

Not (Just) Barriers: How Poor and Working-Class Black People See Politics

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(note to readers: this is an early draft; please forgive the relative lack of signposting, some repetition in the results, and any infelicities in the writing)

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Abstract

To understand class and racial gaps in voting, we conducted 262 semi-structured interviews with low-income and working-class people across Pennsylvania. In this paper, we focus on how 88 Black respondents view politics and political participation, and the strategies they say might increase their engagement with electoral politics. Many Black interviewees describe feeling disillusioned with the electoral process, and we heard about both deep disappointment with politics and a sense that politics don't really affect the lives of poor and working-class Black people, that little changes for them no matter who is in office. In discussing reasons for disengaging from politics, very few mentioned barriers to voting; instead, they suggested improvements to their living conditions, and proof their vote matters might motivate them to participate politically. In this paper, we unpack responses from poor and working-class Black Americans about how feelings of duty, political efficacy, apathy, disillusionment, and distrust impact their electoral participation, and what can be done to improve turnout for this group of eligible voters. Lastly, our data shows that low participation in elections does not necessarily mean low levels of activism or community engagement, demonstrating that Black Americans from poor and working-class backgrounds may be abstaining from voting without fully disengaging politically.

Introduction

Elections affect everything from the quality of our schools to who has access to food and shelter; from the character of policing to the management of a pandemic. Policy choices in all of these areas (and more) can profoundly affect the well-being of the least well-off, yet poor and working-class people of all races, and Black people (and other people of color) of all classes, participate in the political processes that decide them at much lower rates than white people and people with higher incomes and professional or managerial jobs.

The 2020 US election saw the highest number of voters ever to participate in an American election, and the highest *rate* of voting in at least a generation: about 66% of the voting-eligible population cast a ballot (McDonald, n.d.). The 2020 contest was unusual for a host of reasons, but participation was still deeply unequal, as has been the case in American elections for a very long time (e.g. Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2018; Fraga 2018). Exact estimates vary by dataset, but only about 40% - 50% of people in households earning under \$30,000 a year in 2020 voted, as compared with 70%-80% of those in households with incomes above \$100,000 per year (Laurison and Rastogi 2023). Black turnout in 2020 was about 11 points lower than white turnout; turnout among low-income Black people was about 8 points lower than among low-income white people (Morris and Grange 2024), but close to *thirty-five points* lower than among well-off white people (our analysis, Cooperative Election Study 2020 data). The racial and class inequality in participation, and the political disengagement of many Black poor and working-class people that leads to it, is a severe challenge to US democracy and to the promise of equal representation.

Most researchers who study this issue explain lower participation by lower-income people and/or people of color in one of two ways, each of which is partial at best (Laurison 2016). First, many analyses focus on institutional barriers to voting (e.g. Piven and Cloward 2000; Anderson

2018). Efforts to make voting more difficult, especially in low-income communities of color, are a threat to democratic inclusion, and voting ought to be as accessible and inclusive as possible.

However, institutional barriers are not a complete explanation for inequalities; in fact, making voting easier often actually *increases* inequality (e.g. Berinsky 2005).

The second approach explains lower participation as a consequence of individuals' lack of the necessary economic or educational resources (e.g. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995 and the team's many other related publications). These kinds of resources, however, do not predict political participation consistently: the relationship between income and political participation is not at all constant across time and place, or even within sub-groups in the contemporary United States (Laurison, Brown, and Rastogi 2022; Birch, Gottfried, and Lodge 2013); moreover, there are income inequalities in participation even when resources cannot possibly affect participation (Laurison 2015). Neither of these approaches, then, fully captures the reasons for lower voting rates among poor and working-class people and people of color.

Instead, as one of us has argued elsewhere (Laurison 2016), to fully understand how inequalities in political participation come about we need to attend to how those in marginalized communities relate to politics: what they think it is, how and whether they think it matters, and the extent to which they do (or do not) feel invited or expected to participate. To do that requires really listening to people. However, methodologically, almost all work on racial and economic inequalities in political participation is based on quantitative analysis, whether of surveys or administrative data (one important exception is Michener 2018); these approaches are essential for describing overall patterns of political engagement, but in order to *understand* race and class inequalities in political participation, we also need approaches that take seriously the perspectives of Black poor and working-class people themselves.

This paper does just that: together with a team of undergraduate and community-based researchers, we have conducted over 100 interviews with poor and working-class Black people across Pennsylvania. We talked with people who had all kinds of perspectives on politics and voting, from ardent socialists who don't vote because they feel no party represents their beliefs, to at least one person who plans to vote for Trump if he runs in 2024; from staunch Democrats who vote every time because of a sense of duty to their ancestors who fought for the right to vote, to people who feel deeply betrayed by politics and politicians, to those who are completely disconnected from the world of politics and do not see how it could possibly do anything to improve their situation.

In this paper we focus on how 88 of our Black interviewees talked to us about politics. None of these perspectives are fully captured by most surveys, and all are important for understanding how low-income and less-educated people Black people understand American democracy and their role in it. Across these interviews, we identified two consistent themes in low-income Black people's discussions of their relationship to politics. First, over three quarters described persistent problems in their lives or communities and expressed a lack of faith that elected officials were likely to be able to make substantial positive changes; they were pessimistic or disillusioned about politics. Second, three out of five Black working-class interviewees told interviewers that politicians and elected officials don't care about their views and opinions, that they feel that they don't matter to those in power; they feel that politics is game by and for white and/or rich people.

These views were common whether participants voted regularly or not, but they were more common among the less electorally engaged. We also heard from a number of Black respondents about their sense of duty to participate, given the sacrifices made by Black people in pursuit of the franchise. Moreover, many respondents – even those who voted rarely if at all – were attuned to

political issues, engaged in activism or community work, and were hopeful about the possibilities for a better future.

After reviewing the state of existing literature on inequalities in political participation, and describing our research methods, this paper explains what we heard from 88 low-income Black interviewees – their views of politics, their reasons for engaging or not, and their beliefs about what might make voting more enticing for themselves and those they know.

Existing Knowledge

Surprisingly little research has focused on the political behavior of poor and working-class Black people; most work on voting rates focuses on class *or* race but not their intersection (though it may control for race when discussing class effects, or vice versa; but see Laurison et al 2022). In what follows we review the work on class and political participation first, before turning to work on racial voting gaps.

Class and political participation

There are two major theories of the link between being poor/low-income/less-educated and being less likely to vote in the US: the first argues that it is the lack of resources itself which keeps people from participating; the second focuses on institutional barriers. Both start with politics as something people naturally ought to want to express themselves in, and look for barriers or facilitators in structures and resources.

The “resource model” is dominated by the works of Verba, Schlozman and Brady, in various author orders and combinations (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2018; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012); their approach is

descriptively rich, but somewhat circular as a theoretical argument: one can read them as simply calling everything that predicts political engagement some form of a “resource” whether that’s owning a home and therefore (for them) feeling more invested in one’s community, or having parents who voted and paid attention to politics and therefore also being interested.

The institutional barriers approaches are somewhat more diverse, but focus on the administrative and logistical hurdles that make voting more difficult for poor and working class people, especially in Black neighborhoods. These works focus on elites’ desires to reduce participation to protect their own interests, and on the role of racism in suppressing voting (Piven and Cloward 2000; Piven et al. 2009; Anderson 2018).

Both of these explanations – resources and barriers – capture real phenomena, and point to important factors that surely affect low-income and working-class people’s ability to vote. There are, however, empirical and theoretical problems with both.

Research suggests that the laws and policies that govern the electoral process, including convenience laws (e.g., universal vote-by-mail, Election Day registration, and early in-person voting) and restrictive laws (e.g., voter ID laws), have inconsistent effects on both overall voter turnout, the class turnout gap, and the Black-white turnout gap.

Research has shown that convenience voting has a modestly positive, inconsistent effect on turnout. For example, Thompson et al. (2020) find that universal vote-by-mail modestly increases overall turnout rate while Larocca and Klemanski (2011) find that universal vote-by-mail has a positive, inconsistent effect. No-excuse absentee voting and Election Day registration are associated with increased turnout (Larocca and Klemanski 2011), yet early in-person voting is associated with decreased turnout (Larocca and Klemanski 2011).

Moreover, it turns out that making voting easier often actually increases economic inequality in participation (Berinsky 2005; Burden et al. 2014), because increased access facilitates voting for those who are already at least somewhat inclined to participate, but not for those with no interest at all. Because those whose behavior is affected by the ease of voting access are on average higher-income than those who will not vote regardless, the income gap in voting grows even if overall rates of turnout also rise.

Turning to resource theories, while they provide comprehensive descriptions of economic inequalities in turnout, they also do not work as stand-alone explanations or imply solutions that are likely to be effective. This is for a few reasons; most notably for our purposes, resources do not predict voting the same way across places and times, or even in different groups within the US. The income-voting relationship in the US is strongest for White people and essentially flat for Black people (Laurison, Brown, and Rastogi 2022). Another paper also showed that even when resources can't directly affect participation – in the setting of a survey – lower-income people refuse to participate (by saying they “don't know” at higher rates than better-off people (Laurison 2015).

The institutional and resource theories also both miss something essential: how people feel and think about politics, how they understand what it is, and how they see their relationship to it as a part of the social world.

An alternative model of participation is provided by social theorist Pierre Bourdieu: that we ought to see politics as a field, in many ways similar to other fields such as art, publishing, or television. There are insiders who are producing our politics (Laurison 2022) just as there are insiders who curate art galleries, gatekeep book publishing, or decide which shows will make it to *Netflix* or *HBO* or *CBS*. We need to attend to people's relationship to that field — their proximity or

distance from it, as well as how they understand it from the vantage point of their position in social space.

A growing body of work takes what we would call a broadly relational approach to politics (Laurison 2016), whether or not it draws directly on Bourdieu. Joseph Soss and Sarah Bruch have published a number of works demonstrating that the kinds of government institutions people participate in, and the way they are treated within them, predict their level of political participation (Soss 1999; 2002; Bruch and Soss 2018; Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010); the basic insight is that when people are exposed to welfare regimes or high schools that treat them as potential troublemakers and punish them for transgressions, they come to understand their relationship to government and politics as a disempowered one; Jamila Michener makes a similar point about Medicaid's role (Michener 2018).

From a different angle, Meredith Rolfe has shown that most of what looks like the “effect” of resources on participation is actually about what networks people are in: higher-income and more-educated people are more likely to have connections to people who are already highly engaged in politics, and they also are more likely to know people who are themselves politicians (Rolfe 2012); she argues that these connections are most of what drive higher participation, rather than the resources themselves.

Little work up to now, however, has simply asked poor and working class people themselves to talk about what politics means to them, their experiences of it, and their sense of their own power or lack thereof. Our paper, on the other hand, centers poor and working-class Black Americans' voices and aims to move the field forward by putting their personal sentiments and anecdotes in conversation with existing paradigms, theories, and frameworks.

Race and Turnout Inequalities

Black/White Turnout Gap

Patterns of Black political engagement differ from those of other racial groups. From 1960 to the 1990s, voting-eligible Black Americans were substantially less likely to vote compared to voting-eligible white Americans. Since the mid 1990s, the turnout gap between Black and white voters has narrowed, though there is disagreement over the exact size of the gap depending on whether researchers rely on voter self-reports (which often show higher turnout for Black people, especially in 2008 and 2012), validated voting from survey data, or administrative data (Fraga 2018, Brennan Center 2024).

