distinct period. Next, I discuss the five elements of EA theory within the context of the study's findings in the following order: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and optimism (Arnett, 2018).

First, students seemed to view their work with nonpartisan political engagement as an opportunity to deepen what Arnett (2018) referred to as identity exploration, an effort to "clarify their sense of who they are and what they want out of life" (p. 15). Nonpartisan political engagement in a tumultuous election meant students explored their identities during a particularly uncertain time, recognizing their privileges and wishing to influence others. Several students indicated they were known as the "voting person" on their campus. Even if students did not yet know what they wanted to pursue as a career, their involvement in nonpartisan political engagement reinforced their commitment to civic engagement and helped them discover new problems to solve and areas to explore in their future careers. Two students, for example, decided

to go to law school to advocate for voting rights, a direct connection between their experiences in nonpartisan political engagement and future aspiration for civic engagement.

Next, EA theory described feelings of instability in all facets of this life stage, including relationships, finances, and increased demands on their time (Arnett, 2018). Participants in the study were confident about their roles with CVP but exhibited the instability component of the life stage in how they shared about their lived experiences of nonpartisan political engagement. Specifically, the pandemic heightened students' feelings of instability. Not only were their own lives experienced in a period of uncertainty, but the entire societal structures students typically relied upon were as well. At first, instability came through their campus closures and planning for the fall semester, but then instability permeated the national and local tenor. The extreme threats to democracy, from denial of the election results to the presence of White supremacy in the public discourse, made students feel concerned about the stability of the country itself.

Self-focus does not mean emerging adults are unconcerned about the world around them, but rather, they remain intensely focused on preparing themselves for their future (Arnett, 2018). Participants viewed their involvement as directly contributing to their future but took few direct or practical actions to consciously focus outside of their roles on their own goals during the election season. Although I anticipated a strong commitment to community, students seemed to put themselves second throughout the season, sometimes at a detriment to their own well-being. Participants without a strong advisor seemed most negatively affected. As soon as the election ended, however, students felt like they could regroup and refocus on direct preparation for their future, such as graduate school applications. When discussing future aspiration for civic engagement, students exhibited a focus on self, not accounting for families of their own yet, and instead the focus on self was set within the context of how they hoped to serve.

Students in the study exhibited feeling wedged in-between youth and adulthood, the fourth theme in EA theory (Arnett, 2018). In some ways, students felt their efforts to institutionalize political engagement at their college or university were not taken seriously by administrators because of their age or position as a student. More often, however, students encountered peers who felt caught in-between, not feeling like politics was something they should invest in because they were not yet adults. Arnett (2018) indicated emerging adults as uniquely positioned, not youth, but feeling caught in-between their childhood and adulthood. Participants could empathize with their peers who felt they were not taken seriously because of their age. Empathizing with their peers, participants used perspective-taking to help connect with students who felt they did not belong in politics because of their age and stage of life.

Finally, students represented the emerging adulthood theme of optimism, both in the manner they carried out their roles, as well as in describing their future contributions to civic engagement. In emerging adulthood, "the present may be fraught with anxiety, but the future looks bright" (Arnett, 2018, p. 21). When students described the challenges of the 2020 election season and needing to rely heavily on technology to engage their peers for example, they spoke with optimism to make the most of a challenging situation. When sharing about their future aspiration, optimism exuded from students' responses. In spite of the hostility participants faced, and concerns about threats to democracy, student optimism seemed to grow during their service.

Implications and Recommendations

The study offered valuable scholarly and practical contributions to an emerging body of research and widespread efforts to encourage college student civic and political engagement. In the next section, I outlined the implications derived from the study and embed recommendations for continued study and support for students involved in nonpartisan political engagement.

Scholarly Directions

As evidenced in the discussion, the study's findings provided insight into the lived experience of an understudied student phenomenon and advanced current understanding of politically engaged college students, specifically those involved in nonpartisan activities. Although some existing studies shared the lived experience of political engagement in classroom-related activities and internships (Beaumont et al., 2006; Hildreth, 2003; Longo et al., 2006), this study delivered more recent awareness into students' lived experiences, specifically in the cocurricular dimension of college and university life. The study also made a historical contribution to the scholarly discourse by documenting student experiences during an unprecedented election season. Finally, the choice to ask students to discuss their future aspiration for civic engagement offered a unique scholarly contribution, which demonstrated an avenue for the study of student experiences and the potential influence of those experiences on students' future behavior.

