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**WHEN BALLOTS ARE BLANK: WRITE-IN'S SERVING LOCAL GOVERNMENT
AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR A HEALTHY AND VIBRANT DEMOCRACY**

A DISSERTATION

by

Thomas J. Ruter, MPA

Submitted to the School of Business of Hamline University, St. Paul, Minnesota
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2024

MAJOR: MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC SERVICE

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Kris Norman, Ph.D., M.A.



May 13, 2024

Thomas Ruter has successfully defended his Dissertation, *When Ballots Are Blank—Write-Ins Serving Local Government: Implications For A Healthy And Vibrant Democracy*, and should be recommended to the Dean of the School of Business to receive the degree of PhD in Management and Public Service.

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Abstract

Our democracy depends on having a supply of candidates running for elected office, but in some instances, no one wants to run. This phenomenological study asks what the effects on a healthy and vibrant democracy are if ballots are blank and the seat is filled through write-in or appointment. Rooted in democratic theory, this study explores small, rural city elections where write-ins won election. Understudied, local governments are responsible for decisions affecting the lives of millions of people each day. Workforce scarcity, the alienation of young Americans from politics, government bashing, nasty campaigns, threats of physical harm, and other barriers that discourage quality candidates from running are explored through interviews and the subsequent thematic analysis. Results identify motivations for serving, barriers to public office, candidate quality, gatekeeping elected officials, perceptions of write-in candidates, the current challenges faced by cities, the loss of the local newspaper, and the city-driven creation of new information environments to inform the public. The study finds abundant learning deficits and opportunities for civics education.

Keywords: Democracy, elections, local government, candidate quality, voting, information environments, newspapers, accessibility, education, civics, write-ins, appointees, city, municipality, government bashing, barriers to elected office, motivation to serving in elected office, young Americans

Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to my family, many supportive friends, and former and current colleagues – it does take a village to create the fortitude for success. A special feeling of gratitude to my father, John Ruter, who taught me integrity, to work hard, and to help others, and my mother, Dorothy M. Ruter, who taught me tenacity, resilience, and to approach problems with intelligence. I am thankful for the encouragement of Beverly A. and Max S. Klesk, who during my youth gave me my first opportunity for growth and a glimpse of a worldview larger than my current circumstance. In addition, I am thankful for the ongoing guidance of my brother, Dan Cain, who overcame great odds and established a respected career by making the world better for many struggling with substance use, poverty, reintegration after incarceration, and societal oppression. I am grateful for the patience of Bradley A. Richards, who often advised, listened, and offered insights throughout the various steps of this Ph.D. I am thankful for Kevin H. Dudek, who arrived one fateful day and has supported me these last two years by picking up my slack, giving me space to focus, and showing his incredible resilience, fortitude, and grace as he journeys ahead as my life partner. Thank you to Jay and Michael Quellier, Juan Gil Restrepo, Elizabeth and Randy Lehs, Christopher A. Foster, and Theresa E. Caspers for cheering me on all these years. Finally, thank you to all my supportive and encouraging friends and colleagues who are unnamed – especially those who are curious, value education and adventure, and pursue facts with a critical eye. This foundation both grounds me and encourages me to soar to new heights.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my dissertation committee members who were generous with their expertise and time. A special thanks to Dr. Kris Norman, Ph.D., M.A., my committee chair, for the hours of reviewing, reading, encouraging, and most of all guiding me throughout the entire process. Thank you, Dr. Craig Waldron, DPA., and Jay Stroebel, M.A. for agreeing to serve on my committee and for your advice.

I would like to acknowledge and thank my many teachers and professors, both named and unnamed, with a special thanks to Hege Herfindahl for sparking my love of language and Russell Christensen for helping me establish precision with the written word, Don Lundell for creating interest in current events and Dr. Joseph Peschek, Ph.D. for directing that interest towards politics and serving local levels of government, Dr. Ellen Dickson for generating interest in public policy, Roger Israel for encouraging me to apply for my first public policy position in State Government, and Dr. Peggy Andrews, Ph.D. for encouragement and creating interest in qualitative research methods and phenomenology.

I'd like to thank my doctoral cohort. Since September 2019, we have journeyed through a worldwide pandemic. In our studies, we have challenged one another, advised one another, supported one another, and listened to one another. All the while, we have dreamed of a world better than the present and how our work might contribute.

I'd like to acknowledge my many colleagues at the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) with special thanks to Fran Bly, who hired me, and Dr. Glenace Edwall, Ph.D. who encouraged me to pursue this advanced degree. In addition, a special thank you to my colleagues at Canvas Health, Inc. who provided me with the time, space, and support to complete this five-year journey. Special thanks to Dr. Matt Eastwood, Ph.D., who hired me into my first

nonprofit leadership position, encouraged my professional growth, and supported the pursuit of this degree.

Lastly, I would like to thank all the participants, both elected and non-elected, in this study for their gift of insight and time. A career in public service and nonprofit leadership allows us to, in some small way, harness our desire to bridge the gaps of inequality and injustice to better society and improve the quality of life for all people. In my humble opinion, public service is an honorable and admirable profession, and regardless of the political climate, we should be proud of our efforts.

Preface

I have always believed that education is the linchpin to escape poverty. This dissertation represents the highest level of my academic achievement, and it is my wish that the findings be used to strengthen our *democracy* at the local level and beyond especially given the political environment we have faced since 2016 and possibly even earlier. Braver Angels of Minnesota (2024) summarizes this environment, “our national life – from local schools to cities, towns, state legislatures and Congress – has increasingly become a zone of disrespect and hostility, leading to paralysis in public policy and divisiveness in our communities, families, and friendship circles” (para. 2). As I have witnessed debates amongst friends and colleagues, I have long felt that we need to find a space to listen to each other rather than talking over each other. Without listening, we cannot learn from one another. By talking over one another, we disrespect each other by dismissing another point of view. This doesn’t mean we can’t disagree, but disagreement can be done respectfully. I hope that we can *learn to listen to each other* and by hearing what the other holds dear, we might *learn* and find common values and a common solution to the problems facing so many of our communities.

This study holds firm to the concept that representative democracy and legitimate and uninfluenced elections are important to our core values as a democratic nation and should continue as a form of government, regardless of its virtues and faults. To this end, the freedom to vote is essential, and just as essential is that our democracy must have high-quality candidates at all levels who are willing to run for public office. In today’s political environment we need them to run with integrity and without fear of harm – we need good leaders engaged in strengthening our communities. Competition between candidates can be healthy and civil and still provide the voters with the information they need to make an informed decision as they

execute their choice. The public needs to be critical of the information it uses to make decisions – evaluating the source and the various perspectives to achieve a more well-rounded view. As we know, not everything published is fact and other actors have an interest in disrupting our form of government.

Local newspapers continue to be lost and objective information environments are becoming more limited, especially at the local level of government. Having local newspapers exiting the marketplace prevents the recording of the common history being experienced in small, rural communities – an erosion of free and independent media evaluating democracy. The real story is often lost because no one has recorded it. Local governments have a massive influence on American society being responsible for so many decisions that touch our daily lives and yet, much of what they do is unreported. Access to the *why* and the *who* behind the decisions of local governments has become far more limited. Given these forces, it is clear that further study is needed in this area.

While attending a March 17, 2024, VocalEssence concert at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis, I was struck by the significance and correlation of their *Leading with Love* pledge and how it interconnects with this body of research. The pledge contains “twelve statements that invite us to nurture habits of caring and connection” (VocalEssence, 2024, para. 3) in our world. The pledge is a valuable approach to us as we engage with this ever-changing and challenging world. Their pledge has been adapted and intends to be a charge to us as we work to further the health and vibrancy of our democracy.

LISTEN to others.

ENCOURAGE others to be the best versions of themselves.

QUESTION so a better understanding of the perspectives of those around you can be
LEARNED.

DEEPEN your awareness of the needs that exist in our communities.

WORK with others to strengthen our communities.

INVEST time, talents, and resources to help improve the lives of those around you.

TAKE TIME for reflection and TAKE ACTION when the situation calls for it.

LIFT OTHERS UP when they experience difficulties and disappointments.

SPEAK UP in the face of injustice.

OPEN DOORS through conversation and compromise.

VALIDATE the differences that make us unique.

EMBRACE changes that allow us to better live in community with one another.

Note. Adapted from the *Leading with Love Pledge* by VocalEssence, 2024.