Prior research on Black political participation has largely overlooked Black people's beliefs about whether the electoral system benefits them and their feelings of connection to – or distance from – politics, which are the main findings we uncover in our in-depth interviews. Rather, when explaining Black political participation, prior research has focused largely on: socioeconomic status, laws and policies, lack of resources/political knowledge, community and relationships, group consciousness, Black candidates, and Black empowerment. We review each of these bodies of research below.

Race and Socioeconomic Status

A body of literature, largely relying on self-reported turnout data, finds that while Black voters vote at slightly lower rates than white voters overall, this gap is reduced, and even reversed when socioeconomic status is controlled for (Leighley and Nagler 2013; Verba and Nie 1972; Bobo and Gilliam 1990). When income and education are controlled for, Black voters report voting at similar or higher rates than their white counterparts (Verba and Nie 1972; Fraga 2018) and engage at higher rates in other political activities (Dawson, Brown, and Allen 1990). In fact, low-income Black

voters and Black voters without a high school degree have, at least in some elections, voted at higher rates than their white counterparts (Fraga 2018; Laurison et al 2022). Additionally, low-income Black women vote at higher rates than any other race/class pairing at least on average across the three Presidential elections from 2008 to 2016 (Laurison et al 2022). While this body of research relies largely on self-reported, rather than verified, turnout data, it suggests that Black patterns in voting behavior differ from those of other racial groups and cannot be fully explained by differences in socioeconomic status (Fraga 2018).

Restrictive laws and turnout

Research on the effect of restrictive laws is focused on voter ID regulations and is also mixed. Valentino and Neuner (2016) find no evidence that voter ID laws reduce turnout, while some research finds that voter ID regulations are associated with increased turnout (e.g., Larocca and Klemanski 2011). Several scholars suggest that the public's emotional reactions to debates about voter ID laws might mobilize Democrats and counteract any disenfranchising effects (Valentino and Neuner 2017; Rocha and Matsubayashi 2014) and that campaigns and political organizations effectively subsidize the costs and burdens of complying with new barriers to voting (Neiheisel and Horner 2019; Rocha and Matsubayashi 2014). Yet Rogers (2019) finds that while voter ID laws may motivate a weak, short-term increase in voter turnout, over time turnout decreases as the law's ability to counter-mobilize fades. Over time, in states with voter ID laws, voters are more likely to report trying and failing to cast a ballot, and minoritized racial groups are less likely to successfully vote (Rogers 2019).

By contrast to Rogers, Rocha and Matsubayashi (2014) find no evidence that Black or Latino turnout is uniquely affected by voter ID regulations. Fraga (2018) similarly finds that voter ID laws do not have a clear effect on the Black-white turnout gap, nor does felon disenfranchisement (Fraga

2018), however the latest Brennan Center report, based on voter records, indicates a clear effect of the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision on the Black-white participation gap in covered counties (Morris and March, n.d.)

It is clear that barriers to voting are bad for democracy, and likely that they exacerbate racial voting gaps; it is less clear that the entirety of the difference in voting between low-income Black people and higher-income white people can be explained entirely by restrictive laws and policies.

Community, Relationships, Group Consciousness, and R

Across racial groups, community, relationships, and social connectedness matter for political participation (e.g., Cole and Stewart 1996; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999, Rolfe 2012). Unlike work on the class gap in voting, there is a wealth of research on how relationships and social context matter for Black communities' political participation. The relationship between these factors and political participation is especially strong among Black Americans, where social networks developed through Black organizations and political churches play a unique role in Black political engagement. For Black Americans, relationships have a larger effect on political participation than socioeconomic status, political efficacy, and trust (Farris and Holman 2014). Other research finds that only education has a stronger effect (Shaw, Foster, and Combs 2019).

There is some evidence that Black candidates increase Black voter turnout (Lublin and Tate 1995; Tate 1991; Tate 1994; Washington 2006; Fairdosi and Rogowski 2015; Mckee, Hood, and Hill 2012, Bobo and Gilliam 1990). Researchers argue that this is due both to Black candidates instilling a sense of pride, group loyalty, and political interest among Black voters, and also because the campaigns of Black candidates may put more resources towards mobilizing in Black communities, largely through Black churches and through increased political knowledge (e.g., of dates of primaries) developed in Black churches and political organizations (Tate 1991). Researchers find that

in cities with Black mayors and districts with Black Congressional representatives, Black political participation and political knowledge are higher (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Hayes and McKee 2012; Griffin and Keane 2006; Gay 2001).

Verba and Nie's (1972) seminal work on Black political participation tackled the turnout gap in Black and white American's political engagement. Their work emphasized the importance of racial group consciousness as a resource for Black people to engage in politics. Black people have an understanding of their disadvantaged position in society and therefore think of politics as a means to advocate for their rights (Verba and Nie 1972; Dawson 1995). Ultimately, this work argues that higher levels of RGC will mostly always lead to political action for Black Americans.

Recent work on RGC addresses some of the common critiques of the framework by establishing the degree of influence RGC has on Black political behavior (Smith et al 2023). Contrary to previous work, Smith et al. (2023) argue that the impact of RGC on political behavior has various caveats: most importantly for our purposes, individuals will engage in a political activity only if they believe the activity has power in achieving some racial group objective.

Our work takes up where these studies leave off, examining how low-income Black people describe their relationship to politics, and what differentiates those who do vote regularly from those who do not.

Methods

Between summer of 2018 and spring of 2023, a rotating research team (led by Daniel Laurison) worked to design an interview guide, recruit for, and conduct interviews with poor and working class people from across Pennsylvania. We defined "poor and working class" broadly, including anyone who met at least one of three criteria:

1. They were earning \$45,000/year or less, and/or
2. They did not have a 4-year college degree (and were not currently in the process of attaining one as a traditional-age college student), and/or
3. They were unemployed or working in a routine, manual, or service job such as cleaner, retail sales, or security guard.

This paper is based on the subset of those interviews with Black respondents—about 105 interviewees in total, 88 of which have been fully coded at this writing—but as we recruited across all racial groups, we describe our research team and our methods for the whole sample below; all of this applies equally to Black and all other respondents.

The research team

In the summer of 2018, Laurison hired four Swarthmore undergraduate students to work full time for 10 weeks on this project. As our work was gearing up, we made a connection with a young working-class Black man from North Philadelphia, who had just come home after finishing his degree and was looking for work. Laurison decided to add him to the team as the first community-based researcher on the project. The model of having someone from the communities we sought to interview was so successful that we replicated it and expanded it going forward. We have since hired and collaborated with 10 community-based researchers (not counting four who were hired, but were unable to conduct interviews). All community-based researchers (CBRs) have been from families that meet at least some of the above criteria for being poor or working-class, though many (but not all) had college degrees. CBRs recruited for and conducted interviews primarily in their own communities. Not only did we expand the research team to include CBRs, but we also grew from having four undergraduate student researchers to a total of 60 rotating through full- and part-time research positions over the last six years. Student lab members and CBRs took

part in every aspect of the research process, from writing and improving the interview guide, to designing recruitment materials, to conducting, transcribing, coding, and analyzing interviews. In summer 2023, we also added a post-doctoral researcher and eight postgraduate researchers to the team (most of whom are co-authors on this paper), again primarily people with origins in poor and working-class communities and/or ties to these communities and/or communities of color.

Across all 79 people who worked as researchers on this project, 65 were non-white (82%), with 20 (25%) self-identifying as Black. Moreover, 51 of the 79 researchers (65%) are from poor or working class backgrounds with 5 additional members of the team reporting that they were close to meeting this criterion (raising total to 71%). The diversity of racial identity and socioeconomic backgrounds of our lab members has had a positive impact on our collective ability to recruit interviewees, conduct ethical and non-exploitative research, and analyze responses on political engagement with the empathy and understanding that comes from shared racial and class positions.

Recruitment

We recruited interviewees through a series of flyers (see Appendix 1) posted in stores and community centers, on bus stops and telephone polls, as well as through social media and Craigslist postings, and the networks of the research team. All respondents were offered a \$20 thank you for participating; in the first waves of interviews these were offered as gift cards to Wawa (a Pennsylvania convenience store, similar to 7-11), Target, or Walmart; in later waves we were able to compensate people with cash, over money apps such as Venmo, or by check.

We had a dedicated phone number (through Google Voice so multiple team members could answer the phone) and an online screening survey to ensure people were in our intended set of respondents and to set up times for interviews. All potentially interested interviewees went through the short screening survey. Those who found us online or who accessed the form through the QR

code on the flyers filled in the Google Form themselves, while those who called or texted us, or were known to research team members, could choose to answer questions over their preferred medium and one of the team would fill in the survey. We had versions of the flyer and screening form in Spanish and a number of Asian languages spoken by members of the research team; we conducted seven interviews in Spanish.

We contacted those people who filled out the survey who lived in Pennsylvania and met at least one of our class criteria (earning under \$45,000/year, unemployed or working in a job that does not require a college degree, or not having a four-year college degree). Across the five years of interviewing, we generally managed to interview about half of the people who filled out the screening surveys; about 10% were excluded for not meeting our criteria, and the rest dropped out at some point between indicating interest and actually showing up for an interview. We made multiple attempts to schedule with everyone who filled out the screening survey, even if they stood us up for interviews, and were able to interview a number of people after multiple attempts.

Initially we only offered in-person interviews; in the summer of 2020 we exclusively conducted interviews virtually, and after that we offered respondents the option to choose how they would be interviewed, using Zoom for interviews distant from any of our interviewers and for people who preferred that modality. Most interviews in Spanish were done on Zoom because at the time of the interviews our Spanish-speaking interviewers were not in Pennsylvania.

We also dealt with a series of fraudulent respondents; two Pittsburgh Craigslist postings, one in 2022 and one in 2023, each resulted in both legitimate interviewees and a number of people who attempted to (and sometimes did) complete interviews from outside the United States. Once we identified that this was happening, we initiated stronger screening for people who looked similar to interviewees we had identified as fraudulent: we told them we could only pay via money apps that

were linked to US bank accounts, or by mailing checks to a Pennsylvania address, and if necessary we ended interviews early when respondents clearly were misleading us (for example, one person with a distinctly non-US, non-European and non-Australian accent, when asked where he was from, said he was from “Europe and Australia;” he also could not identify any areas in the part of Pittsburgh he said he was from, and gave extremely vague and unusual answers to our initial questions). Many recent articles address the increasing problem of fraud in interview studies (e.g. Drysdale et al. 2023; Ridge et al. 2023). We dropped from our analysis (and our counts of potential respondents) all sign-ups that showed clear signs of being from people outside the US.

Aside from the dishonest respondents, there were few substantial differences between the pool of people who completed the screening survey and those who completed interviews. Men were a bit more likely than women to complete interviews, as were Black and Asian people and those with higher incomes.

Our respondents are of course not a representative sample of poor and working-class Black Pennsylvanians. They will differ from non-respondents in ways we can and cannot measure. One issue for our work is self-selection: people who responded to our flyers are likely more politically engaged on average than people in similar circumstances who did not even consider signing up from an interview about their relationship with politics. Especially in our early interviews, we talked to a number of self-described activists and people with strong political beliefs. Nonetheless, between the substantial incentive of twenty dollars for many participants, and recruitment of friends and family members by community-based researchers, we have a meaningful number of respondents with very low levels of political participation.