The study's findings suggest several possibilities for further scholarly inquiry. First, research can build off of the study's focus on expressly nonpartisan political engagement as a fruitful space for learning and influence on students' future civic engagement. Specifically, future studies could gain more insight into the central tensions involved in maintaining a nonpartisan approach. Next, because this study occurred during a presidential election, the findings may most accurately represent the lived experience of nonpartisan work every four years. Future research could explore the experiences of students involved in nonpartisan political engagement efforts during midterm, primary, and local elections, providing different insight into the lived experience and influence of the activity on future behaviors. Given the collective attention paid to presidential elections, the findings from this study may represent themes unique

to a presidential election. The use of students' aspirations for future civic engagement provides an opportunity for a follow-up study with the same sample of participants to learn the accuracy of students' projections and the longer-term influence of their involvement on their civic engagement. Finally, future studies can more closely examine the complex phenomenon of personal change and learning encouraged by student leaders and experienced by their peers, in knowledge attainment, attitudinal shifts, and behavioral growth.

The study's limitations also offer a roadmap for further scholarly inquiry. Given the lack of racial diversity present among the sample, research can extend understanding of the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement by selecting a sampling method to yield a more racially diverse cohort. Furthermore, given the particularly hostile encounters the few students of Color experienced, future research can specifically investigate the role of race in the lived experience of nonpartisan political activity. Additionally, scholars could study the influence of institutional type, state politics, and any number of factors better controlled for through quantitative methods. As indicated in the study's limitations, given the irregular nature of the election during a global crisis, future study during an election year without public health restrictions may yield a different image of the lived experience and future aspirations.

Practical Implications

The study's findings offer practical implications for a variety of audiences. First, the findings can help student leaders gain insight into the many dynamics involved in this work. Next, for third-party entities focused on increasing youth voting, findings provide awareness of an activity these organizations work hard to support, the unique challenges students face, and evidence to better prepare student leaders. For college and university faculty, staff, and administrators seeking to increase political engagement, the findings showcase a student peer

233

educator model which holds potential for advancing goals on their respective campuses. Finally, from a policy standpoint, the findings demonstrate the value of nonpartisan political engagement as a function supported by colleges and universities. Furthermore, the findings uncover opportunities for better policy to protect student voters, such as highlighting the areas where participants needed to advocate for peers on and off campus. In the next section, I review the implications associated with each finding and share recommendations for practice.

From Uncertainty and Disruption to a Culture of Support

The findings suggest students participating in nonpartisan political engagement will likely experience disruption and uncertainty. Although students leading during the 2020 election season faced particularly extreme examples of disruption and uncertainty due to COVID-19, the study demonstrated the role of external and internal political influences on their lived experience. National, state, and local political events can cloud students' experiences and create uncertainty and disruption. Institutional responses to these events and circumstances also greatly influence the lived experience of students involved in this work and the general study body alike.

Given these implications, students would benefit from support from invested advisors, faculty, and staff. Students in the study appreciated the support they received from CVP state coordinators, yet all yearned for greater investment from their campus leaders. Faculty and staff should understand how challenging and unpredictable these roles can be and offer ideas to ease the burden. For example, in addition to offering practical solutions to the challenges encountered, such as how to navigate bureaucratic policies, on a personal level, faculty and staff could also encourage students to take care of their own well-being. Congruent with any student leadership role offering a service for the college or university (such as orientation mentors, desk staff, and

resident assistants), students involved in nonpartisan political engagement deserve support consistent with the critical investment they make in service to the institution's civic mission.

Although disruption is unlikely to be as extreme as it was in this cycle, advisors should prepare to support students as they navigate their roles in the midst of local and national events and tragedies, from mass shootings, to hate crimes, and everything in between. Advisors should equip students with support and guidance to be responsive to disruption, and of course serve as referral agents for when such disruption occurs (i.e., recommending mental health resources, offering space to debrief, etc.). Encouraging students to disconnect and regroup after national tragedies, for example, serves as a way to teach student healthy boundaries. Even in a more typical election cycle, advisors should encourage students to take care of themselves.

Celebrating Students' Commitment to Nonpartisanship

Students demonstrated tangible examples of the ways they mitigated personal bias in a nonpartisan leadership role, a finding with several implications. First, the participant's example can inspire future students doing nonpartisan political engagement to seek the same level of intentionality. Within the findings, participants shared practical techniques they used to hold themselves and one another accountable. Next, any person working in a role whereby they are required to maintain a nonpartisan approach could benefit from learning about the lived experience of participants in this study. Finally, the strategies employed and motivations behind maintaining a nonpartisan approach should instill greater trust in students doing this work. Specifically, administrators can gain an understanding of the nonpartisan approach and the students' level of professionalism.

Next, learning about the hostility students faced in their roles can help future student leaders to better prepare for what they may encounter and to consider how to respond, as the

235

participants did, in a nonpartisan manner. Additionally, advisors should ensure students know their resources and ways to report hostile incidents in conflict with institutional policy or even the law. From a training perspective, advisors can use the experiences articulated in this dissertation to provide students with tools and strategies for deescalating tension and hostility. Finally, the hostility apparent in the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement only furthers the call to action for colleges and universities to invest in political learning and development inside and outside of the classroom.