Dissertation Committee

Consistent with the Hamline University *Dissertation Guide* (2020),

The dissertation committee consists of three to four members. The chair is lead advisor and 2-3 other members serve as content experts. At least two members must have a doctorate that required a dissertation and at least two people must be from Hamline. The other committee members may be from within or outside of Hamline. Students often include one or two members from outside of Hamline who are content experts on the dissertation topic (Hamline University, 2020, p. 6).

Given this, the following individuals have agreed to serve on the dissertation committee associated with this study:

1. Dr. Kris Norman, Ph.D., M.A. as Chair. E-mail: knorman06@hamline.edu, Phone: 651-523-2814.

Kris teaches several courses in both the Master's in Public Administration (MPA) and Doctorate in Public Administration (DPA) programs, but her emphasis is on public policy and social policy. She received her Ph.D. in Political Science from Vanderbilt University, her M.A. in Public Affairs from the Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota, and her B.A. in Political Science and Business Administration from Hamline University

Professor Norman has public sector experience working for both the St. Paul Public Works Department and Minnesota Department of Education. Her current research examines issues of cultural competency and social equity in public administration and includes co-editing with Susan Gooden of Virginia Commonwealth University the book, *Cultural Competency for Public Administrators*.

All of Professor Norman's courses emphasize theory-to-practice learning which includes both the academic and practical sides to public administration. She believes students should leave every class session with information they can use in their work. Her philosophy is that students should always play an active role in their own learning. Developing students' critical thinking and analytical skills are especially important in all of her classes (Hamline University, 2023, para. 1-3).

2. Dr. Craig Waldron, DPA, M.A. E-mail: cwaldron01@hamline.edu, Phone: 651-523-2971.

Craig Waldron served as city administrator for the City of Oakdale for 20 years and is a highly respected leader in local government. Dr. Waldron was recognized as manager of the year for his efforts in career development in Oakdale. He has also served as an elected official for North Mankato and has chaired several municipal organizations in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

Waldron earned his Doctorate in Public Administration from Hamline University, his M.A. in Urban and Regional Studies from Minnesota State University, and his a B.A. in Sociology from the University of Iowa.

Dr. Waldron's teaching approach works to blend the theoretical with a real-world application to public administration. (Hamline University, 2023, para. 1-3)

3. Jay Stroebel, M.A., E-mail: Jay.stroebel@brooklynpark.org, Phone: 763-493-8002.

Jay Stroebel has been the City Manager of Brooklyn Park since August 2015. Prior to joining Brooklyn Park, Jay served in a variety of leadership roles in the City of Minneapolis between 2005 and 2015, including City Coordinator, Deputy City Coordinator and Director of Regulatory Services. From 1996 to 2005, Jay worked at

the State of Minnesota in a variety of capacities for the Carlson, Ventura and Pawlenty administrations. Jay has a master's degree in applied economics from the University of Minnesota and an undergraduate degree in economics from St. Olaf College. In Jay's spare time, he enjoys playing tennis, cross country skiing, camping in the Boundary Waters and traveling with his family (City of Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, 2023, para. 1).

Chapter 1: Introduction

A healthy and vibrant democracy is resilient in the face of change, protects the dignity and rights of each individual, removes barriers to equitable participation, exposes undue influence, relies upon checks and balances, reigns in overreaches of power, respects the rule of law, nourishes independent journalism, fosters an environment for the population to flourish, and encourages leaders to act with integrity, compromise, utilize facts, and nurtures the common good. To realize these goals, democracies require that there be a connection between citizens and representatives, and they rely upon the informed participation of citizens (Michels, 2011). The level of citizen participation impacts the quality of democracy. “Citizens increase their civic skills and become more competent when they participate” (Michels, 2011, p. 278), and “citizen participation has a positive effect on the development of knowledge, skills, and virtues” (Michels, 2011, p. 290). Citizen participation takes many roles, including that of voter and elected representative.

Voting is one method of establishing a connection between citizens and representatives. In the United States, the history of expanding voting rights to the entire population has been a legal journey as the right has been granted, removed, and granted again to certain populations. As the right to vote has been granted so has the right to run for elected office. Standing for election is an important principle of representative democracy and at a basic level, citizens have the right to choose which group of candidates have the opportunity to run for office.

“Voting begins with information” (Gronke, 2010, p. 148). An election between two or more candidates creates political competition and an information environment that informs the voter. These information environments are highly desirable for exposing voters to more information and a higher quality of information about the various candidates, their positions, and

platforms, and to highlight specific issues for the voter. In essence, voters depend upon elections with two or more candidates running for office for both information and choice.

Unlike national elections, we know little about local government and electoral politics related to them in the United States because a majority of people who study elections focus their efforts at the national level. Models developed for understanding national politics and elections do not necessarily apply to elections at the local level because the style of leadership needed at the local level varies significantly from the style of leadership needed at the national level, namely local governments require *managerial leadership* while national governments require *ideological leadership*. At the local level, who runs for office is determined by their ownership interest in their community, having a strong sense of civic obligation, and being encouraged by their family, friends, neighbors, or through their ambitions. At the local level, who runs for office and how they conduct themselves determines whether the government operates as a true democracy, a plutocracy, an oligarchy, or a de facto autocracy.

Our democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for elected office and the field of study often assumes that in elections someone will always run. This study, however, doesn't rely upon such an assumption and asks the question, what are the effects on a *healthy and vibrant democracy* if no one ran for elected office and open seats were left unfilled or if the seat was filled without a majority endorsement of the voters as in the case of a write-in candidate or a political appointment? To assure a *healthy and vibrant democracy*, it is important to understand the factors that contribute to not having candidates on the ballot and study the effects of having an officeholder who was not chosen by the majority of the electorate. It is assumed that the electorate solves the problem of not having candidates on the ballot by writing in a candidate or if no write-in candidate is viable, a willing individual is appointed into the open

office but that may not always be true. Doing so, however, not only removes the competitive environment of elections but also removes the information environment necessary to inform the voter and inhibits the ability of the voter to select the best candidate for the office. If a vacuum is created in the information environment because no one is running for office, what does this mean for informed citizen involvement and a democracy reliant upon such a principle? Since local governments have a massive influence on American society, what does this anomaly mean at the local level and to the principles of democracy?

An Issue of Scarcity

This study is being conducted through a lens of *scarcity*. Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) define *scarcity* as “having less than you feel you need” (p. 4). In this study, the vacuum of having no political candidate running for office is a prime example of scarcity and has the potential of becoming scarcity building upon scarcity. While all communities and elections can be affected by this shortage, one could argue that local elections in small communities – those of small municipalities, school boards, and others are most affected because of the nature of influence leaders have at the local level and over the daily lives of the voter. Therefore, essential questions are raised while identifying and understanding the contributing forces to this *scarcity*. Under this scarcity, it is essential to successfully navigate why the phenomenon is occurring and the leadership challenges of having a leader in a position of influence who was not vetted by the voters or voted by a majority of them. In his book *Averting Catastrophe* (2021), Cass R. Sunstein encourages us to minimize the worst of this worst-case scenario by understanding the contributing factors to the phenomenon. By doing so, one can mitigate the phenomenon and its negative effects.

The Minnesota Example

While it does not seem plausible, Minnesota recently experienced elections where no candidate ran for an open seat. According to the League of Minnesota Cities, going into the state-wide 2022 elections, 131 city elections had no identified candidate running for the open seat (Walker, 2022). A state-wide breakdown by elected positions where no one is running is presented in Table 1.1 below (Walker, 2022).

Table 1.1

State-wide Municipal Elections Where there is No Candidate

Position	Count
Mayor	27
Council (no candidates)	32
Council (fewer candidates than open seats e.g. vote for two)	59
Total Council Seats without candidates	91
City Clerk	5
City Clerk-Treasurer	1
City Treasurer	7
Total	131

Statement of the Problem

If a *healthy and vibrant democracy* is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications? Shames (2017), indicates that having a shortage of candidates creates shortcomings. In exploring this problem or research question, some questions to explore include:

- What circumstances surround the election occurred before the open seat was filled? For instance, did candidates consider running and being on the ballot, but chose not to or was there a situation with an incumbent, or did a situation occur that prevented an identified candidate from running in the election?
- How was the open seat filled?

- What are the demographics of the individual who filled the seat?
- Did the person have an interest in running for the seat and if so, why didn't they add their name to the ballot?
- Where do citizens who would have voted in the election get their local news about events in their community? What was the information environment during a nonexistent campaign?
- What has been the office holders experience since obtaining the seat?
- How has the phenomenon influenced the voter's perception of government, support of government initiatives, or the ability to access or utilize government-provided services?