Moreover, qualitative work is not meant to be (and usually cannot be) representative in a statistical sense; however, giving people the opportunity to have lightly-structured open

conversations can help develop our understanding of issues in deeper and more nuanced ways than are possible with survey or administrative data.

Interviewing

We revised the interview guide each year based on unfolding events such as the pandemic and the election cycle, and our sense of the effectiveness of the previous year's iteration. Across all the variations, though, we always had sections asking people about the community they live in, the work they've done, their experiences with and thoughts about electoral politics, and a concluding section explaining that people like them are less likely to vote than those with more resources, and asking them why they think that is. [Appendix 2 – interview guide]. This process meant all of the research team knew the interview guide intimately and had some ownership of the research.

In addition to being part of working on the interview guide, students and CBRs were trained extensively in interview methods at the beginning of each summer. We improved the training process over time, but the key components of training were present from the beginning: Laurison gave an overview of the goals and philosophy of semi-structured interviews, then, research assistants would conduct practice interviews with each other and give each other feedback. In 2018, 2019, and 2020 they also found friends who were not in the study universe to do a second practice/pilot interview. In 2022-3 we added an additional round where students and CBRs interviewed each other and recorded those interviews, then received feedback from either Laurison or a graduate student RA with training and experience with in-depth interviewing.

In the first three summers students and community-based researchers conducted interviews individually; in summer 2022 we moved to a model based on paired interviewers, usually one community-based researcher and one graduate or undergraduate student, or Laurison and either a CBR or a student. We aimed wherever possible, especially in 2022 and 2023 when we had the

biggest team, to have at least one interviewer share a racial/ethnic identity, gender category, and/or neighborhood/hometown with the person they were interviewing. Wherever possible (which was most of the time), community-based researchers interviewed people they knew or had themselves recruited from their own network or community.

In the paired interviews, we designated one person as lead interviewer (the CBR if they were involved) and one as second interviewer. The lead interviewer guided the interview and asked the main questions on the interview guide; second interviewers asked follow-up questions and probed, and helped make sure all the key topics in the guide were covered. Sometimes interviewees shifted this dynamic by being more attentive and responsive to the “second” interviewer, and that person ended up taking the lead. Shortly after each interview, all interviewers wrote post-interview memos recording their impressions of the interviewee in terms of both their appearance and manner, and their views, as well as the setting, and their reflections on what the interviewee said and what it might mean for our research.

Coding and analysis

Most interviews from 2018, 2019 and 2020 were transcribed by paid transcription services, with a few from 2018 transcribed by student researchers. In 2022-2023 we switched to having the research team do transcription with the assistance of the program Trint, which produces a first auto-transcribed file and then links sound to text so that transcription can be done fairly efficiently by less-experienced transcribers.

Students in the Politics and Equal Participation Lab (PEPL) part of the Healthy, Equitable and Responsive Democracy Research Initiative at Swarthmore (HEARD), along with continuing community-based researchers (CBRs) have participated in both transcribing and coding. These are almost all first-gen and low-income students and students of color; a subset were also interviewers.

For coding we are using Atlas.ti's web interface, which allows multiple people to work on the project at once and is simple and intuitive to learn. Laurison and graduate students trained the students and CBRs in the philosophy and practice of coding qualitative data, and we started with a list of codes Laurison generated, largely tagged to particular sections in the interview guide and themes he had informally identified already. Students coded anything that seemed important but did not fit an existing code with a "seems important" code, and we discussed these at our weekly meetings, added new codes and refined others as needed. When we transcribed or coded an interview, we wrote an additional memo reflecting on the interviewee's views, story, and any reflections we had.

At the end of each term as part of the research team, every member of the team has written a reflection memo thinking over what they learned about poor and working class people's views of and experiences with politics; we also have retreats or meetings where we talked over those memos and discussed the key themes as we see them; this generated additional codes for our work in Atlas.ti going forward.

In our second round of analysis, we developed a protocol for ranking each interviewee on their levels of electoral, community, and activist political engagement, as well as their political awareness; for each of these we assigned everyone to "high" "medium" or "low" categories, where "low" indicated essentially no engagement with that form of politics and "high" indicated consistent, intentional engagement. Appendix 3 provides a description of these categories and their rankings. To assess consistency among the many coders on the team, we underwent an intercoder reliability (ICR) process to produce a measure of agreement between coders. After a training period, roughly 32 percent of interviews were scored independently by two different coders; the intercoder reliability score for these rankings is approximately 87 percent. This work is in the final stages and, when complete, approximately 41 percent of interviews will have two readers. While there is variance in

how researchers evaluate ICR results, our score successfully meets most interpretations; we have 80 percent or greater agreement on more than 95 percent of codes (Miles and Huberman 1994) for more than 25 percent of interviews, which is considered nearly perfect agreement (O'Connor and Joffe 2020; Landis and Koch 1977). More details on the ICR process can be found in Appendix 4.

Interviewees

We have conducted 262 interviews to date, 105 of them with people who identified themselves as Black. We have completed coding and analysis on 88 of these interviewees; this paper is based on results from those respondents. These 88 interviewees are primarily from the city of Philadelphia, especially the city's two predominantly Black areas, North (15) and West (16) Philadelphia, but we have also conducted 5 interviews in the small town of Coatesville PA, four in the Pittsburgh area, and three in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Just over half (53%) of our interviewees are men, 44% are women, 3% are non-binary. Figures 1 through 3 describe the income, age, and education distributions of our interviewees. They are predominantly very low income, with a plurality earning under \$15,000 per year; a majority have a high school diploma or less education. They span the range of ages.

Figure 1: Reported Incomes of Black Participants

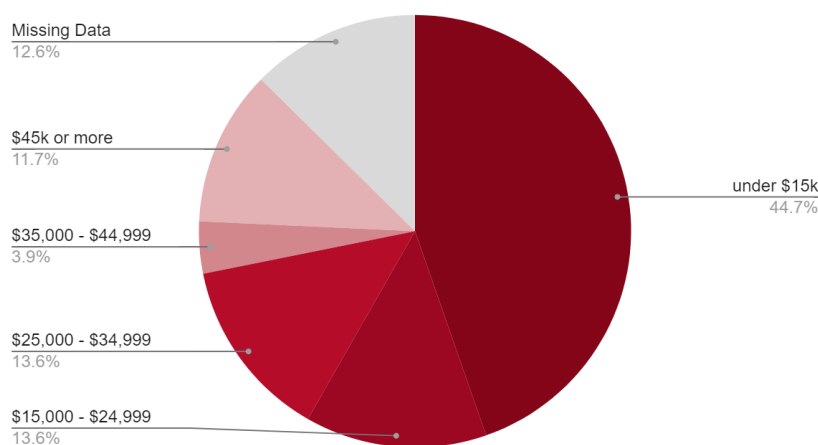


Figure 2: Birth Year Ranges of Black Participants

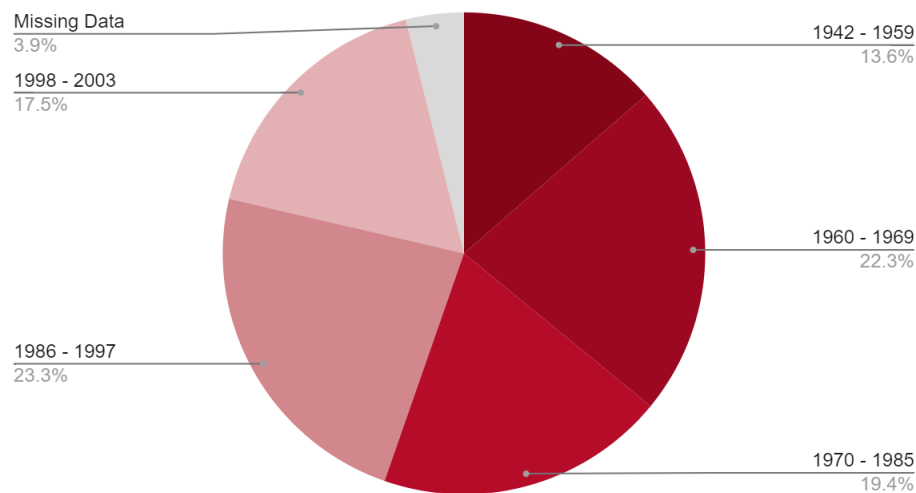
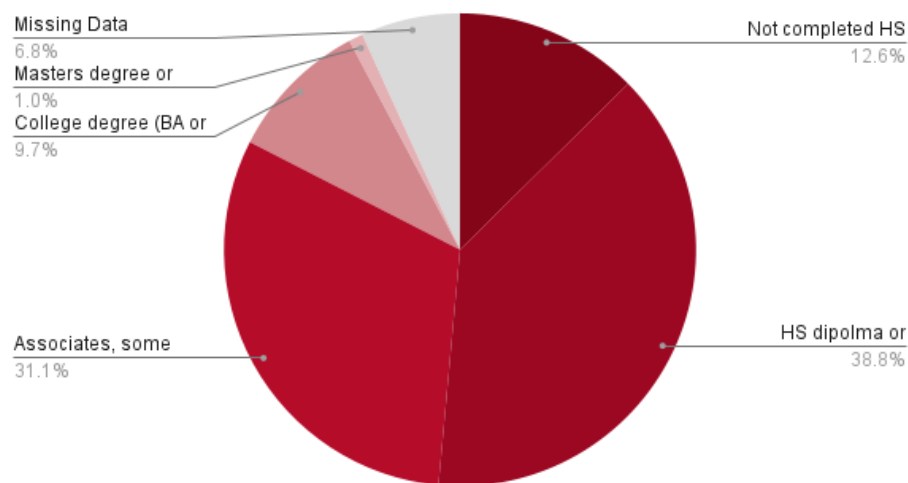


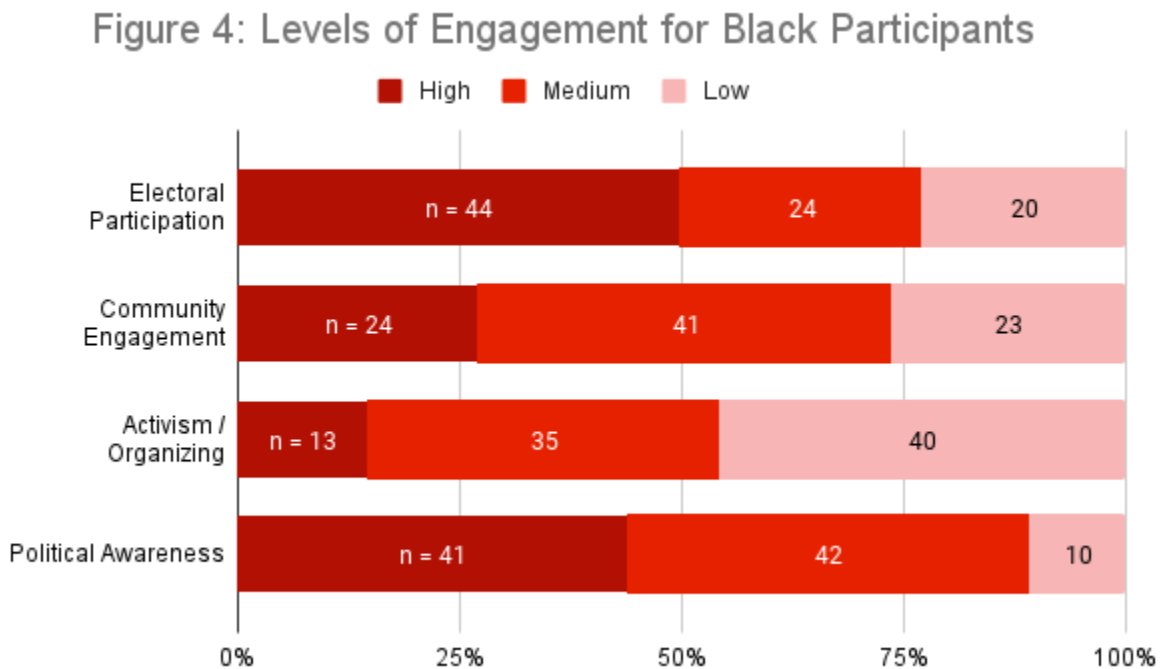
Figure 3: Reported Educational Attainment of Black Participants