Findings suggested students of Color and students holding other minoritized identities experienced nonpartisan political engagement differently than White students and those from other majority group backgrounds. Namely, when in a visible and public role such as that of a student involved in nonpartisan political engagement, students of Color and students holding other minoritized student identities may be subject to overt racism, sexism, homophobia, ablism, and assorted forms of direct marginalization. Advisors should encourage students to seek mentors and peer support groups with people who can empathize with and counsel student leaders with minoritized identities. The cultivation of affinity group spaces could be especially helpful if provided at the state and national level, providing space for students with shared social identities to connect and support one another. Advisors should be prepared to not just support students, but to show them where and how to report hate crimes, bullying, and more.

Finally, in demonstrating ways students grappled with the boundaries of nonpartisanship, the study suggests more guidance is needed to assist in defining nonpartisanship in an everchanging political landscape. Organizations like CVP can and should offer assistance to help students navigate the grey areas, but colleges and universities also need to provide clarity, especially if students or student organizations hold a formal tie or relationship with the college or

university. Institutions can visit with their mission statements and values to guide decisions about responsiveness to issues which may otherwise be viewed as partisan. As students indicated, their efforts to encourage peers to be involved politically became viewed as partisan at times. At a policy level, colleges and universities would benefit from increased legal guidance on their role and responsibility in helping students navigate their nonpartisan political engagement.

On a more personal level, advisors could provide students with more guidance, assisting them in determining the lines in maintaining a nonpartisan stance, such as how to manage their personal social media presence, peer conversations, and other difficult situations. Given student experiences and conflict around racial justice, advisors should also ensure students have an understanding of the interconnected nature and congruence between justice and civic engagement. Advisors can help students understand the ways political parties may co-opt an issue, such as mask-wearing. As nonpartisan actors, advisors can assist students in considering their agency in modeling behavior for peers.

Considering the Role of Digital and Online Engagement

The study also provided student leaders, organizations, and colleges or universities involved in nonpartisan political engagement with considerations for their future practice. In an unprecedented election, the participants relied heavily on digital and online outreach, offering new ways to extend peer influence in the future. The new techniques to engage peers, such as peer-to-peer text banking, offer future student leaders a variety of examples to extend their reach. Findings suggesting the role of social pressure and peer influence could make personalized digital outreach particularly influential. Although students were able to connect with peers, many felt a lack of genuine interpersonal connection due to overreliance on technology. The most lively and memorable experiences and learning participants had were derived from in-person

interactions, especially the peer-to-peer conversations held on campus. Overreliance on digital

and online engagement, as evidenced in this study, suggests student leaders may struggle with

motivation when their work is only online. Therefore, students and advisors should balance how

much of the role is conducted through technology versus through interpersonal interaction. As

shared in the study's limitations, however, students lived through an unprecedented election.

Learning from Participant's Experiences Persuading Peers

The next finding, persuading peers in political participation offered several implications

for practice. First, because so many of their peers felt unseen and disillusioned by politics, one

implication is that students involved in nonpartisan political engagement are well-positioned to

persuade their peers. Given the participant's backgrounds and genuine interests in politics and

government, they knew the nuances and rules of navigating the political system. As a result,

students involved in nonpartisan political engagement model the noncognitive skills colleges and

universities should seek to instill in their students. I recommend colleges and universities invite

student leaders to serve in peer educator roles to encourage their peers to get involved in politics

from a nonpartisan standpoint, an effort in line with the civic mission of higher education.

Next, when persuading peers in political participation, participants in the study began to

recognize their own privilege. Students had the opportunity to reflect upon this learning with me

through their interview. Advisors can prepare students involved in this work to recognize the

dynamics of power and privilege prior to and throughout their involvement, normalizing the

cognitive dissonance experienced. Offering opportunities for reflective practice, especially

following the peak of student involvement can result in valuable learning. Given the particularly

hostile encounters students of Color in the study recounted, advisors should account for and be

responsive to the diverse needs of the student leaders they support, specifically students from minoritized identity backgrounds.

In persuading peers, participants recognized systemic barriers their classmates faced in attempting to exercise the right to vote. Findings reinforced prior research indicating the need for clearer pathways and support for student voters. For example, several participants identified transportation as a frequently encountered barrier to casting a vote. Colleges and universities can work with local board of elections officials to establish a campus polling location, or to arrange for transportation on election day. Students also encountered peers who struggled with challenges, such as housing and food insecurity, viewed as barriers to participation in politics. If college and universities are able to help their students engage in politics, their basic needs must be met, otherwise voting will be an activity many students are unable to accommodate.