Contribution to Theory

Furthering Democratic Theory

Warren (2017) writes, "Democratic theory has grown dramatically in its power and sophistication, fueled by debates among models of democracy" (p. 39) and he indicates that democratic theorists largely think in terms of *models of democracy* where thought is centered on deliberation or elections. As we learn more about this theory, we learn that this is just one of many approaches for *democratic theory* that is not "clearly demarcated or agreed upon" (Dean, Gagnon, & Asenbaum, 2019, p. v). In his book, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, Robert A. Dahl (2006) writes, "One of the difficulties one must face at the outset is that there is no democratic theory – there are only democratic theories" (Dahl, 2006, p. 1). Dahl (2006) reasons that there are so many different *democratic theories* or approaches to democracy because there is a linkage between *democratic theory* and the multitude of approaches for social theory and "in dealing with democracy a good cause can be made out for almost all of these possibilities" (p. 1).

Dean, Gagnon, & AsenBaum (2019) indicate that “perhaps the only thing democratic theorists could agree about democratic theory is that it is diverse, even inchoate in nature” (p. v).

Given this challenge with the theory, it remains important to this study to have a definition from which to work. Laurence (2018) provides us just such an option, so for purposes of this study, *democratic theory* is defined as “an established subfield of political theory that is primarily concerned with examining the definition and meaning of the concept of democracy, as well as the moral foundations, obligations, challenges, and overall desirability of democratic governance” (para. 1). As Laurence (2018) writes, “generally speaking, [democratic theory involves] a commitment to democracy as an object of study and deliberation is what unites democratic theorists across a variety of academic disciplines and methodological orientations” (para. 1).

The hope is that this study will further *democratic theory* by exploring elections, specifically, those where there is a vacuum caused by having no one running for a municipal office, and how this circumstance may have implications for a *healthy and vibrant democracy*. This study will also explore some of the influencing factors that may be contributing to the vacancies.

The Current Environment and Why This Topic is Important to Study

This study operates under the assumption that representative democracy and legitimate and uninfluenced elections are important to our core values as a democratic nation and should continue as a form of government, regardless of its virtues and faults. This study, while localized and small-scale, is important to the community of scholars because today’s political environment appears to bring this assumption into doubt at the national level. “Representative democracy is...being questioned...[due to] decreasing voter turnout and increasing electoral

volatility” (Michels, 2011, p. 277). The legitimacy of democracy is further being brought into question as is evidenced by the aftermath of *The Big Lie* - the verifiably false assertion that Donald Trump won a second term as U.S. President and the subsequent actions of his supporters and others across the nation.

The *Big Lie* led to the January 6, 2021 insurrection in the U.S. Capital where Trump supporters ignored the legitimate results of the 2020 Presidential election and interfered with the joint session of Congress tasked with counting the electoral college votes to formalize the victory of President-elect Joe Biden to keep President Trump in office. Since this event, the nation continues to wrestle with severe and mostly unfounded scrutiny of the validity of elections and accusations of widespread election fraud at various levels. Efforts also continue to subvert voting and invalidate elections at various levels.

Rick Hasen, co-director of the Fair Elections and Free Speech Center at the University of California, Irvine, said, "I've never been more scared about American democracy than I am right now, because of the metastasizing of the 'big lie'" (Block, 2021, para. 5). Since the violent mob stormed the U.S. Capital to impede the Electoral College process, overturning the count of the votes, and stopping the transition of power from one President to the other (Block, 2021), the idea that the 2020 Presidential election was *stolen* has “grown more entrenched and more dangerous...and firmly anchored in the public opinion” (Block, 2021, para. 4 & 15). One CNN poll, for instance, found that 36% of Americans do not believe that President Biden legitimately won the election and that number jumps to 78% of persons who identify as Republican (Block, 2021). Another poll conducted by NPR, PBS Newshour, and Marist found that “34% of Republicans say they trust that elections are fair, while 75% of Republicans say Trump has a

legitimate claim that there were ‘real cases of fraud that changed the results’. Just 2% of Democrats agreed with that statement” (Block, 2021, para. 17).

According to Block (2021), this perception has led to:

- 19 states adopting laws limiting ballot access.
- Several persons who deny the results of the 2020 election are running for the very offices that run and control elections.
- “Some Republican-controlled state legislatures have moved to seize power over elections, opening a path where they could overrule voters and substitute their own slate of electors to choose the winner” (para 21).

These efforts to limit voting, subvert elections, and maybe even terminate all rules, regulations, and articles, including those in the Constitution move us into a dangerous territory unknown to Americans, who, since George Washington, have benefited from recognizing the results of an election and witnessing the peaceful transfer of power between former and newly elected leaders (Stromberg, 2011).

This study will not dive deeper into how *The Big Lie* has influenced voting or elections but does identify that *The Big Lie* and calls to *terminate all rules, regulations, and articles including those found in the Constitution due to a lost election* contribute to how voters react to election results and a pool of candidates. The environment of dismantling our democracy appears to be real. In the words of Yale University history professor, Timothy Snyder, “We delude ourselves...if we think we’re immune from an anti-democratic turn....we can lose democracy just like anybody else can, just like most people have in the history of democracy....we can lose it, and we’re losing it right now” (Block, 2021, para. 25).

For over 200 years, Americans have viewed the American Constitution as a sacred document guiding our rule of law, a guarantee of rights, a division of governmental powers, and a guide for elections (Yen, 2022). All Presidents, Senators, and Representatives are bound by oath or affirmation to support the provisions outlined in the American Constitution (The National Archives, n.d.). When former Presidents have taken the oath, they have sworn or affirmed that they will “faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my [their] ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States ” (The National Archives, n.d., Article II, Section 1). At no time in history has any U.S. President suggested termination of all rules, regulations, and articles of the U.S. Constitution – the very document he took an oath to *preserve, protect and defend*. That is until, the former 45th President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump wrote on his Truth Social media platform, “A Massive Fraud of this type [referring to the verifiably false assertion that Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election] and magnitude allows for the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, *even those found in the Constitution*” (Yen, 2022, para. 3).

This statement can be seen as a continuation of recent attacks on our American constitutional democracy and elections. In the past, as summarized by White House Deputy Press Secretary, Andrew Bates, “attacking the Constitution and all it stands for is anathema to the soul of our nation” (Yen, 2022, para. 13). Yet, in the last several years, we have seen ongoing attacks on those Constitutionally guaranteed democratic ideals as is best symbolized by the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capital when Trump supporters stormed and vandalized the Capital itself and injured persons as they sought to interfere with a joint session of Congress tasked with counting the electoral college votes to formalize the victory of President-elect Joe Biden. For years, this process of tallying the votes of the Electoral College has

occurred peacefully whereby objections to individual electoral votes or state returns are required to be declared in writing and agreed to by at least one other Representative and one other Senator (United States House of Representatives, n.d.). At no time in the past, was the U.S. Capital stormed in such a way and for such purpose as to disrupt or undermine the proceedings of a legitimate election.

Given this environment, who runs for office, who wins, and who leads government is essential for the voter to understand both at the national and local levels. When no one runs and seats are filled without any public vetting, the core principle of democracy related to an informed voter is lost, and the public has no quality information environment available to help it understand the new leader or their positions on important issues. “A small pool of candidates can decrease the quality and importantly hamper citizen choice; which is the key ‘crowdsourcing’ element that is supposed to make democracy better than other forms of government” (Shames, 2017, pp. 3-4). Given the assumption that representative democracy and competitive elections should continue, the importance of this study is rooted in the following principles:

1. An informed and educated voter is core to a *healthy and vibrant* representative democracy.
2. Elections are core to a *healthy and vibrant* representative democracy.
3. Competitive elections provide the voter with essential information about the candidate.
4. Having multiple candidates provides the electorate with a larger information environment.

5. Absent candidates, a minority of voters may select to *write-in* a candidate that may not be desirable by the majority.
6. Absent a write-in candidate, a candidate may be selected by an appointment process. Again, that candidate may not be desirable by the majority of voters.
7. In both instances of write-in or appointment, the voter is denied the opportunity to adequately learn about the candidate.
8. Both the write-in and appointment selection process minimizes or silences the information environment.

Contribution to Research

Presently, it appears as though no one has studied the implications to our democratic form of government when no candidates run for an elected office. Existing studies vary, but appear to focus on:

1. The shortage of the public employee workforce or the collection of persons employed by any public agency, such as a state, county, city, school district, etc., except those persons who are elected to their employment, such as elected officials.
2. Identifying methods to inspire people to run for an elected office.
3. Identifying barriers to running for office and methods that could be enacted to remove those barriers.