Results

Description of interviewees

Across our 88 analyzed interviews of Black working-class people in Pennsylvania, we scored 20 as low on electoral engagement, 24 as medium, and 44 as high (see Figure 4). We coded people as high on electoral political engagement if they reported voting in most or all Presidential and midterm elections; medium if they reported voting in most Presidential elections but not otherwise (or otherwise voting only every four years or so), and low if they reported voting rarely or not at all. Even among this generally low-income and less-educated group of interviewees, differences in electoral political engagement were associated with income, education, age and gender: low-involvement respondents tended to be younger (mean age of 37, while high-electoral-participation respondents had an average age of 50), were less likely to have attended any college, and were most likely to be in the lowest-income group.



In what follows, we introduce you to some of our interviewees across electoral involvement levels, then discuss the differences and similarities between them. Across all our Black interviewees, there were a lot of commonalities in how people talked and felt about politics, whether or not they reported voting regularly. Beginning with those in the middle of the spectrum of electoral engagement, we demonstrate a consistent and widespread cynicism with the state of politics, the government, and the electoral system. Within such cynicism, some voters narrate grappling with the choice to vote. Their stories reveal the reasons why some drop a ballot in the box, and why others stay home. We turn to outline the aspects that disengaged voters say drive their lack of engagement with electoral politics. Disillusionment, dissatisfaction, and distrust texture the relationship between disengaged Black voters and electoral politics. Our interviews illustrate how cynicism and disillusionment are tied to propensity to vote; potential voters with more cynical views on numerous facets of politics, from politicians to distrust in the electoral process are less likely to turn out. They feel they don't matter, and neither does their vote.

We then consider the highly engaged voters. What drives them to the polls includes deep rooted optimism that there could be change, in some way in the future. These voters speak of historical and familial duty and optimism, as well as persistent disillusionment. Even when stating this disillusionment with the current political order, many highly engaged voters discuss how voting is an opportunity to create change. The political efficacy of Black voters is, in part, tied to being more likely to feel their interests, needs, and desires matter to the government. Without feeling they matter, their drive to vote is lower.

Finally, we turn to what Black voters say would increase their participation. Rather than discuss barriers as paramount to their experience voting, Black voters in Pennsylvania speak about better candidates and witnessing change in their communities and lives as critical to increasing their

engagement. We also wish to speak to a critical concern about the widespread cynicism throughout this voting bloc and the impact such cynicism has to apathetic voters and the racial turnout gap. We end with a discussion of possible interventions and avenues to speak to disengaged Black voters with their perceptions in mind.

John: Tensions and Contradictions of Electoral Engagement

John, a 27-year-old Black man with medium electoral participation, shared the views of most of our interviewees across engagement levels. At the time of the interview in 2018, he was working several gig jobs and considering going back to school after previously receiving his associate's degree. He did not vote in the first national election he was old enough to vote in because he was living abroad. He lamented how the first election he was able to vote in when he returned home, the 2016 election, was a disappointment because he did not want to vote due to his lack of excitement for either candidate. He voted because, "I guess I just felt like I needed to do my part." John attributed this belief to stories his mother told of his grandfather and great-grandfather who could not vote in Mississippi. These stories lead him to believe that he should "try to have [his] voice be heard." While John discusses the historical and familial reasons for participating in electoral politics as well as feeling as though he needed to do his part, he had only voted twice at the time of the interview. His present grappling with the electoral system is emblematic of the tensions less engaged Black voters experience. While he extensively details the lack of change in his life, he feels compelled to participate in the electoral process due to a historical and familial duty.

Duty was not enough to initially drive John to the polls. Throughout the rest of the interview he discussed why he and others choose not to not engage. He told us:

I see that a lot of people that I know are just like, 'I'm always going to be poor or I'm always gonna be treated like this way as a minority. So it's like, whatever happens that's not necessarily going to change my situation. [...] I feel like those people are justified in their feelings and I'm not mad at them for not voting. I really feel similarly to the way they do.

He described the feeling many other interviewees did, that their participation in electoral politics or voting would not create change in their daily lives. He expressed a shared disillusionment with the efficacy of voting, while also acknowledging the importance of paying attention to and participating in local elections. He noted a palpable feeling of anxiety regarding not voting and an important issue being defunded, such as Medicare, due to a lack of votes. His internal struggle with electoral participation reveals a double awareness many low-income and working Black voters have: that the system is deeply flawed, but sometimes they must participate anyway. Saying he might vote in one sentence, and then expressing his disillusionment in another John continued: “And that’s pretty weird because people are like, ‘It’s, it’s your duty to vote and stuff like that. But it’s like... no, a lot of times things don’t change even if you do vote. Or, sometimes you do vote and things are the same for life.”

For John and other interviewees, the pessimism related to participating in electoral politics was directly derived from a lack of substantive change in their own lives and the lives of those around them., playing a central role in their decisions to head to the polls or abstain. They were not alone in these sentiments, and we found that many disengaged Black voters discuss feeling disillusioned, apathetic, and unmotivated to electorally participate — especially in presidential elections — due to the lack of change in their lives. Disengaged Black voters discuss a clear tension between being keenly aware of pressing issues, while simultaneously feeling as though their vote will not have an impact and the political system does not represent their desires, interests, or needs.

The Disengaged: Disillusionment, Dissatisfaction, and Distrust - Matthew & Alex

Members of our team met with Matthew at a Starbucks in Philadelphia. Matthew was Black, 51, and worked in security. He was born in Philadelphia, but as a child moved to New Jersey, and returned to the city almost a decade ago. He earned between \$15,000-\$25,000/a year working his

security job, and previously obtained an associate degree. Throughout the interview he animatedly discussed the book he was working on about his life. He talked with passion about the criminal legal system, and the destitute conditions at Montgomery County and the Curran Fromhold Correctional Facility (a jail located in Philadelphia). Some years before he had spent four months in the Montgomery County Facility. In his free time, he likes to play chess and read. After he was asked about his reaction to politics the immediate response was negative and that politics was a game, and that once people became involved in politics they transformed, “it just seems like the good guys turn bad and the bad guys turn worse.” Throughout his interview, a clear narrative of a lack of faith in politics, politicians, and the electoral system became apparent.

When asked if he was registered to vote, Matthew responded, “Yeah, I’ve registered. But I never went.” He had not voted since 1996, when he had cast his ballot for Bill Clinton. Despite not participating in electoral politics for over twenty years, he had a keen political awareness and cited specific aspects of national presidential issues since the Clinton years, including barriers to Barack Obama’s ability to advance his agenda in Congress. While explaining his decision to refrain from voting, he said, “It gets to the point where you say, ‘Well my vote don’t matter anyway.’ [...] that’s what I’ve been feeling for the last twenty years.” The cynical attitude he obtained regarding the electoral system was not due to barriers being placed where he could not exercise his ability to vote, but rather the lack of progress he observed within the political sphere.

Matthew’s lack of participation in electoral politics did not preclude his involvement in other forms of political activity. He described attending protests regarding former Mayor Michael Nutter closing libraries in Philadelphia and picketing in front of Rudy Giuliani’s home while living in New York City. Additionally, he was highly politically aware, referencing several pertinent local and national issues such as affordable housing, homelessness, and access to government service centers, such as libraries.

Alex, a fifty-year-old Black man from Pittsburgh, was similarly disinterested in electoral politics. He'd lived in Pittsburgh the majority of his life, with a short stint on the West Coast. He typically worked in healthcare or security, and had a high school diploma. Throughout the interview he vividly described Pittsburgh in the 1970s and reflected on the difference in city dance club life over the decades. While talking about the changes in club culture, he lamented the impact that gun violence, gentrification, and wealth disparities had within the city. He described how he slowly became politically aware while growing up and that politics was not discussed in his home, though his parents voted often. Alex revealed,

Alex: I'm going to be honest, I don't think I have. And that's shame on me, but I don't think I've ever voted. Really. Like I said, for me personally, I just didn't see any. I'm like, okay, so put him in office. He just said what he knows you want to hear. I'm like, and never really... I never saw any change. So I'm like...

Interviewer: You don't see any point in voting?

A: Yeah, because I'm like, I must still be making the same money, still struggling. And, you know, so I'm like, none of these folks gets it. They don't care.

Alex offers a multi-layered critique of the electoral system. He believes that no candidate or politician in office would bring about substantial change to his life. Voting was meaningless. While he struggled, politicians did not care about him. When asked about if there was any way he could meaningfully engage in politics he said, "I just think it's all hooey. Tell you what you want to hear so you can vote them in, and maybe they might make little changes. But I used to always wonder, like, 'Okay, so what does the president... Like what changes?'"

His disillusionment ran deep and was based on his perception that changes in political leadership, especially at the national level, do not translate into material changes for Alex, or those like him. As a dishwasher at a local restaurant he made under \$15,000 a year. When Alex was interviewed in 2022, the minimum wage in Pennsylvania had been \$7.25 since 2009. Alex had

protested the lack of increase in the minimum wage, which had only been raised the year after his interview, in 2023 (to increase to \$15/an hour by 2026). Although politicians regularly promise to make people’s lives better, Alex had not seen any changes that mattered to him at the time of his interview.

Alex’s frustrations with the pandemic-era government were primarily economic as well. He discussed the inequity in stimulus payments for business owners compared to low-income individuals; there was so much more money available to businesses than to people, like himself, who were truly struggling. His critique of a lack of change was discussed squarely in economic terms; he did, however, describe Pittsburgh as primarily socially conservative, but the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people publicly had increased. His view of the lack of change was economic in nature, and his lack of voting derived from economic cynicism.

Disillusionment, Dissatisfaction, Distrust

Many low-income and working-class Black people across the electoral spectrum felt as though their opinions were not important to the government. Not only does the government not represent their interests, but it also does not care what they think. They do not believe that their voices make a difference to the government, and are disillusioned with the prospect of changing the government through their electoral participation or voice. During our first pass coding of our interviews, lab members highlighted any quotes where interviewees expressed the sentiment that “I don’t matter” to politics or politicians. The theme was present in 61% of interviews with Black interviewees, who described feeling as though their lives, votes, and opinions do not matter to the American government. This sentiment extended across the electorally engaged spectrum.