The student experiences expressed in this study should also motivate politicians, government employees, and others involved in politics to consider the ways they appeal to younger voters. Many of the participants in the study shared stories about encountering hesitant potential voters who felt their opinions did not matter. Given the high turnout and arguably large influence young voters had on the outcome of the 2020 presidential election (CIRCLE, 2021), perhaps politicians and policy makers will think more about engaging student voters. Yet, as indicated in the literature review, some lawmakers are not so subtle in their opposition to policies making the political process more accessible for student voters. In response to the proposed voting reform in H.R. 1, the For the People Act of 2021, Mississippi's Secretary of State, Michael Watson said, "Think about all these woke college university students now who would automatically be registered to vote, whether they wanted to or not" (Stribling, 2021, p.1). Regardless of the voting laws, sentiments like those expressed by politicians like Mr. Watson

disrespect the students profiled in this study, students who hold a deep love for inclusive

democracy and political discourse with peers from all ideological backgrounds.

Multilevel Approach to Resisting Threats to Democracy

Student encounters with firsthand efforts to suppress the student vote served as a

reminder to advisors and third-party organizations supporting students of the very real opposition

students in these roles may encounter. The experiences can be used to provide new student

leaders with training to recognize and report issues. Institutions can work with students leading

this work to identify barriers, such as issues with mailing addresses in processing voter

registrations. Next, the finding which demonstrated students' efforts to educate peers about

absentee and mail-in ballots, suggests students hold trust in the political system to work as

designed. With ever-changing laws and policies, differing from state-to-state, colleges and

universities should look to organizations like CVP for support in understanding new laws.

The finding of students encountering misinformation and disinformation reinforced the

need for colleges and universities to help students be critical thinkers in a confusing and

turbulent political climate. Instead of simply consuming the media from television and social

media news feeds, students should be encouraged to read the legislation, platforms, and direct

sources whenever possible. Student leaders, like the study's participants, are well positioned to

offer peer-to-peer education. Colleges and universities should make voting information clear to

students and demystify the process of registering and ultimately casting a vote in an election.

Although participants felt like trusted peers, they could benefit from institutional credibility.

The study illuminated the tensions, polarization, and mistrust of the American political

system. Despite the repeated court failed challenges to the results of the 2020 presidential

election, a significant number of registered Republicans, as high as 70% questioned the

legitimacy of the results following the election (Kim, 2020). Students leading through nonpartisan political engagement will be instrumental in regaining trust of all voters in the upcoming midterm election. Related to participant's concern about the looming threat of White supremacy, the findings imply deep rooted anxieties in many of the communities highlighted in the study. The threat of White nationalists will likely persist in the coming years and educators should be prepared to support students in upholding democracy. Nonpartisan political engagement assumes trust in the political system to work as intended, yet issues like White supremacy and questioning the legitimacy of a democratic process make students' roles incredibly challenging, again indicating the need for institutional support.

For college and universities with existing political engagement initiatives, the findings suggested the need for further guidance on the boundaries of nonpartisanship, especially when democracy itself is in question. The threats to democracy students observed, such as misinformation and disinformation, voter suppression, and White supremacy are unlikely to fade any time soon. Colleges and universities should assist all of their students in navigating a polarized and tenuous political environment. With active threats to limit student participation, college and university leaders should seek input from students leading nonpartisan political engagement. Student leaders should be viewed as partners in working to increase the political participation of all students at a college or university.

The study demonstrated some institutions were hesitant to offer support for students of Color in the wake of racial injustice for fear of political ramifications. Following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, however, some university leaders engaged in communication directly opposed to racism and in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in June 2020. Arguing silence perpetuates injustice, Bowman (2020) reviewed the

moral and legal right of university leaders to speak out, while also outlining legal challenges some leaders face specifically at the state level. Policy makers may consider offering guidance for leaders regarding their speech in the wake of events involving the rights and safety of others. Students viewed anti-racism efforts as nonpartisan, not promoting one party over another.

Participants would benefit from additional guidance about the boundaries of their work when moderating programs where students or members of the community may say or act on values incongruent with the college's mission. The American Political Science Association, the largest professional association of political scientists, came under fire following a statement the organization issued about the insurrection at the Capitol, referring to work scholars must do to remedy the current state of affairs on both sides (Pineda, 2021). As Pineda (2021) pointed out, "It is here that the language of 'both sides' – and the fear of being perceived as partisan that motivates it – becomes a danger to political science itself" (p. 4). After all, issues like White supremacy must be addressed with and by both major political parties in the United States. Following the attack on the U.S. Capitol, Alger (2021) wrote, "We must partner with other community and civic organizations and institutions to bring people together at all levels: locally and across the country. This conversation must be nonpartisan, and we need to engage with open minds, humility, interconnectedness and a willingness to learn" (p. 3). Although a delicate balance, colleges and universities can and should make it clear they support full participation in democracy for all members of the community.