What is understudied, and possibly more critical to identify during this time when election result denying and statements calling for the termination of election rules are so prevalent in our national narrative, and as the workforce is scarce, and as new generations are less interested in running for elected office, is what does it mean to our representative democracy if no one enters the race? While I am also curious about what it means to our representative democracy when

only one candidate enters the race and runs unopposed, the implications are different in that the candidate still ran, likely shared information with the electorate, and was chosen by the electorate. As Shames (2017) identifies, representative democracy is dependent upon having candidates and without candidates, our democracy is in crisis. Under this crisis, democratic governments must continue to function, but how? As mentioned earlier, it is assumed that the electorate solves this by writing in a candidate or by utilizing an appointment process to fill an open seat. This action certainly removes the existence of an information environment, limits the knowledge of the overall electorate, and impacts who represents the people and how people are represented. What exactly does an electorate short a candidate gain or lose? With elected offices vacant or filled in such a manner, how do governments make decisions, and do those decisions withstand the test of the electorate?

It is generally accepted that having few candidates running for office minimizes options for the electorate, but what if there are none and persons obtain office through write-in campaigns or appointments? Certainly, both having a candidate and a quality candidate matters to elections, especially given election result denying and calls to terminate all rules, regulations, and articles. While further analysis is needed, having no one to run for elected office, appears to be an issue that has not been considered in any great depth before because few scholars have written about it. Gaps certainly exist in the literature and the hope is that this study will explore unanswered questions and areas of concern regarding how a representative democracy operates without an information environment and the widespread engagement of the voter.

The persons and groups that will care about this study are broad and include persons, generally interested in the health of American Representative Democracy, politicians, political parties, government scholars and public administrators, the voting public, and the public at large.

The reason they will care is that this study highlights current issues of concern and ways that governments fill empty elected offices and respond when no one is running for office. Certainly, by having additional knowledge, all of the aforementioned groups will benefit.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify factors that are present and influencing persons to not seek elected office, methods where empty offices are filled or not, the information environment available to the voter, and leadership implications for the electorate as identified through interviews of local government elected or appointed officials. Through a literature review we will explore a foundation of what is already known.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Democracy

A *democracy* is a political system, a form of government, or a system of decision-making in which the power is vested in the people and directly, or indirectly through, representation, is exercised by them. The term stems from the Greek word, *dēmokratia*, devised from *dēmos* or people and *kratos* or rule (Dahl, 2023 & Oliver, 2012). The term dates back to the middle of the 5th century B.C.E. and has come to mean ‘rule by the people’. As society became more complex, “Western democracies...became representative democracies in which elected representatives make decisions” (Michels, 2011, p. 277).

With this understanding, over time, this *rule by the people* or *democracy* has become more sophisticated and today relies upon some generally understood principles, universal values, features, or norms and standards to function, yet is constantly developing (United Nations General Assembly, 2000; United Nations, 2023; United Nations, n.d.; Geissel & Michels, 2018). These principles include, but are not limited to:

1. Citizen involvement or participation in the form of voting in elections, standing for election, becoming informed, debating issues, attending community and civic events, paying taxes, protesting, and volunteering.
2. A system of representation where citizens delegate to others the responsibility to make decisions. This delegation occurs through elections and a peaceful transition of representation occurs when citizens have elected a new representative.
3. An electoral system for choosing representation and acceptance of the election results even if those results are contrary to an individual's beliefs. For this electoral system to function well, it is important to have more than one political party so that opposition generates a discussion of different options or viewpoints on issues. This also creates a system where voters have choices in candidates.
4. The rule of law concept requires everyone in the Democracy to obey the law and be held accountable if they violate the law. Under this concept, both elected and appointed officials also answer to the people and make decisions and perform their duties accounting to the direction gathered from the people and not their individual opinions. Embedded in this accountability idea is the concept of transparency – where people or the press are aware of what is happening in government through accessible information and unrestricted public meetings.
5. Equality among citizens meaning all individuals are valued equally, have equal opportunities, and may not be discriminated against because of various individualized factors. Under this concept, democracies respect human life and human dignity.
6. Liberty, freedom, and rights are retained by citizens if the use of those causes no damage to society as a whole or to the individuals within it. Some Democracies may have a bill of

rights to protect people against the abuse of power and guarantee certain liberties, freedoms, and rights to all people in the country.

7. Education is in the form of having an educated citizenry where citizens can evaluate information, weigh the positives and negatives, and make decisions on what best fits their interests.

Core to these seven principles is the continued and ongoing involvement of the people in the process and as summarized by the Secretary-General on Democracy for the United Nations (n.d.) “Democracy is a universal value based on *the freely expressed will of people* to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives” (p. 2).

These seven principles are certainly observed in the *democracy* of the United States. The Constitution of the United States has established it as a representative democracy and further as a democratic republic, meaning it is democratic because the people establish the method by which they govern and it is a republic because the government’s power originates from its people (U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services, 2023). A publication of the United States Government indicates:

The United States, under its Constitution, is a federal, representative, democratic republic, an indivisible union of 50 sovereign States. With the exception of town meetings, a form of pure democracy, we have at the local, state, and national levels a government which is: ‘federal’ because power is shared among these three levels; ‘democratic’ because the people govern themselves and have the means to control the government; and ‘republic’ because the people choose elected delegates by free and secret ballot (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003, p. 7).

The United States today is even more of a participatory democracy than was envisioned by the Founders when they established the government ‘of the people, by the people, and for the people,’ as President Abraham Lincoln later described it. Along with the constitutional responsibilities which accompany citizenship, such as obeying laws and paying taxes, the citizen is afforded a wide range of rights and opportunities to influence the making of public policy by the Government through functions such as voting and being able to run for office. The involvement of people in the 7 principles as identified above, is essential.

Citizen Involvement in Democracy

“Empirical research has shown that the health and quality of democracy are affected by patterns on political participation” of the citizen (Oser, 2017, p. 236). Citizen involvement in democracy is core to democracy. “Citizen participation is usually considered a valuable element of democratic citizenship and democratic decision making” and “many theorists claim that citizen participation has positive effects on the quality of democracy” (Michels, 2011, p. 275). Michels (2011) identified that “participation gives citizens a more direct say, it gives a voice to individual citizens and to minorities, it encourages civic skills and civic virtues, it leads to rational decisions based on public reasoning, and it increases support for the outcome and the process” (p. 276). A publication of the United States Government indicates:

Citizen involvement in the Government need not be manifested only during election campaigns. Legislators are accustomed to hearing from constituents expressing opinions about issues of the day, and procedures exist that mandate that executive agencies allow time for public comment before proposed regulations become final. Individuals may also join with others who hold similar views to make the most of their influence with the Government on particular issues; this is how interest groups or political action

committees are established and the lobbying process begins. (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003, p. 7).

Citizen involvement has positive influences on democracy in the form of decision-making, inclusion, skills and virtues, deliberation, and legitimacy (Michels, 2011). As shown by Michels (2011), “It increases issue knowledge, civic skills, and public engagement, and it contributes to the support for decisions amongst the participants” (p. 275). While citizen participation can take many forms, two are most important to this study, namely the right to vote and the ability to run for a representative office.

The Right to Vote

At the most basic level, the right to vote gives the citizen a chance to help select those who will ultimately be responsible for determining public policy. Beyond casting the ballot, a citizen may actively assist in nominating and electing preferred public officials through volunteer activities and campaign donations. The participation of citizens in the electoral process contributes greatly to the sense of legitimacy of the Government. “One of the most important rights of American citizens is the franchise—the right to vote” (The White House, n.d.). The “right to vote in the United States has deep roots in the nation’s historical conception of democracy – a conception fueled largely by the desire to various groups of ‘newcomers’ to be recognized as citizens with a stake in the country’s well-being (Brown & Clemons, 2015, p. 4). When America was founded in the 1700’s only white male landowners over the age of 21 were eligible to vote. “Women, Indians, and the majority of blacks were considered unqualified to participate in the electoral process” (Brown & Clemons, 2015, p. 5). Despite this early state, over time, voting rights have expanded through bipartisan efforts by the adoption of

constitutional amendments and laws expanding access to the vote based on race and ethnicity, gender, disability, age, and other factors (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2019).

Simultaneously, while many have worked to expand voting rights, others have worked to restrict the vote as a method to retain power. The battle between enfranchisement or expansion of the vote and disenfranchisement or restriction of the vote continues to this day. Best illustrated by the history of how the vote has been extended and restricted to descendants from Africa, this battle is well-researched.