Table 1: “I don’t matter”

Participant	Electoral Participation	Quote
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Marisa	Low	“To the government, no. I think they want you to believe that [your opinion matters]. But I don’t think it really does.”
Jonathon	Low	“[Voting] ain’t going to do nothing for me, personally.”
Sam	High	“I think my vote counts because it is a vote, but my opinion is something different.”
Jennifer	High	Interviewer - “Do you feel like your opinions about politics are something that people in charge are paying attention to or interested in?” “My opinions? No. No.”

Another electoral critique discussed by disengaged voters was that voting accomplished nothing and that the system was rigged against their interests. There was a deep sense of distrust in the electoral process, with feelings that participation could not materially change their circumstances. Potential voters described the electoral system as “predetermined,” “staged,” and incapable of producing change. Many did not feel as though the electoral sphere was the correct arena to advocate or seek change to their lives. Over 75% of our respondents expressed some degree of cynicism or pessimism about the possibility for electoral politics to affect changes in their lives.

Table 2 Voting Does Nothing & The System is Rigged

Participant	Electoral Participation	Quote
Jordan	Low	“Voting to me?... we just don’t count or maybe something wrong with the system. It just seems...predetermined”
Thomas	Low	“They gonna elect who they want to elect and we really don’t have a say-so.” “...it don’t matter what you vote. Right. They already have their agenda set.”
Marisa	Low	“I don’t think that it matters... Basically they put in there who they want to put in there.”
Simon	Low	“...every vote should matter... the whole thing is staged... I think the media and programming is more influential in determining...who’s in power than...whether or not your vote.”
Tabatha	Low	“I don’t think my vote can change anything.”

Disengaged Black voters discuss clear frustrations and tension with the current electoral process, voting system, and government. They are keenly aware of issues in their communities and have seen a lack of progress or change over recent years, leading many to no longer participate electorally. Furthermore, many feel a deep disillusionment, dissatisfaction, and distrust in a system that, at least in theory, is meant to serve them. Their lack of participation was not discussed in terms of electoral barriers or a lack of political awareness, but rather marked by deeply cynical feelings about the efficacy of the electoral process and the government’s propensity to change.

Table 3: Electoral Participation, Cynicism, and “I don’t matter”

Electoral Participation	Percent expressing cynicism or pessimism	Percent saying their views or their vote don’t matter
Low	89%	72%
Medium	83%	57%
High	66%	58%

The Highly Engaged Voters: Duty, Optimism, and Disillusionment - Ibrahim and Violet

Narratives of mistrust in the political system did not only extend to those who abstained from electoral politics. Many highly engaged voters, those voting at least every two years, also held feelings of disillusionment and not mattering to politicians and the government.

A member of our interviewing team met Violet, a 49-year-old Black woman, at a coffee shop in Center City Philadelphia in 2019. She was from North Philadelphia where she’s lived her entire life and was not presently employed, making under \$15,000 per year. She was not very involved in neighborhood organizations and only occasionally volunteered. She’d attended protests and rallies when she was younger, but hadn’t in recent years. To her, politics meant a chance to improve and

create a better society. Similar to the majority of our Black interviewees, Violet had knowledge about various political issues, even though she considered herself less aware than the average person.

Awareness aside, Violet always votes. She knew about the upcoming local elections for mayor and various offices in Philadelphia the following November and discussed voting in the latest midterm and presidential elections. Her propensity to vote, however, did not negate the feelings of disillusionment with the electoral system she felt,

Interviewer: Do you feel the government adequately represents you and your interests?

Violet: No.

I: Why do you think so?

V: I just think, there's a billion other people so just me ... it all doesn't really matter.

Unlike several other interviewees, Violet's belief that her individual interests are not represented are about the relative importance of her vote amidst so many other voters, rather than feeling that the American electoral system created a structural reason for her vote and opinion not to be represented.

Ibrahim met a member of our team at a library. Presently homeless due to a failed business venture, Ibrahim, a 50-year-old certified chef, began his interview by describing politics as a deeply personal endeavor. Throughout his life, he has dealt with different periods of homelessness and consistently relies on government support and aid to survive. When articulating the current state of politics, he drew on historical details about Philadelphia and displayed his wealth of knowledge on local and national pressing issues. When asked the same question as Violet regarding the government representing his interests he replied, "Never have. Since I've been a kid, [they] never have." Once again, the rhetoric of the government not representing the interests of Black voters returned.

Ibrahim's deep cynicism was present throughout his interview. Later, he expressed his take on the future of the American political system stating, "There's nothing no one can do about [the design of the political system], they never going to change it. You can change Democrats and Republicans all you want. But it's only this one way." Despite his deep cynicism about the lack of change possible to the structure of the political system, he continues to vote. Why? His children. Diametrically opposed to his previous cynical sentiments about the propensity for change in the American electoral system, Ibrahim continues to vote because it could help his children and change this system. How does he reconcile these two fundamentally different views on the electoral system? He says he views them as two different things, separating his optimism for the future and involvement in changing the system from his disgruntled feelings about the present state of the political system. Such dual thinking is representative of many Black interviewees who noted important issues with the current structure of the electoral system, politics, politicians, and the government, but also felt an enduring optimism and duty to participate through voting that continually drove them to the polls.

Highly engaged voters often discussed voting as worth the amount of effort it takes to vote. Kimber, a thirty-six year old West Philly resident, illustrated how she conceived of participation through voting,

So I think of votes like... like drops of rain in a bucket. And so, my vote goes towards filling that bucket, right? Unless there's like gerrymandering which is like poking holes in the bucket. [laughs] And um I think that that's important, because if I was like, "Oh, it's just like one drop and the bucket will get full anyway, like one drop isn't going to make a difference." But I do understand if I'm taking that attitude and the person to the left and the right of me takes that attitude, and the person to the left—then the bucket's never going to get filled.

The drops in the bucket metaphor is emblematic of how many engaged Black voters believed that some participation might improve their community or allow their voice to be heard. These voters felt that voting provides an opportunity for change, even if change has yet to

materialize. There is a striking undercurrent of optimism within such voters, whose participation is marked by a belief that voting is an opportunity to change the system or policies, even if it does not always result in substantive change.

Table 4: Voting is Worth the Effort

Participant	Electoral Participation	Quote
Byron	High	“Sometimes I can’t take [issues] into my own hands; I don’t have superpowers... But I can do other things (discusses voting and political protests).” “Your vote counts because if you see the negativity of somebody and then you feel like they’re not progressing as they’re supposed to be, your vote can send this person out of office.”
Oliver	High	“It shows the numbers. How people’s... it shows the numbers.” “[Voting] means expressing myself... Letting people know who I feel one way or the other.”
Kimber	High	“I think of votes like drops of rain in a bucket. And so, my vote goes toward filling that bucket, right?”
Harrison	High	“[Voting is] your way to be accounted for, to speak up. If you don’t vote, you can’t complain about anything that happens.”
Layla	High	“...every vote matters. It’s good to know that you can make a change.” “It’s a free chance to have your voice heard.”
Sam	High	“Even if whoever win do win, at least you tried. You tried your best.”
Jayla	High	“[Voting is] one step closer to making a community better.”

Highly engaged voters are less likely to express to cynicism and disillusionment, instead they repeatedly discussed wanting to do something to change the system. Many viewed the electoral process as an opportunity to do just that. They believe that their votes matter and that they have the propensity to make change. Often, these feelings accompany similar feelings of disillusionment, dissatisfaction, and distrust that disengaged voters had. Yet, there are important distinctions in the outlooks and beliefs of disengaged and engaged Black voters. Similar socio-economic circumstances create different responses to perceived government abandonment and deeply rooted cynicism.

If it's all Hooley, Why Do Some Participate?

Disengaged voters like Matthew and Alex chose not to vote in response to their disempowerment, while Violet and Ibrahim remained avid voters. All had at least a general awareness of the electoral system and pressing political issues, but their belief that things don't change led to different avenues of political participation. For instance, both Sam — a highly engaged voter — and Matthew believe there are some chances that change will not materialize even if you go to the polls. Matthew discussed how his brother felt the same way about politics that he did which leads them both to not engage electorally,

He says that you're screwed if you do and screwed if you don't. It don't matter. They — they're going to do — you know.... He feels the same way I see it, that my vote don't matter either. If I go vote, well, what the hell, man? It ain't going to do nothing for me, personally.

Sam, also expressing that voting might not produce a wanted outcome has a different perspective,

It's part of being part of something. You gotta be part of something by doing something, like, you're not just sitting back saying, "Oh well, whoever wins, wins." You know? Even if whoever win do win, at least you tried. You tried your best.

There are myriad views about the efficacy of voting and participating electorally. Sam and Matthew feel unease about the electoral system working, but Sam has chosen to engage regardless. This difference illuminates a key reason why some people turn out to vote, and others do not. Our preliminary findings suggest the difference between highly engaged Black voters in Pennsylvania and disengaged voters is housed in optimism for the future, feeling a need to do *something*, and lingering feelings of historical and/or familial duty.

Optimism

In terms of optimism, of the twenty-nine interviews coded as describing an aspect of politics optimistically, the majority (16/29) had high electoral participation, with the most of the rest having

medium electoral participation (8/29). Optimism was described in myriad ways. Edward, a fifty-eight-year-old Black man interviewed in 2022, held a similar dualistic belief to Ibrahim, saying in the same breath, “Oh okay, maybe politics really is dirty, but I also know how important it is. You know, when they make different changes in the government and they tap into your lives.” Edward expresses both the difficult and painful aspect of politics, but clings to politics actually enacted and working in people’s lives. He believes in the accomplishments of past presidents, and is “even hopeful for our new president.” While the government is corrupt and has not been working for him, he still is optimistic for better politicians improving the system in the future. Other people, like Ibrahim, turned to children as part of their optimistic vision of the future. Amira, a twenty-seven-year-old Black woman, laid her hope in young people, saying, “the future is the youth.”

Disengaged voters express deep cynicism compared to engaged voters’ optimism. Edmond, a disengaged independent, stated “It don’t matter what you vote. Right. They already have their agenda set.” His lack of optimism prevents his participation. Another disengaged voter, Jareel, held a similar belief that voting could not lead to substantive change,

If you're a minority, it's going to seem like it's not going to count. But if you just power to the vote and it seems like the right group gets the right, it helps the right group. Right. But if you're a minority it's, it's not gonna make a difference because either way it seems like we were just don't count or do maybe something wrong with the system. It just seems like it's just one side or not one sided, but it's like, it's predetermined.

Without optimism, disengaged voters feel their time and energy would be wasted by involving themselves with electoral politics. Responses like this demonstrate that removing barriers to voting will likely not change turnout for working-class Black Americans who don’t believe their vote will make a difference. There is no point trying, if it won’t make a difference.

Violet offered a short line of hope within the electoral process while describing what politics was, “I think a chance to better the society.” Her description demonstrates how she views voting as an opportunity to change the system in some way, even if it does not improve things, it is a chance.

Optimism about the state of the American political system is often housed and discussed in terms of future potentials and possibilities, rather than the current shape of the system.