Institutionalizing Nonpartisan Political Engagement

The students in the study felt their administration only went so far to support their work. More often than not, participants felt like they needed to lobby their administration to begin to own some of the responsibility for political engagement efforts. Most students operated without

any formal connection or recognition in partnership with their institution. Even schools that had a dedicated office for civic engagement appeared wary to promote student voting. The finding of participants seeking institutionalization of political engagement suggests colleges and universities can be doing more to support students through nonpartisan political learning activities, an effort in line with the civic mission of higher education.

In addition to meeting their civic mission, colleges and universities should look to students leading nonpartisan political engagement to meet and exceed legal expectations. Current legal guidance from Title IV (20 U.S.C. 1094(a)(23) obliges colleges and universities to do some baseline political engagement work, but institutional support for political learning and engagement may soon entail more requirements for any college or university interested in receiving federal funding. House Resolution 1, the For the People Act of 2021, outlined increased responsibility for institutions of higher education to assist students in navigating the voting process. If passed, the law would require colleges and universities to designate a voting coordinator to lead efforts for the campus. Although the law has not made it to the floor in the U.S. Senate at the time of publication of this study, the bill signals lawmaker's desire for increased civic responsibility within higher education. Even if the law is not adopted, nonpartisan political engagement could be an important strategy for supporting student learning inside and outside of the classroom. Participants demonstrated innovative ways colleges and universities can institutionalize the work. From encouraging peer presentations in classrooms to training front-line staff to register students to vote, a culture of voting is possible if embraced by the college or university itself.

Findings suggested most students leading nonpartisan political engagement did so without strong advising or financial support from their institutions. Decision-makers should

designate a campus advisor for students involved in nonpartisan political engagement and consider permanent funding sources to ensure voting and political engagement remain part of the student experience. After all, findings demonstrated participants used their own money or fundraised to support basic function to encourage a culture of voting. Although participants received a small stipend from CVP, the amount of time and energy students put into advancing a core need at their colleges and universities calls for dedicated institutional funding. Commitment of institutional resources would serve as a sign of an institution's support for student political engagement. Participants shared the challenges in recruiting volunteers, so from an equity standpoint, funding could draw other students who otherwise might not be able to participate in peer educator roles.

Findings emphasized the important role of CVP in providing support to students and their institutions. Students spoke highly about receiving guidance from a knowledgeable staff member, specific to their state. Providing students with on-boarding, professional development, and active advising, the organization met a need not currently being addressed on many college and university campuses. Even if more institutions offer greater support for nonpartisan political engagement, third party organizations can continue to serve as content experts for campuses seeking to expand nonpartisan political engagement efforts, staying up to date on election law and best practices at a state and national level.

Aspiration for Future Civic Engagement

The findings suggested students foster a series of factors which will continue to drive their aspiration for future civic engagement. Their hands-on experiences engaging in democracy only seemed to deepen their desire to improve the political system and their own personal commitment to political engagement. Despite students' negative encounters during the election

season, they maintained trust in the political system and described their future engagement as a civic duty. Findings bolstered prior research indicating the importance of engaging in the sometimes-chaotic political environment and the heightened commitment to civic engagement as a result of involvement. Faculty, student affairs administrators, and others invested in student civic engagement can therefore leverage nonpartisan political activities as a means for giving students the opportunity to learn more about our political systems and how they operate, ultimately leading to more trust in democracy.

Next, students developed a number of capacities, which would guide their future civic engagement. The findings suggested involvement in nonpartisan political engagement leads to valuable learning, not only in how to foster civic values in a community, but also to further one's own ability to decipher politics through a more objective lens. Finally, findings suggest nonpartisan political engagement developed students' leadership skills, which made students more confident to want to be involved in civic engagement moving forward. Colleges and universities could seek to offer more opportunities for nonpartisan political engagement, such as volunteering with the local board of elections, running get out the vote campaigns, and attending local candidate debates and policy forums.

As the study demonstrated, students performing nonpartisan political engagement gain a wide range of interpersonal experiences. Advisors could capitalize on senior and outgoing student leaders to develop responsive training, case studies, and conversational guidance for navigating peer-to-peer nonpartisan political engagement. Allowing students to leave a legacy would honor the work of outgoing student leaders and align with their desire to pass on their knowledge. The study also showcased how a focus group can yield important data for folks supporting students doing this important work, while also providing space for students to process

their learning. Students enjoyed learning from one another and sharing space reflecting on their experiences and how they may influence their future aspiration for civic life.