Of important note here is that, early in the history of the United States, social class was the most operative construct in the political arena, not race (Brown & Clemons, 2015). In those early years, Africans, like many poor Europeans, served in the role of indentured servants and because freedom was a commodity, it could be acquired along with the right to vote in certain locales (Brown & Clemons, 2015). Brown & Clemons (2015) write:

For almost 80 years, from 1787, the year of the Constitutional Convention, to the end of the Civil War in 1865, a total of six (6) states allowed free black people to vote.

However black people could not vote in any state if they were enslaved. In 1776, white men who owned property were granted suffrage, and free black men voted in the states of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. Between 1783 and 1810, only those freed prior to 1783 were allowed the franchise, and after 1810 no black men could vote (p. 7).

During the early 1800s, property ownership as a voting requirement was removed across the states, excluding New York, and all white male workers acquired the right to vote (Brown & Clemons, 2015). During this time, any right to vote held by black males was also disallowed, limiting the franchise to white males (Brown & Clemons, 2015). Furthermore, as states joined the union, the right to vote for black men was denied (Brown & Clemons, 2015). Rather than

simply denying the right to vote to black men, New York state “imposed a minimum property ownership requirement of \$200” effectively reducing voting participation by black men (Brown & Clemons, 2015, p. 7).

Enslaved persons of African descent were not allowed to vote and in 1857, with the Dred Scott decision, the Supreme Court further ruled “that those who had been sold as slaves were not citizens and that therefore they could not lay claim to any rights and privileges, except those given to them by whites” (Brown & Clemons, 2015, p. 7). With the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, this ruling was gradually changed over the years and, by 1870, voting rights were given back to black men. “However, in later years, the U.S. Supreme Court interpreted the [Fifteenth] amendment very narrowly, and thus, in earnest, initiated the disenfranchisement of black voters” (Brown & Clemons, 2015, p. 8) through poll taxes and literacy tests. Despite this effort, post-civil war and through the Military Reconstruction Act of 1868, “freed slaves...were now to become a part of society, able to exercise their rights as citizens to be involved in the political processes along with other Americans” (Brown & Clemons, 2015, p. 9).

The Civil Rights Act of 1875 guaranteed all citizens, regardless of color, access to accommodations, theatres, public schools, churches, and cemeteries and illustrated “that extending the franchise to those excluded from public accommodations access was an important objective” (Brown & Clemons, 2015, p. 10); however, as federal troops were removed from the South, public support waned. In 1883, the Supreme Court ruled in the Civil Rights Cases that the public accommodation sections of the act were unconstitutional, saying Congress was not afforded control over private persons or businesses under the Equal Protection Clause and only over states (Brown & Clemons, 2015).

Even with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, black voting rights continued to be suppressed. As the reconstruction of post-Civil War society in the southern states declined, people in the South tried a wide range of schemes and methods to maintain political power and restrain the black vote. The era from 1890 to 1901 was known as the *era of disenfranchisement* during which “the states of the Old Confederacy adopted new state constitutions that prevented, prohibited, or manipulated African Americans out of their voting rights” (Brown & Clemons, 2015, p. 10). Despite this, in the *Smith v. Allwright* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional for the state to delegate its authority over elections to political parties to allow discrimination to be practiced but the ruling did not end the structural restrictions that were in place to suppress voter access (Brown & Clemons, 2015).

With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the federal government gained the authority to obtain an injunction against any type of voting interference and the U.S. district courts gained the ability to exercise jurisdiction over such lawsuits removing the customary requirement that parties first exhaust available state remedies (Brown & Clemons, 2015). Three years later, the Civil Rights Act of 1960 passed and established federal inspection of local voter registration polls, introduced penalties for anyone who obstructed someone's attempt to register to vote, authorized the federal district courts to enlist qualified voters in locations where systematic disenfranchisement had taken place, and allowed the U.S. Department of Justice to challenge cases in which individuals had been denied their voting rights (Brown & Clemons, 2015). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited the unequal application of voter registration requirements, racial segregation in schools and public accommodations, and employment discrimination (Brown & Clemons, 2015). Further enhanced by the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which aimed to overcome legal barriers at the state and local levels that prevented

African Americans from exercising their right to vote as guaranteed under the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and gave the federal government the power to take action necessary to ensure compliance (Brown & Clemons, 2015).

The 21st Century, post-Civil Rights era, continues to echo the vacillations of enfranchisement and disenfranchisement of the past with “growing emphasis on so-called ‘race-neutral’ policies helping to further obscure and obfuscate recognition of legitimate cases of racial discrimination and inequality” (Brown & Clemons, 2015, p. 17). In 1970, an amendment to the 1965 Voting Rights Act was adopted granting 18-year-olds the right to vote but also prohibiting the use of literacy as a condition of voter registration (Brown & Clemons, 2015). The Act was further modified again in 1975 when an amendment was passed that permanently prohibited literacy tests (Brown & Clemons, 2015). Continuous court challenges continued to circulate either upholding certain provisions or striking down others as it pertains to voting.

This history of enfranchisement and disenfranchisement of black voters is important to understand as the nation continues to see instances where voting rights are affected. In recent years other factors, such as immigration, have emerged as a political issue where diversity is viewed as a “threat to their [conservatives’] capacity to maintain political power” (Brown & Clemons, 2015, p. 21). The “hijacking of public policy to achieve the political objectives of social forces aiming to acquire and/or maintain their power base...facilitate[s] democratic erosion and the lack of inclusiveness of political participation...to the detriment of the nation” (Brown & Clemons, 2015, p. 21).

Running for Representative Office

One way voters of the United States express their will is by electing officials to represent them in our representative government. Standing for election is also an important principle of

“maximizing democracy” (Michels, 2011, p. 277) and the evolution of who is allowed to run for office coincides with the advances and legal journey of the effort to enfranchise various groups of voters. Through the history provided previously, a greater diversity of candidates are now eligible to run for political office as more groups of people through history receive additional rights to vote.

Some political scholars have applied theories of economic behavior to describe competitive elections drawing comparisons between consumers of products and services and voters in elections and highlighting the concept of *free competition for a free vote* (Lipsitz, 2011). Lipsitz (2011) writes:

At a basic level, this meant that citizens – like consumers – should be able to choose which group of political elites runs the government, and political elites should have the opportunity to sell themselves to voters. In this way, political competition ensures two key features of democracy: choice or sovereignty, and accountability. For democracy to function, voters must have a choice in an election between at least two parties or candidates. Otherwise, they have no real role to play in an election. Democracy also requires that there be a link between representatives and citizens, which ensures that the former represents the latter. Political competition provides that link by giving citizens the opportunity to pass judgment on their representatives and opt for others if they believe those in power are not doing a good job. Thus, political competition is not an end in itself, but rather a means for achieving other more substantive goals related to democracy (p. 18).

Shames (2017) identifies that while “Representative democracy requires many things, among them free and fair elections, civil rights for citizens, constraints on executive power, and free and

independent media”, “we also need people who are ready and willing to run for office [candidates] – and preferably enough of them to create good electoral competition” (p. 18).

Shames (2017) contends, “the better the competition, we hope, the better will be the quality of those who eventually assumes office” and challenges that “an ideal democracy would have a bounty of high quality, competitive candidates among whom voters could select” (p. 18).

Shames (2017) writes, “Representative democracy depends on having good people willing to run for office” (p. 2).

According to Eulau, Gibbins, & Webb (2022), typically, “elections enable voters to select leaders and hold them accountable for their performance in office” (para. 1). They also solve a succession problem in leadership and contribute to the continuation of democracy. When elections are competitive with strong candidates, transparency of the candidate or political party and their goals or positions is increased allowing the voting population to learn more about the candidate, their qualifications, and their future intentions. Elections provide political education for citizens and ensure the responsiveness of democratic governments to the will of the people. Elections serve as a popular method to legitimize the decisions through the populace of those who are elected. Elections reinforce the political community's stability and legitimacy, linking citizens to each other, confirming the viability of the polity, and facilitating social and political integration. Finally, elections and the act of voting or nonvoting give people an opportunity to express their approval or non-approval of a candidate, express their partisanship, form a sense of belonging, and manifest personal fulfillment.

At the time of writing their book, Lawless & Fox (2015) identified that there were 519,682 elected officials in the United States with “hundreds of thousands of people serving as mayors, city and town councilors, school board members, parks commissioners, soil and water

conservation directors, coroners, auditors, sewage disposal authorities, tax collectors, and recorders of deeds” (pp. 20-21). They also estimated that “for every 600 people living in the United States, one is an elected official” (p. 21). Lawless & Fox (2015) write that the sheer volume of elected offices requires citizens persist through completing an often tedious ballot with multiple offices and more importantly, due to the “large number of elective positions necessitate that millions of engaged citizens rise up and seek these offices” (p. 21).