Table 5: Optimism and Engagement

Participant	Electoral Participation	Quote
Ibrahim	High(est)	Interviewer - "If enough people voted, the government would change?" "I expect for it to change and for - it's for the kids... Of course I am going to vote, because I have kids, of course...it was imperative that I had to vote because I wanted a better education for my kids."
Oliver	High(est)	Interviewer - "Do you feel that the government adequately represents you and your interests?" "Yes. More and more... I think [politics] is good. I think they're starting to become aware of all the individual people, instead of big business, pharmaceuticals...the little man...is where the real power is going to come from."
Tabatha	Low	Interviewer - "I was wondering why you think some people vote. What makes a person want to go vote?" "Because they have hope."

Voting is Something

Another persistent theme for highly electorally voters was a feeling that any contribution they could make was important and necessary, even if it was to demonstrate the importance of voting (and even if it did not lead to substantive change). As previously mentioned in the section on highly engaged voters, those who vote in elections often feel it is the least they can do to make a difference. Ellis, a highly engaged voter from Northwest Philly, discussed the importance of going to vote as setting an example for his children. He discussed how his great uncle told him,

[My uncle told me] "The only power we can have is voting power." he said, "If you vote, you might not think it counts, but it do." You know what I mean? But... what really, I think what really pushed me over the edge, edge to go vote, was seeing my kids. They weren't understanding it, you know? So I was all—I know you have to lead by example, you know? [chuckles] So I wanted my kids to do it, and all my kids, when they get to eighteen, they automatically go and register to vote.

His contribution, described as part of his power within the realm of voting, was squarely in the realm of voting to show his children how important voting is. Even if it does not manifest into substantive change, he can at least show his children it is important and maybe his vote will count. Voting is one strategy of many to effect change, and several highly engaged Black voters believed that anything they could do would be beneficial to themselves or those around them. Layla offered a descriptive metaphor for how change can occur through engagement with politics,

You have to want the change... It's like, if you knock over a brick. You can leave the brick there or you can stand it back up again and watch it. You could leave it there as one brick or you could pick it up and build a house with it. Do you want to be the brick that just sits there and does nothing, or do you want to help build something forever.

Her house building could be accomplished through engagement in various forms, with electoral engagement being one way that she can build the house. By voting, she offers another opportunity to change her society and community, which Layla hopes will produce change down the line. As the quotes in Table 6 below illustrate, sometimes voting feels like something that will manifest, when people go to the polls they can feel like they are part of a larger effort to change things or actually impact policy.

Table6: Voting as Doing Your Part

Participant	Electoral Participation	Quote
John	Medium	"I don't want to be like, oh no, Medicaid is like getting defunded cause I didn't vote and now, like, I'm screwed, I don't know what to do."
Simon	Low	"...even though it might not make a difference, I should say I did something."
Charlie	Low	"...if [the elected official does] a good job and I was a part of it, then yes, that would be nice."
Grace	High	"We all stood at the polling booths and we took pictures and were very happy about voting for the first black person who could had a big old chance to be president. We felt really good about that. That was pride."

Duty

As noted with John, a sense of duty to participate, both historical and familial, is often involved in Black voters' decision to vote. Many Black voters across the electoral engagement spectrum discussed feeling both historical and familial duty to vote, with thirty-seven Black interviewees invoking a sense of duty while discussing politics. Black voters do not invoke concepts of duty more than other racial groups, but rather talk about the shape of duty differently. Duty is experienced in familial stories and associations with voting as something acquired historically, rather than attachments to civic duty (which still sometimes appears). Thus, a tension emerges when voters that are less engaged feel the pull of historical and familial duty while simultaneously being disillusioned with the electoral system. A deep sense of duty is what drives some medium engaged voters, like John, over the line and potentially enables them to be more likely to vote.

Table7: Duty to Vote

Participant	Electoral Participation	Quote
John	Medium	"My grandfather or great-grandfather couldn't vote... when I was thinking about that in this last election... I felt like maybe I should try to have my voice be heard."
Simon	Low	"[Voting is] something you should take advantage of...everybody doesn't have that right, and so you shouldn't let it go to waste." "I don't really vote because I feel like it's going to influence anything but just...the duty and privilege of voting."
Violet	High	"The fact that women couldn't vote for years. It's a good thing that we can vote now."
Ellen	High	"...this is what my ancestors died for...if I was one of the slaves and I died for the whole voting thing, if you didn't vote, I might haunt you... This is what people get nailed to the cross for."
Jennifer	High	"I just vote. I don't know if it made a difference or not, but just, as a citizen, I just vote." "I just go do my duty; I vote."

Increasing Involvement: Strategies Voters Offer to Increase Participation

Along with questions about their current participation in politics, interviewees were also asked to speculate what might increase their or others participation in politics, both broadly and electorally. Almost no one told us that it was too difficult to vote; in fact, when we asked about access to voting, most said it was – or would be – quite easy.

Table 8: Ease of Voting

Participant	Electoral Participation	Quote
Michael	Low	“I’m registered to vote and everything, it’s literally [laughing] like a straight ride from my house to the voting booths, if I wanted to vote it would be very easy to vote.”
John	Medium	Interviewer - “So, talking more directly about voting, when you went, or when you want to vote, is it fairly easy for you to go and vote? “Absolutely, I must say that, they made it much easier to vote, you know, making you aware of where you need to go vote, if you need help voting, you know, they’re always giving you information before you go, here’s what this is, even a diagram of the letters and stuff, so its not really hard at all and for like seniors and stuff, you see them up in the seniors if you need a ride to get there, we’ll come and get you, so, that’s great.”
Frances	High	Interviewer - “When you wanted to vote were you able to do so?” “It was easy, yeah. Cause they have people volunteering telling people how to get their card out. I just go to the polls, walk there.”

Black people we spoke with said they need to see change in the government and their lives to increase their participation. They discuss their future selves as potentially engaging, only if they witness substantive change in their communities and current efficiency of the government. The responses range from seeing change that produces hope, to the literal sense of change in important policy matters, to change in the system of governance. Change is conceived broadly, from improvement in the education system to improving the function of government, but remains an important theme to what Black voters believe would drive them to the polls.

Table 9: The Need for Change

Participant	Electoral Participation	Quote
Charlotte	Medium	[When asked what would get her interested in participating in politics] “To be involved in something that I feel is meaning, um, adds meaning to life. Like, like I say, more programs for the children and cities and um, undeveloped areas to give them things to do, to give them some hope.”
Frances	High	[When asked in what situation she’d start voting] B: “If I see a change.” I: “What kind of change?” B: If the people that you go vote for, and the people that you choose to vote go and do what they’re elected to do. And I see some changes in unemployment, homelessness, see some, not drastic changes—because it takes time for drastic change—but at least start a format right or show something... the change, and you beginning to see the change. Maybe I’ll reconsider.
Ethan	Medium	[When asked what would get him interested in participating more in politics] “I would say seeing real change, but I can't even pinpoint something that's like, oh, wow, if they did this, I'd be all on board. I can't even pinpoint a particular area. But I don't know, I just kind of need to see something. Being brought to the forefront. It actually being changed and that change is pushed nationwide or whatever, worldwide, whatever.”
Simon	Low	[When asked what would get him more interested in politics and voting] “I think a drastic revolution in the way, you know, the system is run. Uh, if I really felt that, you know, we lived in a, you know, open front, like, you know, honest, everything exposed kind of country that it’s supposed to be, not, you know, people behind the scenes and pulling the strings and stuff like that, then I’ll probably would be more interested.”
Sam	Medium	[When asked what would get him more interested in politics] “Other than the local level, me getting involved at the state or federal level, I—people are just too nutty. I think you need a whole new society.”

Some respondents were more specific and noted they would like to see a change in the kind and effective quality of elected officials. Tabatha, who admitted she was not very involved in electoral politics, stated that seeing “someone who enters into the government and tries to fulfill what he promised he or she will do when she gets there, maybe I can consider voting for someone.

Maybe.” She wants candidates that produce tangible results, and then she would consider engaging with the electoral system. Part of the distrust that some Black voters have in the system can be attributed to politicians, especially their not fulfilling election promises. They did not talk about the identity of the politicians as being non-representative, but rather an underlying sentiment that the government broadly did not care about their interests.

Emerging Themes

Difference in Electoral Versus Community and Local Engagement

It is important to note that a lack of electoral participation does not correlate with a lack of participation in other forms of political activity, even as feelings of disillusionment may bleed into other forms of participation. We found that disengagement from electoral politics did *not* necessarily mean a lack of community engagement nor a lack of engagement in activism/organizing for our Black interviewees. In fact, disengaged Black voters ranked across the community engagement level, with two participating at high levels despite their lack of involvement in electoral arenas.

Notably, several voters across the electoral engagement spectrum noted the important difference of participation and voting in local electors versus national elections. The majority of interviewees were involved in their community at least to the point of staying up to date with local issues, even if their participation was infrequent. The attention to local politics is notable, and reveals an important distinction in how Black voters' participation must be considered beyond strict emphasis on voting. Phillip, who ranked medium on electoral engagement, discussed the importance of being involved in his local community and related it to historical participation in politics. He expressed why being in community was important to him,

Absolutely, absolutely it matters, just as much as Martin Luther King’s opinion about politics mattered. It mattered just as much as Malcolm X’s opinion about politics mattered. And

anyone else that had a voice, and that was vocal, and that were organizers. Me being a community organizer myself, and wanting to see some change in my neighborhoods, and in my community, and see the advancement of my people. Yes.

Beyond electoral politics, he ranked high in community engagement and activism and organizing. While he was less enthusiastic about electoral politics, his deep commitment to community based politics displays how many potential voters different levels of politics. While national-level electoral politics feels abstract and distant and often irrelevant, being part of making a difference in his community was accessible and meaningful.

Discussion/Conclusion

In a post-Civil Rights political context, Black people have consistently and overwhelmingly voted for Democratic candidates at the national level. This is a concept that Frymer (2011) refers to as vote capture, the idea that a group is “captured” as a voting block. Because Black voters overwhelmingly vote for the Democratic party at a national level, the Democratic party has little incentive to work hard for their votes, and many see them as failing to create a coherent message to turn out Black voters. Instead, according to Frymer, the Democratic party, in a post-Reagan era, focused many of their resources and campaigning on capturing the “median” or key swing voter - generally conceptualized as white, independent, middle class voters.

Black apathy is a critical concern for those interested in increasing turnout on election day. Through perpetual disillusionment, many Black voters feel as though their voice, their vote does not matter to the electoral process because they do not see change in their lives. From their view, their interests, needs, and desires remain underrepresented and under considered within the elected government.

For Black Americans like John—who vote out of a sense of familial and historical duty but are disillusioned and cynical—when will the lack of material change drive them toward the low level of engagement of someone like Matthew, who has sat out of elections for the last 27 years? Critically important for understanding how to increase electoral involvement for Black voters is the tension between historical, often familial, duty and the lack of substantial change in their socio-economic status or situations. When considering how to increase the political efficacy of the disengaged low-income and working-class Black voter, voter engagement is tied to the impact elections have, and how people's lives improve. The pervasive sense of cynicism that many Black voters feel corresponds with their levels of engagement. With this insight, the method of voter outreach to Black voters must be understood with this cynicism in mind.