Finally, students' emerging career outlook and relationship to civic engagement suggested a lasting influence of nonpartisan political engagement on career choice and how students will engage outside of their chosen career. Advisors should consider providing career development support for students involved in nonpartisan political engagement. Although students were able to articulate ways they thought about their future civic engagement, their interviews suggested I may have been one of the first people to ask them about the skills they gained and how those skills might be applied to their future. Colleges and universities could maintain databases of graduates who led nonpartisan political engagement to enable current students to connect with alumni for advice and support for their future civic engagement.

From Theory to Practice

Thomas and Brower (2018) proposed their framework on campus climate for student political learning and engagement to advance scholarly inquiry and also to, "identify areas on which an institution can focus to strengthen student political learning and engagement in democracy" (p. 248). The study's findings share the students' lived experience during a contentious election season but also demonstrated needed attention to support student political learning on college and university campuses across the country.

Administrators and policy makers can look at peer-to-peer nonpartisan political engagement as one piece of a larger plan to influence the campus political climate. An estimated 53-56% of youth, ages 18-29, voted in the 2020 election as opposed to 42-44% in 2016 representing a 1% increase in overall share of votes cast by age group (CIRCLE, 2021). The increase, though exciting, especially for folks leading nonpartisan political engagement, cannot

simply be attributed to the efforts made to encourage nonpartisan political engagement. Many factors contributed to the historic turnout among all voters, from access to mail-in voting to the volatile nature of a presidential election. Evidence submits, however, the work of students encouraging political participation does matter. The direct link between students' experience in nonpartisan political engagement and their deepened commitment to future civic engagement suggests contact with the political system, even during a bitter election, can deepen students' interest in a future as a civically engaged person.

On Inauguration Day, January 20, 2021, Amanda Gorman, the 22-year-old youth poet laureate, said: "Somehow we've weathered and witnessed, a nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished." Though a chaotic election season, I had the privilege to speak with young people who truly believe in the power of our democracy despite how broken the system can feel. Learning with student participants dedicated to nonpartisan political engagement and living out a calling to strengthen democracy, I too developed a restored faith in the future of our nation.

Conclusion

This final chapter served as a space to discuss the study's findings in relation to existing research. I reviewed the findings, as organized by the study's two research questions and structured through the study's conceptual framework. Throughout the findings, I incorporated scholarly understanding of students and politics to make meaning of the data. I then offered scholarly and practical implications and provided recommendations for future study and practice in support of nonpartisan political engagement. I closed the chapter with a brief reflection on the theory to practice implications of the study.

APPENDICES

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS EMAIL

Dear [NAME],

My name is Alex Kappus and I am a PhD student at Michigan State University. I am conducting a qualitative study on the lived experience of politically engaged college students involved in nonpartisan political activity leading up to the 2020 U.S. election. I received your contact information from (CVP leadership) after receiving approval to conduct the study. I am excited to partner with the Campus Vote Project to gain important insight into the interesting work your student fellows are carrying out all across the country this fall.

I am writing to invite you to complete the short survey below to nominate CVP Fellows you work with to take part in the study. You may nominate multiple Fellows. The purpose of the nomination process is to generate a manageable list of particularly engaged students and to generate excitement for participation in the study by the students who receive a nomination to participate.

CLICK HERE to view the nomination link.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at kappusal@msu.edu.

Sincerely,

Alex

_____

Alexander Kappus, M.Ed.
Ph.D. Candidate
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education Program
Michigan State University

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear [NAME],

My name is Alex Kappus and I am a Ph.D. student at Michigan State University. I am conducting a study on the lived experience of politically engaged college students involved in nonpartisan political activity leading up to the 2020 U.S. election. A member of the Campus Vote Project (CVP) leadership team nominated you to participate in this study. Congratulations!

Your participation is completely voluntary. Should you agree to participate, your involvement would entail: (1) Video conference interview conducted between August and November 2020 (approximately one hour) and (2) Participation in a virtual focus group with a few other Campus Vote Project Fellows.

Your participation will help shine a light on the important work you and so many are doing to encourage voter engagement and education within higher education. Any information you provide will be confidential.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please follow the link below to complete a short survey and to select potential interview times.

CLICK HERE to view the registration link. You will receive a confirmation email upon registration, and a reminder email the day prior to your interview date and time.

Thank you for considering this exciting opportunity! If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me at kappusal@msu.edu.

Sincerely,

Alex

_____

Alexander Kappus, M.Ed.
Ph.D. Student
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education Program
Michigan State University

INTERVIEW EMAIL

Dear [NAME],

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my study on the lived experience of nonpartisan political activity leading up to the 2020 election. I will be conducting the interview with you on [DATE] at [TIME] through the following weblink [LINK]. Below, I have listed instructions for calling in to the link. I look forward to speaking with you and if you have any questions or need to move the interview time, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Alex

_____

Alexander Kappus, M.Ed.
PhD Student
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education Program
Michigan State University

REMINDER EMAIL

Hello [NAME],

This is Alex Kappus and I am emailing to remind you about our interview tomorrow [DATE] at [TIME] via web conference [LINK]. I look forward to speaking with you and if you have any questions or need to move the interview time, please just let me know.
Sincerely,

Alex

_____

Alexander Kappus, M.Ed.
Ph.D. Student
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education Program
Michigan State University

Appendix B: Intake Form

Congratulations on your nomination to participate in this study on nonpartisan political activity! To learn a little more about you, please complete the short form below.