Competitive Elections and the Value of Information Environments. Gronke (2010) identifies that a ‘high-quality’ candidate can be someone who connects well with their district, has success fundraising, or has a high public profile. In each category, “one would hope that ‘quality’ candidates also have the desire to improve government and formulate superior public policies” (Gronke, 2010, p. 64). Gronke (2010) further writes that a quality candidate is someone with specific features that would increase his or her ability to win the election. These features include “previous political and elective experience and celebrity status, notoriety, or other feature that lend him or her to particular prominence” (Gronke, 2010, p. 64). Each of these features finds that a candidate has the background, experience, and knowledge necessary to be successful in the campaign. According to Gronke (2010):

Candidate quality influences the competitiveness of a campaign independent of other campaign effects. Experienced candidates know when to contest a seat and when to take a pass. Higher-quality candidates can more easily overcome the recognition hurdle. Success rates in the general election are far higher for experienced or prominent candidates. (p. 28)

Gronke (2010) suggests that higher-quality candidates bring more competitive elections and as a result, there are more opportunities for them to build competitive coalitions and for the voters to choose.

In her study on elections in the United States, Lipsitz (2011) makes an argument in favor of improving the competitiveness of our elections. Lipsitz (2011) finds that our American democracy depends upon competitive elections and campaigns, especially negative campaigns because they inherently create information environments highly desirable for exposing voters to more information and a higher quality of information. In these environments, candidates supply more information about their candidacy and vision for the future – highlighting issues and how their platform intends to tackle the issues. And, conversely, these environments shed light on the platforms of their opponent(s) and their failings (Lipsitz, 2011). “Electoral challenges force incumbents to tell voters what they have done for them and offer their opponents a platform for disputing those claims” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 3). Unlike any other time during a candidate’s term, the information environment created during a campaign sheds light on information rarely available (Lipsitz, 2011). These actions inform the electorate or the body of persons eligible to vote in an election (Lipsitz, 2011). In essence, “voting begins with information” (Gronke, 2010, p. 148), and information “...is necessary in a democracy if voters are to make informed decisions about their representatives” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 2).

Lipsitz (2011) also finds that “even if...information is available at other times, most voters are only interested in hearing it when it directly bears on a decision they need to make [and], that is right before an election” (p. 3). Lipsitz (2011) identifies that most voters do not actively seek out information, but rather passively absorb it – paying attention when doing so

does not require any extra effort, time, or energy – therefore making quality information environments critical to campaigns.

Voters depend upon elections with two or more candidates running for an office for both communications and choice (Lipsitz, 2011). “Usually candidates who are unopposed are popular incumbents or belong to a party that is heavily favored. An unopposed incumbent has absolutely no reason to defend her record or tell voters what she plans to do in her next term” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 19). Lipsitz (2011) highlights that incumbents have a vested interest in “ensuring that serious challengers do not run in the first place” (p. 41). Lipsitz (2011) also identifies that candidates running unopposed should seize the opportunity to share information about their candidacy – rather than remain silent – because they can control the message and set the stage for the next campaign cycle where they may be running in an opposed election.

Political challengers identify issues with the performance of the incumbent and describe an alternative future for voters in the form of different policies or choices (Lipsitz, 2011). In challenged elections, the incumbent and the challenger spar for votes, and the electorate becomes more informed ultimately making the voter’s choice more clear (Lipsitz, 2011). This political sparring “serves as the basis of a substantive campaign information environment by providing candidates with an incentive to communicate with voters” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 19). According to Lipsitz (2011), “My analysis has shown that competitive elections, even those that are modestly or moderately competitive, generate information environments that help voters learn” (p. 179). When there is no competition between two or more candidates “there is only silence, which is not conducive to a health and vibrant democracy” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 19). As indicated by Lipsitz (2011), silence is the antithesis of competitive elections.

Local Government

The nearly 90,000 local governments have a massive influence on American society accounting for “over \$1.6 trillion in spending every year or roughly a quarter of the nation’s gross domestic product [and collecting] more in revenue than the federal government does in income taxes” (Oliver, 2012, pp. 1-2). With “three in four Americans [living] in a community under 100,000 in size” (Oliver, 2012, p. 3), the daily decisions made by local government have a more direct impact on the population than many of the laws and regulations made at the national level instructing us on many elements of our daily life. Local governments display widespread diversity with the economic and social makeup of their various constituencies, their purpose and function, size, and engagement with other civic and political institutions (Oliver, 2012).

Local government is where the real-world impact of decisions by elected officials affects the everyday lives of citizens most frequently (John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 2015). At a local level, residents experience engagements with their local Police, Fire, Street Maintenance, and Water departments, libraries, and schools, more frequently than they do with departments related to State and Federal Government. Local governments regulate issues of zoning, construction, and commercial development. They also influence behaviors like gambling, care of animals, use of bicycles, disposal of trash or recycling, and define what is obscene or noisy. Local governments regulate water quality, parties, parades, begging and loitering, smoking or vaping, public nudity, and one’s general demeanor in public places. The list is larger than what has been identified here, but in short, local governments decide many things that affect the daily lives of the voter and local elections are the time when the voters are deciding who will make decisions truly affecting their day-to-day lives.

The traits – size, scope, and bias – of local government position it differently from larger governments and how elections rollout are a prime example. “Electoral politics are much different in larger democracies than smaller ones, in broad-ranging institutions than narrow ones, and in democracies that direct resources to particular groups rather than those that distribute them universally” (Oliver, 2012, p. 5). Oliver (2012) explains:

Where a democracy resides on each of... [the three traits listed above] will determine whether ideological or civic-minded politicians run for office; whether citizens are mobilized to vote by racial appeals, financial incentives, or civic duty; and whether voters will base their decisions on issues, candidate charisma, partisanship, or other factors. Larger democracies, for instance, simply by having more people in them, are also more likely to have more potential candidates with the ambition or drive to seek leadership posts. Democracies that have greater scope are likely to foster more ideologically motivated candidates and parties. And, as democracies become more biased, their elections become more ‘partisan’ in the sense that there are now groups who are divided in a zero-sum competition over collective resources. Because of their differences in *size*, *scope*, and *bias*, the factors that shape electoral politics in most local elections are very different than those in presidential, state, or even big city contests (pp. 5-6).

Oliver (2012), indicates that local elections are more intimate events involving a small number of voters for offices with limited powers where the benefit of the power is applied more evenly across the constituencies.

With this knowledge, Oliver (2012) continues “We know comparatively little about local government and electoral politics in the United States” because “the overwhelming majority of people who...[study] politics...focus mostly on national elections” (p. 2). Oliver (2012)

continues to write that “nearly *all* the published scientific research on American electoral behavior has focused on presidential or congressional races” (p. 2). Oliver (2012) commends experts on their development of strong models for national elections but argues that these models are not right for explaining local voting. “National elections tend to hinge on partisan loyalties, candidate charisma, retrospective evaluations of economic conditions, and voters’ stances on a few key issues” (Oliver, 2012, p. 2). Oliver (2012) finds that these factors have “limited applicability to local elections: most are nonpartisan [because of their size, a candidate can directly contact the voter and ask for support]; the criteria for judging incumbents’ performance are unclear; contentious issues are often hard to identify; and, unlike national contests, we don’t have much of an understanding about what voters actually know about local candidates and issues” (p. 3). Oliver (2012) notes that local elections also, “get little media attention, and seem to provide voters with little public information to differentiate candidates” (p. 13). Oliver (2012) contends that the field of study on why people vote for president is well established, but the most experts can offer for votes for a local office is nothing more than conjecture. Oliver (2012) calls on the community of experts to “consider electoral politics in the smaller towns and cities where a majority of Americans actually reside” (p. 3).

Oliver (2012) indicates that while national elections are *highly ideological*, local elections are *managerial*, meaning the politics are primarily about on the job performance or *managerial competence* of the incumbent. “In most circumstances, incumbents will be successful if they simply maintain a preexisting equilibrium between taxes and services and if they can avoid major scandals or faux pas” (Oliver, 2012, p. 7). “As long as basic operations run smoothly and incumbents avoid being on the wrong side of a very visible issue or caught in a scandal, voters in most localities will probably not need to seek any more information and incumbents should have

an easy time getting elected” (Oliver, 2012, p. 31). Oliver (2012) contends that the real challenge is for incumbents to communicate their accomplishments, rally their supporters, and again, avoid political mistakes. Due to factors such as little or no compensation, challenging work efforts, and restricted opportunities for new projects or further growth, incumbents in local government often run unopposed and are secure in their rate of reelection.