Increasing turnout of Black voters emerges as a project that extends beyond the accessibility of the polls on election day. Many Black voters feel as though the electoral process and the government does not represent their interests or care about their opinions and needs. As such, electoral participation is impacted by wholly negative associations with the efficacy of voting and the ability for voting to be a mechanism that produces change. Disenchantment with the electoral system represents a greater dissatisfaction with how life, especially economic life, has changed without improving in recent decades. For some potential Black voters, this drives a lack of political engagement in any political sphere, not just electoral engagement; others disavow the electoral process as effective for producing change and turn to other forms of political engagement, and some merely vote anyways. There are a myriad ways that disillusionment, distrust, and dissatisfaction manifest, but these sentiments must be addressed in attempts to close the voter turnout gap.

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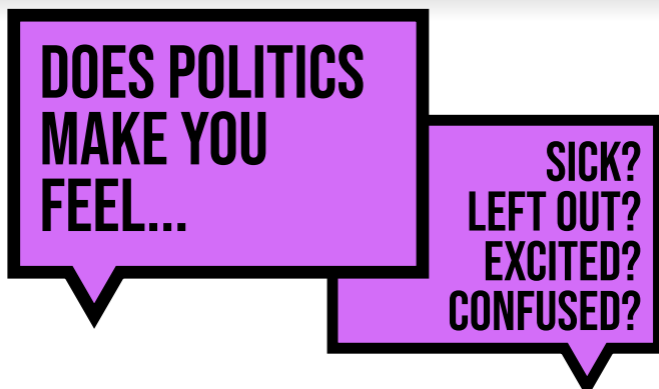
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Appendix 1: flyers



TELL US HOW YOU FEEL GET \$20 CASH

We're looking to interview all Pennsylvanians 18+ without a 4-year college degree OR making under \$45,000/year are eligible

to schedule your interview:

<https://bit.ly/PEPLsignup>

text or call: (484) 985-9555

email: PEPLInterviews@gmail.com



***all interviews are confidential/anonymous**



Politics and Equal Participation Lab
Swarthmore College IRB Study #14-15-101

Community Public Schools Immigration

WANT TO
GET PAID TO
SHARE YOUR
OPINIONS?

Government
Voting Police
Pandemic

COME TALK
TO US!

Welfare Taxes Politics
Guns Environment Healthcare
Jobs Military

TELL US HOW YOU FEEL + GET \$20 CASH

We're looking to interview all Pennsylvanians 18+
without a 4-year college degree
OR making under \$45,000/year are eligible

to schedule your interview:

<https://bit.ly/PEPLsignup>

text or call: (484) 985-9555

email: PEPLInterviews@gmail.com



SCAN ME

***all interviews are confidential/anonymous**



Politics and Equal Participation Lab
Swarthmore College IRB Study #14-15-101

Appendix 2: Full interview guide

(lighter font indicates sections that were optional depending on time)

Politics and Equal Participation Interview Guide (2022-2023)

Introduction

Hi **[Participant's Name]**. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today. *(Consent form, audio recording, voluntary)* I wanted to double check that you received the consent form and had a chance to look over it? **(if yes, continue, if no, provide consent form)**. I'd like to audio record this interview -if that's OK. The recording will only stay within the research group; and nothing you say will ever be publicly linked to your name/everything is confidential and anonymous. This interview is completely voluntary, so if at any point you want to stop the interview you can do so - just let me know. **(turn on recorder)**

(Interviewer intro) Great, so thank you again for finding the time and for doing this interview. [Lead interviewer] My name is _____, and I'm a **(student/recent graduate/community member)** working on this project for the summer **(some other small-talk-y piece of info about you)**. [2nd interviewer also introduce themselves and explain the role of the two interviewers] [Lead interviewer] Before we get into it, do you have any questions for me?

(No wrong answers/explain what you're doing) OK, so I'm going to ask you a bunch of questions, and there are no wrong answers, I really just want to understand who you are and where you're coming from. If you're not sure what I'm trying to get at, feel free to ask! It's not a test and when we're done you get the \$20/compensation no matter what your answers are.

(Outline/overview - goal = describe what we're doing; - make sure they get that we really want to know about their whole lives, not just politics narrowly) Before we start I wanted to give you a brief outline of what we'll be talking about today – we'll start by getting to know you a bit more and asking about your work and family, then ask about your experiences with politics, your views, and your take on voting. [long version]

- First we're going to ask you about yourself, your family, your life the last couple of years
- Then spend some time talking about your experiences with politics [by which we mean anything to do with government, community groups...] growing up,
- then we'll talk a bit about what you think about politics more broadly today.
- In the next part we'll discuss how you partake in politics, and how politics shows up in your life more generally.
- Finally we'll end with discussing voting practices.

We want to know who you are and how you think about the world, and then how that might relate to politics.

(Prompt some things we're looking for when we say politics - if needed for clarity/comfort say something like this; could also say something shorter) Overall we're interested in hearing your thoughts and opinions on politics in general, they can be things on political parties, campaigns, elections, or policies, as well as more particular things, like opinions on specific presidents, things you heard growing up, political ads, agencies that affect you, such as social security, SNAP, or public schools (to name a few). We want to hear your feelings about local politics, things like school districts, and roads; state politics, stuff like governor/senator races, and state parks; and national politics, like the presidential race, and organizing/protests going on around the country at this very minute.

[ask 2nd interviewer if they missed anything]

[ask interviewee if they have any questions before starting]

Entree

1. To start, can you tell me a little about yourself? *[Below are follow up questions to elicit more information / help build rapport - Don't have to ask every one; ALSO if one of these leads into one of the next questions, go ahead and ask that question]*
 - a. Where do you call home/where are you from? What was it like growing up/living there?
 - i. Can you tell me a bit about your family when you were growing up?
 - ii. What did your parents do for work?
 - b. Can you tell me a bit about your family now?
 - i. If kids—in public school?
 - ii. Is anyone in the military?
 - c. Are you working right now? What kind of work do you do (or did you do in the past)?
 - i. *Could follow up with - how's that been affected by the pandemic?*
 - d. Are you a part of any groups or organizations? Churches, sports leagues, committees, etc.?
 - e. What are some things you like to do with friends or family? What do you like to do in your free time?
 - f. [ask about a local thing you might share if possible]
 - g. What kinds of things do you like to watch on TV, or look at online, or do for entertainment?
2. What are some things about your neighborhood/city/school that could be better or that you want to see changed?
3. If you feel comfortable, can you tell me about what the last couple years of the pandemic have been like for you?
 - a. Did you lose work?
4. How do you feel about how politicians/government have handled things? [might need reassurance that they don't have *political* opinion, but how did things work for you?]
 - a. Mask mandates?
 - b. Stimulus checks/child tax credit?
 - c. closures/lockdowns
 - d. schools

Growing up, Family, and Schooling:

I want to transition to hear a little bit about how politics showed up when you were growing up.

5. Can you tell me about your first memory of politics (anything to do with a politician, a campaign, a protest....)
 - a. When do you first remember paying attention/noticing?
 - b. (If necessary, emphasize that we mean politics broadly, it might be marches, it might be local organizing, it might be discussing social issues...)
6. Growing up, did your family have any opinions about a president or other politician? Or a take on something that was wrong with their city, state, or the country?
 - a. If yes → Do you remember anything they said to you about government, voting, or politics in general?
 - b. If no → What did they think about politics in general? Why do you think that they didn't talk about it?
7. What kinds of ways was your family politically active, if any?
 - a. Do/did your parents vote?
 - b. Do you remember anything your family might have said about identifying with either of the two major parties?
 - i. If yes - When did you find out that they identify with that party?
 - c. Can you talk to me about your political views today in relation to your parents-- are they similar or different to your family's views? How so?
 - i. How did they get different? Do you think your friends or family have influenced your approach to politics?
8. Growing up, did you ever talk about politics in school?
 - a. In class, from a teacher, or more informally, like with friends?
 - b. Growing up, did any of your friends identify with either of the two major parties?
 - c. Did your school experience do anything to develop or change how you see politics?

Engaging with Politics Today:

I'd like to hear about how, if at all, you engage with politics right now:

9. So this is an interview mostly about your views on politics - when I say the word politics, what do you think of/what does it mean to you?
 - a. So... do you like to talk about political things?
 - b. *If comfortable: Continue on.*
 - c. *If not comfortable:*
 - i. That's okay, we don't have to get into anything you don't want to talk about, and remember everything will be anonymized.
 - ii. What makes the idea of politics feel uncomfortable for you?
 - iii. When you are faced with a political conversation, what is that experience like?
10. How does politics make you feel?
11. Do you talk about social issues with people around you (family, friends, co-workers, online?). [if necessary give some examples/a definition: by social issues I mean anything from rising gas & grocery prices, to your experiences with racism/sexism etc, to...]
 - a. What do your conversations tend to look like?

- i. Where do those conversations take place?
 - b. What issues do you care about personally?
 - c. Are there points you disagree on?
 - i. What happens when you disagree?
- 12. And what about talking about electoral politics (politicians, elections, etc.)?
 - a. What do your conversations tend to look like?
- 13. Have you ever donated to a political party, called a representative, attended a protest, signed a petition, or anything like that?
 - a. Can you tell me about a few of those moments, how did you get involved, what was it like, would you do it again, do you do it regularly?
- 14. Do you follow any particular TV channels, websites, or social media pages to get your news?
 - i. What do you like about them?
 - ii. What kind of posts do you see often?
- 15. Were you paying attention during the last (2020) Presidential election between Trump and Biden?
 - a. What did you make of it?
 - b. Did you vote, why or why not?
 - i. Did you feel more or less invested in this election than the 2016 election (or any previous elections)?
 - ii. Why or why not?
- 16. What about any elections this year?
 - a. Are you paying any attention/do you know anything about this year's Governor election?
 - i. (have you heard of these guys at all - it's between Josh Shapiro and Doug Mastriano)?
 - b. What about the Senate race between Fetterman and Dr Oz?
 - c. (more local/county/city races?)
 - d. Have you seen any ads, mailers, etc? What did you make of them? [*this is also a follow-up later but might make more sense here - no need to ask twice!*]
 - e. Is the amount of attention you're paying similar to your friends and coworkers? More or less?
 - i. Why do you think that is?
- 17. And have you been paying attention to any of the big political debates going on right now?
 - a. For example... I'm going to read a short list of things, when I'm done tell me if there's any you've heard of and/or want to talk about.
 - i. Debates about gun control?
 - ii. January 6th hearings?
 - iii. Roe v. Wade / Abortion restrictions?
 - iv. Climate change?
 - v. War in Ukraine?
 - vi. Trans/LGBT issues?
 - vii. Starbucks/Amazon unionization?
 - viii. Student debt cancellation?
- 18. Have you been involved with any other protests/social movements/advocacy? [For example: Black Lives Matter, Women's March, mutual aid during the Pandemic, harm reduction, labor strikes?]
- 19. Do you have opinions about any other issues? (*only ask if you didn't get much engagement from 15 & 16*) When did you start thinking about that issue?/How did this start to matter to you?