You will receive an email with a link with instructions for participating in the interview.

- **Name**:

- **Email Address**:

- **Phone Number**:

- **Hometown**:

- **Community College/College/University Name**:

- **Major(s)** (Note: If undecided, please indicate):

- **Cocurricular involvement** (Note: please include current student organizations, volunteer activities, employment, and other affiliations):

- **How long have you been involved with CVP?**

- **How would you characterize your enrollment status?** (choose one)
    - Full-time
    - Less than full-time

- **What is your current class level?**
    - Freshman/First year
    - Sophomore/Second year
    - Junior/Third year
    - Senior (4th year and beyond)
    - Graduate student
    - Unclassified

Demographic Questions (**Optional**)

- **Age:**
    - 14 – 17 years old
    - 18 – 23 years old
    - 24 – 29 years old
    - 30 – 35 years old
    - 36 years of age or older

- **Are you an international student?**
    - Yes
    - No

- **Gender** (Mark all that apply)
    - Genderqueer/Gender Nonconforming/Nonbinary
    - Man
    - Questioning/unsure
    - Transgender
    - Woman
    - Preferred response not listed:

- **Racial Demographic Question** (Please indicate your broad racial group membership. Mark all that apply)
    - African/African American/Black
    - American Indian/Alaska Native
    - Asian American
    - Latinx/Hispanic/Mexican American/South American
    - Middle Eastern/North African
    - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
    - White/Caucasian/European
    - Multiracial
    - Race not listed

- **Please describe other aspects of your social identity you would like to share:**

RESEARCH INTRO

As you know, my name is Alex Kappus and I am a PhD candidate at Michigan State University. The purpose of this study is to better understand the lived experience of politically engaged college students participating in nonpartisan political activity leading up to the November 2020 election. I've partnered with the Campus Vote Project, and as I stated in my email, you were nominated for your demonstrated leadership! Thank you for taking time to speak with me today.

I have prepared some questions for our time together, but I invite you to share anything you would like to about your experience promoting political engagement as a nonpartisan actor. The key is to share not what you think I want to hear, but just what you think and feel about the questions. Of course, I will maintain confidentiality, encrypt the data, and de-identify items. I encourage you to think of stories that bring your experiences to life. In the intake form, you provided written consent to participate and that I have your permission to record our interview so I can later transcribe our conversation. Is that still okay? Wonderful! I'm going to hit record now. Do you have any questions before we jump in?

INTRODUCTION:

1. Please take some time to tell me a little bit about yourself and how you got involved in CVP.

> [*Probe for understanding as student shares*]

SECTION 1: POLITICAL MOTIVATION AND PREPARATION

2. You just shared how you got involved in CVP. Can you share more about ***why*** you decided to get involved in nonpartisan political activity?

    2a. [*If not discussed*] What, if any, ***precollege*** experiences do you think contributed to your interest in being politically engaged as a college student?

    2b. [*If not discussed*] What, if any, aspects of your ***college*** experience contributed to your interest in being politically engaged as a college student?

3. Once you got involved in CVP, you took part in various training components and on-going professional development. Can you please share about your experiences with training?

    3a. [*If not discussed*] Now that you've participated in your role on your campus, have you found any of the components of the training particularly useful? If so, which?

4. In addition to the training, you receive on-going support from your state coordinator. Can you share about your experience interacting with [*name*] and CVP as an organization?

    4a. [*If not discussed*] Has [*name*] provided anything specifically helpful to your role?

4b. [*If not discussed*] Have you connected with other CVP Fellows in your state or across the country?

SECTION 2: NONPARTISAN POLITICAL ACTIVITY

5. Can you share about your experiences so far in carrying out nonpartisan political activity on your campus this fall? I encourage you to share stories highlighting your lived experience in this role.

[*Probe for understanding as students share their experiences*]

5a. Do you have any specific stories that bring to life your nonpartisan political activity? [*Follow up as needed*]

5a.1 Can you tell me a story about a time that you were registering somebody to vote? What does that feel like?

5b. What are the most exciting parts of your role? [*Follow up as needed*]

5c. What are the biggest challenges in carrying out your role? [*Follow up as needed*]

5c.1 What is your perception of the university's support for your work?