Oliver (2012) shares that, unlike common misperceptions about local politics, “local voters are much more likely to embody the classical notions of an informed and rational *polis* than are national voters” (p. 8). This is largely due to the likelihood that the voter is a long-term resident, homeowner, or educated. Due to their engagement with their community and the incentives to protect property values, these citizens are not only more engaged and informed in local politics but also more likely to voice their vote (Oliver, 2012). “Local elections are dominated by homeowners, the educated, and the long-term residents – people who have strong emotional and material connections to their communities” (Oliver, 2012, p. 84).

Oliver (2012) writes, “It is precisely the voters who follow local affairs more closely who can determine whether a political challenger may provide better leadership than an incumbent” (p. 84). Oliver (2012) identifies that when conflicts or issues become known, “they are likely to be decisive in local politics precisely because of the types of people who turn out to vote” and this “highly engaged nature of the local *polis* also makes it exceedingly difficult to predict when and where specific issues are likely to emerge in an election” (p. 8). Oliver (2012) identifies that because of the local citizen’s involvement in their community, “local politics tends to be dominated by periods of general calm that are occasionally, and seemingly randomly, punctuated by intense tumult...triggered by what may seem trivial...to an outsider” (pp. 8-9).

Who Runs for Local Office

People who seek public office and their subsequent campaigns help to create information environments that define the choice for voters. Oliver (2012) writes, “Who runs for office (and how they run) determines whether a democratic organization operates as a true democracy or a plutocracy, oligarchy, or de facto autocracy” (p. 88). According to Oliver’s (2012) research, identifying which candidates will run for office is difficult. For over 50 years, scholars and political observers have offered disparate observations of who runs for city offices (Oliver, 2012). Oliver’s (2012) research confirmed that there are multiple explanations for who runs with each having a unique story, background, or distinct sets of circumstances behind their decision to run for public office. Oliver (2012) identifies that, most often, people who run for local office share the following criteria:

- “Long-term residents of their communities who were engaged in various civic projects before running” (p. 87); and
- “Are property holders who are deeply attached to the towns in which they live” (p. 87); and
- “Share a strong sense of civic obligation to do something to improve the quality of their communities” or motivated or tackle an important issue (p. 87); and
- Were personally ambitious, driven by a sense of civic duty, persuaded by friends or neighbors to run.

As mentioned earlier, scholars and political observers have different perspectives on the types of people who run for local office (Oliver, 2012). These experts view city offices as arenas for the local economic and social elites; captured by real estate and growth professional groups; or filled with party favorites, ideological zealots, or civically minded volunteers (Oliver,

2012). Oliver (2012); however, identifies that the characteristics of the people who run for a public office are dependent upon the type of office they are running for. Oliver (2012) finds that the question of who runs for office is also influenced by “the relative influence of personal ambition, civic responsibility, mobilizing issues, personal gain, political indignation or any other factor...according to where the democracy sits” (p. 89).

Finally, Oliver finds that “as in any managerial democracy, [the candidates running]...are motivated less by ideology, partisanship, or even personal ambition, than by a public-spirited commitment to sustaining the quality of their communities” (p. 89). Oliver (2012) also summarizes “the types of people who seek office and the campaigns they run are relative to the size, scope, and bias of a democracy” (p. 96). When a democracy is small with a limited scope and limited bias with how resources are distributed, the intentions of those who seek public office will lean towards the virtues of civic duty, responsibility, or social obligation instead of ideology or self-serving motivations (Oliver, 2012). Oliver (2012) also finds that as the size, scope, and bias increase in smaller democracies, motivations of the candidate become more focused on ambition, issue-based appeals, or ideology, and upon getting elected into office they are more likely to “govern in a more particularistic fashion” (p. 96).

With this understanding, Oliver (2012) writes, “In the universe of democratic organizations, most municipalities are smaller, limited in scope, and less biased in the distribution of their services (p. 97). With most being under 5,000 in population, municipalities are limited in their discretionary power and allocate a large portion of their budgets to efforts like police and fire protection, street maintenance, libraries, and administrative services (Oliver, 2012). With these qualities, the candidate who is interested in serving a municipal government are those that are interested in serving their community, have a sense of civic duty, and have the

social connections that link them to their fellow citizens, rather than political ambition for a higher office, motivations of financial embellishment, or burning ideological goals (Oliver, 2012).

Finally, Oliver (2012) concludes that local politics is dominated by civic commitments. In addition, “local politicians tend to be older, more educated, and more professional than the general population” (Oliver, 2012, p. 113). Local politicians hold intense feelings of civic obligation, an interest in the success of their local community, and a specific interest in local affairs. Local politicians are driven by the idea of serving their community or to correct a problem or perceived injustice. For them, writes Oliver (2012), “local politics is an activity with intrinsic rewards in itself” and “not a springboard for higher office, a mechanism for personal enrichment, or a vehicle to exercise an ideological vision” (p. 114). Oliver (2012) defines this group of politicians as the *civic elite* or “a group of residents who are differentiated primarily by their intense commitments to their local communities, their deep interest in local politics, and their willingness (often at considerable expense) to work on behalf of their neighbors” (p. 115).

How do Politicians who Run for Local Office and Win Run their Campaigns?

“Among political professionals, there is a well-established, conventional wisdom about how to run a local campaign: ingratiate yourself to local party leaders; make yourself known to local organizations; raise a lot of money; build a political ‘team’; canvas voters by knocking on doors; send out fliers, press releases, and other ‘professional’ materials; and seemingly most important, blanket your constituency with ubiquitous yard signs displaying your name” (Oliver, 2012, p. 108). Unfortunately, Oliver (2012) writes, “there is very little systematic evidence showing what, if any, decisive difference such activities make” (Oliver, 2012, p. 108). To

understand this further, Oliver (2012) examines the types of campaign activities suburban politicians engaged in and how these varied according to their community.

When comparing campaigns for mayors and council members, Oliver (2012) found that “roughly 8 in 10 mayoral candidates (both winners and losers) had previous experience in office and the most common experience among these mayors was being a city council member. By contrast, the least experienced group tended to be current city council members” (p. 108). Secondly, when considering the level of outside support and endorsements, “about two-thirds of the winning mayoral candidates were endorsed by a local paper compared to only 40 percent of their unsuccessful counterparts. Winning mayoral candidates were twice as likely to have received some support from a local party organization, although this overall number was quite small (about one in five)” (Oliver, 2012, p. 108). This observation didn’t play out the same for those who ran for the city council. Successfully elected candidates for mayor benefited from campaign spending; however, spending for candidates for city council seemed to be less effective in their elections (Oliver, 2012). A majority of campaigns for both the mayor and city council offices utilized printing and posting yard signs, canvassing voters door to door, using mailings and fliers, and mobilizing voters by phone and email as activities (Oliver, 2012).

Why Might the Phenomenon of Having No Identified Candidates Occur?

Workforce Scarcity & The Great Sansdemic

The Great Sansdemic. One large contributing factor not often discussed in the literature or in detail as a whole is *The Great Sansdemic* – a demographic drought. Hetrick et al. (2021) is “a demographic drought that is projected to worsen throughout the century and will impact every business, college, and religion. [It] is history catching up with us [and] we’ve been approaching the edge of this cliff for decades” (pp. 5-6). *The Great Sansdemic* is happening now and is a

time of not having enough people to replace the existing workforce. The Great Sansdemic has been brought on by three pre-existing conditions, including the lowest birthrates in history, the mass exodus of the baby boomers from the workforce, and the record low Labor Force Participation Rate of prime-age Americans (Hetrick et al., 2021).

The U.S. Labor Force Participation Rate, which measures people working or actively seeking work, has dropped to unprecedented lows. Hetrick et al. (2021) predict that this “demographic drought...[will] worsen throughout the century and will impact every business, college, and religion.” (pp. 5-6). While Hetrick et al. (2021) allude to the seriousness of the effects of *The Great Sansdemic* on business, college, and religion, they overlook the effects a low Labor Force Participation Rate has on both representative democracy and the operation of government. Certainly, as it pertains to government, a low Labor Force Participation Rate affects both elections to public office and the delivery of government-provided goods and services as it does for the private sector.