- a. Does it matter to your friends and family?
 - b. What do you think caused this to be something that you're concerned about?
 - c. What, if anything, do you do to act on that opinion/issue?
 - d. What stops you from taking action on political issues?
20. Do you think you pay more or less attention to politics than the average person?
- a. Why do you think that is?
 - b. *(if they think they're below average, ask about the above-average; but also if they think they're above-average ask about the below-average; if average probably ask about both less & more engaged)* Do you have an image of people who you think (don't) like to talk about politics or pay attention to campaigns?
 - i. Why do(n't) they do it?
 - ii. What do you make of them?
21. What was the last political thing (ad, speech, flyer) you remember seeing/hearing and what did you make of it? [for any of these, probe if it seems important to them or a big part of their political world; if they say "no" just move on]
- a. Do you ever see anything political on TV or on the Internet? [don't ask if they answered at #1]
 - i. What topics do you see brought up?
 - b. Do you ever see social media posts or ads related to voting?
 - i. Who are those posts from?
 - ii. What do you think of them?
 - c. Do you discuss/share political content on social media?
 - i. If you come across something you disagree with, do you argue?
22. Have you ever posted anything political online, or commented on anything political on social media?
- a. if so, what was that experience like for you?

Political Opinions Today:

I want to shift now to talking about what you think about politics more broadly today. [Might want to remind that all opinions, including no opinion, are OK]

23. Do you think what happens in politics affects you/matters to you?
- a. Are there any government policies or programs that affect you or matter to your life? (Examples include: the military, public schools, social security, Medicaid, veteran benefits, SNAP/food stamps, TANF/welfare, job training programs, Americorps, and federal student loans)
 - b. How do you feel about that program?
 - i. *Are there ways that program/those programs could work better?*
24. How much do you feel that the government represents you and your interests?
- a. Has that changed over time?
25. Generally, how much do you think your opinions about politics matter to people in charge?
- a. Could you make your opinions matter more?
 - b. Whose opinions matter more or less?
26. Do you feel like you have a word or name for your political views?

- a. (if they don't have an answer right away) such as a Democrat or Republican or Independent, Left or Right or Moderate, Socialist or Green... or something else? none?
 - b. [if they have a political ID] Tell me more about why - what about that group seems right for you? Or: Why do you identify as [political identity indicated]?
 - c. Has that ever changed - do you have different views/allegiances now than you did in the past?
 - d. [if no political ID] is there a label that you know of that comes close?
27. When you think of people who are [in the same party/identity as you - OR if none, the Democrats], what type of person comes to mind?
- a. What about people in [another party/identity]?
 - b. What about the politicians from [your party/identity]?
28. What do you think of politics broadly today? Is there anything that could or should be better in your community?
29. Is there a politician you like? Is there some politician you liked growing up?

Voting:

I wonder if we could talk a little bit about voting. To begin with:

30. Can you tell me about your experience with voting?
 - a. Have you ever voted?
 - b. When do you vote or not vote?
31. If you wanted to/when you want to vote, would you be able to/can you do so fairly easily?
 - a. How have you voted - mail, in person - why that way?
 - b. Do you have to wait in long lines to vote?
 - c. Do you have to take off from work to vote?
 - d. How far from your house is your polling place?
32. Has anyone ever asked you to vote? Register to vote?
 - a. Who? When? For whom? Did you?
 - b. What was that experience like?
33. Do most/many/any people you know vote regularly?
 - a. Who are they?
34. Why do you think some people vote or don't vote?
35. Would you feel comfortable sharing how you've voted with a friend or family member?
36. What does voting mean to you?
 - a. What impact do you think casting a vote has/how much do you think your vote matters?
 - b. Do you think voting is a good way to get your voice heard by politicians?
 - i. Why or why not?
37. What do you think works well, or doesn't work, about elections in the US?
 - a. Do you think elections in this country are fair?
38. Some people we've talked to have said they feel like they just don't know enough about politics to participate - how do you feel?
 - a. [if they feel like they don't know enough] What else would you want to know?
 - b. Do you know the names of the politicians who represent you (Senators, Congresspeople, mayors, city council members, etc.)? Or do you remember anyone you voted for last time you voted?

Conclusion:

Thank you so much for your time, I have just a few wrap up questions to finish us off.

39. What does it mean to you to be a part of the US

40. So you mentioned...[personalize for the interviewee] What would it take for you to get interested in participating in politics, if you aren't already, or more than you currently do? To make it easier for you to vote (if anything)?

a. What about for people like you more generally?

41. This project is generally about inequality in political participation – we have seen how privileged people are far more likely to be politically involved – why do you think that is?

42. What, if anything, could be done about the fact that [poorer people/working people/regular people/Black and Brown people/lower income people/Asian-Americans -- ideally use a group they're part of & the terminology they've used] vote less than [richer people/white people etc]

43. We've talked a lot about politics! Are we using a different definition than you would have thought before the interview?/ has this interview changed how you think about politics?

44. That was my last question. Is there anything else you would like to add related to politics, voting, or anything we talked about? Did I miss anything you think is important about how politics works, how you think about it?

Wrap-up

Thank you again for your time! [if on zoom - I can send you a \$20 compensation for your time over whatever electronic service works for you -- cashapp, venmo, paypal etc. Just put your info here: <https://forms.gle/aqFFVYafn4QhBtbR9>] [if in person give them \$20 & do the receipt]

Oh also (if it seems likely & they are themselves in our target universe) - do you know anyone else who might like to be interviewed? (especially people who aren't that politically engaged) If so, they can sign up here <https://forms.gle/NddZe6r1F4t9TeX78> or call or text (your phone number).

Appendix 3: Participation Level Coding Rubric

Electoral Participation - Measure of engagement with the electoral portions of politics including voting and work related to elections.

	Highest	High	Medium	Low
Definition	Votes in most (if not all) elections. They are additionally involved in other electoral activities such as running for/holding office, working for a campaign, canvassing /voter registration, or engagement in a political party/committee/group, etc.	Votes at least every two years.	Votes in some elections. This might be either only national or only local or only pays attention to general/presidential years.	Never or hardly ever votes. Might have voted in the past but no longer does.
Example	Lamont - "I have been following politics since I was 18 years old. I'm 55 years old now. I've been following politics for that long. I also volunteer to register people to vote."	Edward - "I exercise my right to vote all the time. I absolutely believe in exercising my right." (Cool. So, even with local elections?) "Yeah... Even if they don't win, I'm going to exercise my right."	Travis - (Did you vote in the 2020 election?) "Yes" (And what about in the 2016 election?) "No"	Joseph - "We in the streets, that (voting) ain't going to help with things."

Community Engagement - Measure of how in touch a participant is with their community. This looks at knowledge of community issues and people as well as participation in groups and organizations.

	High	Medium	Low
Definition	Regular participation in local groups such as churches or neighborhood associations and/or deep knowledge of things that are happening in the community. Less about issues deemed political and more about support and knowledge of the people in your direct community (however defined).	Think of this as middle of the road. They might stay up to date on local issues and be aware of things that are important to their community but only have surface-level knowledge. They might participate in community groups or organizations but infrequently.	Not aware of community issues or events and/or never participates. Might not mention their community directly in the interview.
Example	Lamont - volunteer at Red Cross House in West Philadelphia, works as a civics educator for youth, also volunteers at "PEC, the Dornsife Center the School District of Philadelphia"	Jarrod - part of a soccer league, used to be part of a church, but is no longer. Discusses the need to reform local tax codes.	Wydia - "I am not really a part of any community groups..." Discussion of national issues, but no local ones.

Activism / Organizing - A measure of work a participant does related to issues other than elections. This includes petitions, protests, donations to parties of mutual aid, etc.

	High	Medium	Low
Definition	Frequently attends protests, works to mobilize others around issues, signs many petitions, does mutual aid, etc. This level should indicate investment, either a personal tie or another motivating factor for caring about an issue.	Occasionally attends protests or signs petitions. Might mention that they do so (petitions) because it is easy. Might donate.	Hardly ever involved in activism or organizing.
Example	Abbi - protest with teachers for better pay and benefits while in high school; "I do a lot of signing petitions. When I donate, I try to do more like mutual aid donating than to politicians or campaigns. But I do a lot of, I do end up donating a lot."	Amariah - will repost and engage with the posters of political posts on social media; has not donated or called a rep, but has attended protests and signed petitions.	Dwayne - (Do you every, yourself post anything political online...) "Not really." Never donated to a political party or called a rep. Aware of strikes/protests and Philadelphia but has not attended them.

Political Awareness - Measure of how up to date a participant is on news and current events. Takes into account how much news they consume, the types of media they use to get their news, as well as the level of detail they provide about political topics.

	High	Medium	Low
Definition	Knows about political topics and is able to provide details. Knows facts and specifics that someone in the medium category is not able to provide.	Knows about current issues, candidates who are running for office, and timing of elections. Able to provide general information.	Cannot name many politicians. Not aware of political events in the news or of upcoming elections.
Example	Dane - able to name specific candidates and historical/political events that are important; voting and political behavior informed by this knowledge	Amira - able to name politicians running in a given year; knows who is currently in state offices and able to name them. can provide broad, general information about issues like taxes, drug convictions and harm reduction.	Kameko - takes about issues with a lot of misinformation; "A lot of the colleges didn't have a lot of funding for people who needed scholarships, but who owned the scholarships. So they had to come up with a wall or like the pandemic." Elana - (Did you know there's gonna be an election for the Senate, House of Representatives, and governor in November?) "No"

Appendix 4: Description of Intercoder Reliability Process

Between August 2023 and March 2024, all completed interview trackers were assigned at least one reader to code for ideology and forms of political participation (see Appendix 3), with 104 being coded by two separate readers. The intercoder reliability (ICR) score is based on these interviews, over 30 percent of the interviews completed. The process had three stages: read through first-pass coding in ATLAS.ti related to engagement and voting to create types of political participation; assign interviews to be read by members of the team; then calculate the ICR score. All tracking and calculations were completed in Excel.

There were seven categories on which to code each participant:

- Political Ideology/Leaning (Leftist, Progressive/Liberal, Split Stance, Disengaged, Conservative)
- Electoral Participation (Highest, High, Medium, Low)
- Community Engagement (High, Medium, Low)
- Activism/Organizing (High, Medium, Low)
- Political Awareness (High, Medium, Low)
- Change (Engagement changed, Left/Right changed, Both engagement and leaning changed)
- Voting Pattern (Usually votes Democrat, Usually votes Republican, Usually votes 3rd party, Usually votes person/platform)

Because there are levels to each category, not a simple yes or no, ICR score was not calculated as all or nothing agreement. Using a 2-point scale, perfect agreement between readers (i.e., both readers said “High” for Community Engagement) gets two points, one level off (i.e., the first reader said “High” and the second said “Medium” for Political Awareness) counts as one point, and anything more than one level away (i.e., the first reader said “Progressive/Liberal” and the second said

“Conservative”) would be no points. If one or both of the readers left a category blank because they felt that there was not enough information in the interview on which to base a ranking, that category was left out of the score. Below are two example interviews, with their scores from each reader and their resulting level of agreement.

	Reader	Ideology / Leaning	Electoral Participation	Community Engagement	Activism / Organizing	Political Awareness	Change?	Voting Pattern	Points (Total)	Percent Agreement
Interview 1	1	Disengaged	Medium	Medium	Low	High			1 + 2 + 1 + 2 = 6 (8)	75%
	2	Progressive / Liberal	Medium		Medium	High		Usually votes D		
Interview 2	1	Disengaged	Medium	Low	Medium	Low			1 + 1 + 0 + 2 + 1 = 5 (10)	50%
	2	Progressive / Liberal	High	High	Medium	Medium				

This process was completed for each interview with two readers and each interview’s agreement level was averaged for the overall ICR score.