6. How would you describe your campus environment this fall as related to carrying out your role?

[*Probe for understanding as student shares*]

7. As a CVP Fellow, you are asked to carry out your responsibilities in a nonpartisan manner. At the same time, you likely hold personal beliefs about candidates and issues you care about. Can you discuss what is it like to operate as a nonpartisan actor on your campus and not outwardly share your beliefs or stance on issues? Do you have any stories that demonstrate this dynamic?

> 7a. [*If not discussed*] Beyond planning events and programs, do informal peer-to-peer conversations play a role in your experiences?

> 7b. [*If not discussed*] Do you ever feel like you can take the CVP hat off? Do you feel the need to remain nonpartisan with friends in informal settings? Or only when you're officially on duty?

SECTION THREE: DUTY, TRUST, LEARNING

8. Why is it important to you that your peers are involved politically?

> [*Probe for understanding as students share*]

9. What have you learned so far through your involvement as a CVP Fellow?

> 9a. Have your perspectives changed at all as a result of your involvement? If so, how?

9c. Have you used any of the skills or perspectives gained through this role in other spaces? If so, please explain.

10. What do the terms Political Engagement and Civic Engagement mean to you? Does your work with CVP contribute to your understanding of these terms?

11. In looking ahead, do you think your experiences with CVP will influence your future civic or political engagement? If so, how?

12. Those are all the questions I have for you. Is there anything else you want to share about your experiences with nonpartisan political engagement?

Okay, so, we've got about five minutes, anything that you are curious about, related to this project related to the PhD work, just want to lend by also my time to you. Anything I can answer?

As far as next steps, I'll send you a text transcript of our interview. If you read it and want to add or build upon any of your responses, you can simply email me! If I have questions about your responses, would you be willing to have a follow-up call or to read anything via email?
After November 3rd, I'll send you an email invitation to participate in a focus group with a few of your other CVP colleagues. A chance to share a bit more specifically about how the season went for you. I really appreciate your time and your participation in this study!

Appendix D: Post-Election Focus Group

Thank you for participating in my study on the lived experience of politically engaged college students participating in nonpartisan political activity. As discussed in your first interview, I'm working hard to maintain confidentiality. In this session, of course, you are sharing the virtual space with others. I ask that you also respect privacy in this space. I will record this session as well as any comments made in the chat but will store in a secure place and upon transcription deidentify information.

Before we jump in, I just want to say – THANK YOU – you all contributed to what many indicate as the highest voter turnout in our country in 100 years! I know you do more than solely voter registration and mobilization, but I still want to celebrate your work.

Discussion Standards

I'd like for us to live up to the following group discussion standards:

- Actively engage and participate free from distractions.

- What's said here stays here, what's learned here leaves here.

- Share the microphone: Step up/step back.

- The purpose of the session is to share experiences, so fight to urge to try to "Say the right thing" or what you think will sound impressive.

- Although I am acting as the moderator, BUT I encourage you to ask one another questions, respond to one another, and actively interact.

- The goal is not consensus, but instead to discuss shared experiences and perspectives.

Zoom Logistics

- Mute & unmute: Keep your microphone muted unless speaking.

  - Unmuting is like raising your hand.

- Expect and embrace awkward transitions in the virtual space.

- Use the chat to actively respond or react when people are speaking

  - "YES! I had the same thing happen!"

  - You may be called upon to expand on your experiences.

- If you get disconnected, rejoin with the same link if you're able! If not, we can get you into a future one.

- Use the "View all" box!

Goals of Session:

- To discuss your lived experiences of nonpartisan political activity leading up to the 2020 election.

- Now that election day has passed, to gain a sense of how these experiences will influence your future aspiration for civic or political engagement.

Protocol Questions

1.) Please take turns introducing yourself and within your introduction include a brief reflection about how you're feeling now that election day has passed (20-25 min)

   (Probe for understanding, follow up question if needed)

- Has the outcome of the election (results or no results) influenced how you feel about your nonpartisan political engagement work? If so, how?

2.) What was it like to participate in nonpartisan political engagement leading up to the 2020 election? How would you describe it? Metaphors encouraged. (20-25 min)

(Probe for understanding, follow up questions if needed)

- Perhaps each of you can share a key highlight, a memory, story that really gets at the essence of this work.
    - Did you consider yourself an educator?

3.) How has your experience as a CVP Fellow leading up to the 2020 election influenced your aspiration for future civic or political engagement work? (20-25 min)

(Probe for understanding, follow up question if needed)

- Do you have more or less faith in our democracy now that you've experienced the 2020 season doing nonpartisan work?

4.) Any closing thoughts or feelings about either the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement or your future aspirations for civic or political engagement? (20-25 min)

(Probe for understanding, follow up question if needed)

- What would you tell a friend who is considering work in nonpartisan political

  engagement?

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277

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