These headlines are common – “Minnesota could face ‘alarming’ health care worker shortage within five years” (Faircloth, 2022) and “Nearly 3 million U.S. women have dropped out of the labor force in the past year” (Cerullo, 2021). While the COVID-19 pandemic is recently credited for this demise and inciting *The Great Resignation of 2021*, the problem is more pervasive and a continuation of a trend of rising rates of persons leaving their careers (Fuller & Kerr, 2022, p. 1). Certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this reality and so has economic volatility, civil unrest (Moreland & Wightman, 2022) lack of a useful immigration policy (Lowell & Gerova, 2004), reductions in birth rates, and the Labor Force Participation Rates (LFPR) (Hetrick et al., 2021), lack of adequate training avenues to careers (Nayar et al., 2016; Hunt et al., 2019) and several other contributing factors. While the issue of the workforce

shortage has been studied in healthcare and other professions, what has not been adequately addressed is shortages of leaders – both political and bureaucratic – in government.

For example, one study of restaurant inspections in Louisiana by Realmuto, Hunting, & Parkin (2013) “evaluated the effects of public health workforce cuts on routine food safety inspections and the occurrence of critical violations” (p. 32) to find that without an adequate workforce, “the length of time between routine inspections nearly quadrupled” (p. 32) placing more people at risk for foodborne illness. While this concept is in its infancy of being explored in greater detail, this article illustrates the problem of how essential and expected government services are compromised without an adequate workforce. Certainly, there are more as it pertains to elections, open offices, and a dearth of candidates.

Shortages in the Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR). According to Hetrick et al.’s (2021) recent report, “In February 2020, before the COVID crisis, a record 70% of U.S. businesses reported a talent shortage. That was more than double the 32% of businesses who reported difficulty finding talent just five years earlier in 2015.” (p. 5). Since the COVID crisis, Hetrick et al. (2021) report that despite there being 7 million job openings, “19 million Americans filed for some form of jobless benefits as of March 2021” (p. 5). “The fact is, the U.S. Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR), which measures people working or actively seeking work, has dropped to lows we haven’t seen since the recession of the mid-1970s” (p. 5). Why is this occurring?

Low Birthrates. For the U.S. population to stay the same – meaning there is 1 child born for every person living – the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) needs to equal 2.1 children per 1 woman (Hetrick et al., 2021). Unfortunately, America’s TFR has been far below 2.1 since 1971 and the national and global rate of population growth continues to slow below this rate (Hetrick

et al., 2021). These trends mean that fewer younger people are rising through the ranks to attend college or enter the workforce (Hetrick et al., 2021). In essence, for over 50 years, we have experienced a baby bust – meaning there were never enough children born to replace exiting workers.

Accelerated Exit of the Baby Boomers from the Workforce. Born between 1946 and 1964, Boomers are an enormous cohort of 74 to 76 million Americans (Hetrick et al., 2021; Moreland & Wightman, 2022). This generation drove a labor force explosion responsible for driving economic growth and prosperity, shaping every institution they touched, and entering retirement as the “richest generation in American history” (Hetrick et al., 2021, pp. 7-9, 11-12). Boomers have been retiring at a rate of 2 million per year and during the COVID-19 pandemic, this trend escalated to 3 million (Hetrick et al., 2021). The accelerated exit of baby boomers from the economy is compounded by the fact that boomers are not being replaced. “Years of accumulated knowledge and experience, ...[is] tremendously difficult to transfer over to younger workers” (Hetrick et al., 2021, p.10).

Record Low Labor Force Participation Rates. Women are leaving the workforce by the millions with 2.4 million women having left between February 2020 to February 2021 (Hetrick et al., 2021). Reasons for this recent exodus include the curtailment or shutdown of business operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, needing to care for their families as schools transitioned to distance learning, and exhaustion from juggling both home life and work life (Hetrick et al., 2021).

This trend has overshadowed another mass exodus not widely discussed – men have been disappearing from the workforce for the last 40 years (Hetrick et al., 2021). In 1980, the prime age male workforce, ages 25 to 54, made up 38% of the workforce and by the end of 2019 had

dropped to just 34% of the workforce, resulting in 3 million fewer male workers in the workforce (Hetrick et al., 2021). This trend “isn’t a matter of men comprising a smaller slice of the pie...[it is] men opting out of the pie. [In addition,] Gen X, millennial, and Gen Z men increasingly don’t work” (Hetrick et al., 2021, p. 14).

With the overall participation of prime-aged men tanking, contributing factors include Boomer wealth and delayed responsibility, the opioid epidemic, and a fundamental attitude shift away from full-time work and towards part-time work (Hetrick et al., 2021). Boomers are expected to pass an estimated \$68 trillion to millennials continuing their sense of security and furthering them to be less motivated to seek careers of their own or move towards achieving life milestones, such as marriage, having children, or owning a home (Hetrick et al., 2021). A full 13% of millennials did not start their first job until they were over the age of 20 and a large percentage had not moved out of their parent’s homes (Hetrick et al., 2021).

In addition, the opioid use epidemic has been found to cause prime-aged men to stop participating in the Labor Force Participation Rate. “In 2015 alone, a staggering 860,000 prime-aged men were absent...due to opioids” (Hetrick et al., 2021, p. 17). Finally, with the Great Recession of 2008 erasing 4.5 million largely full-time jobs from male-dominated industries, prime-aged men moved into different industries largely comprised of part-time work and upon the economic recovery, did not return to full-time work and instead upped their leisure hours (Hetrick et al., 2021).

The Role of Immigrants. While immigration can temporarily slow the decline in population in the United States, as a solution it is temporary because many of the countries supplying America’s immigrants are themselves struggling with declining populations (Hetrick et al., 2021). “Fertility rates are dropping around the world” (Hetrick et al., 2021, p. 35). “The

top three countries that account for immigrants into the U.S. – Mexico, China, and India – are facing massive talent shortages of their own” (Hetrick et al., 2021, p. 35).

The Effects of the Great Sansdemic

Currently, the U.S. can expect to see a deficit of 6 million workers and 8.5 million workers in the years to come while 85 million jobs go unfilled around the globe (Hetrick et al., 2021). The U.S. needs to hire an estimated 2.3 million new healthcare workers by 2025 to maintain existing levels of care which are further exacerbated by the aging of the boomers and their healthcare needs (Moreland & Wightman, 2022). These shortages become a challenge, not only for hiring managers but for everyone because there are not enough workers to fill all job openings and this combination of factors means that two-thirds of the U.S. population could be financially dependent upon the remaining one-third by the year 2100 (Hetrick et al., 2021). As an example, "Given the steep cost of care for elderly dependents, the financial burden on the working-age population will be immense” (Hetrick et al., 2021, p. 23). Shrinking populations in Germany, the UK, and France equate to over \$1.2 trillion in lost revenue by 2030 and the U.S. stands to lose \$162 billion annually due to talent shortages (Hetrick et al., 2021). In short, declining population forecasts result in a declining economy as illustrated by the situation in Japan where schools have closed, universities struggle, debt to Gross Domestic Product has risen and elderly people are forced to care for themselves (Hetrick et al., 2021). Besides business, industry, and healthcare, certainly these trends affect government operations and participation in the election of candidates.

Young Americans Are Not Interested

“A high-quality, well-functioning democracy demands that the next generation hears—and then heeds—a call to public service” (Lawless & Fox, 2015, p. 3). Young people respond to

this call in a variety of different ways, including, but not limited to, community organizing, utilizing social media to encourage political awareness, working for nonprofits, socially conscious businesses or in government, conducting economic boycotts, participating in protests, and running for office. Elected officials help to create, influence, and put into effect laws that affect citizens now and for generations to come at all levels of government. “With more than 500,000 elected positions in the United States, the political system can sustain itself and succeed only if a large number of citizens eventually throw their hats into the ring” (Lawless & Fox, 2015, p. 3).

Government Bashing. In the United States, government bashing has become an ever-present state in political campaigns and politician rhetoric (Garrett et al., 2006) with bashing as a political diversion having been present since as early as 1866 (Yarwood, 1996). “One of America’s great national pastimes...is government bashing” (E.J. Dionne, 2003, p. 157). Garrett et al. (2006) identify that *bashing* occurs in two ways:

1. **Substantive bureaucracy bashing.** Substantive bureaucracy bashing refers to bashing as a means to an end where specific public policy proposals are advanced. An example would be criticizing supporters as an example of why the U.S. Department of Education and the Department of Energy should be abolished.
2. **Meaningless rhetoric bashing.** Meaningless rhetoric bashing refers to vague criticisms of government where the bashing is functionally and programmatically meaningless because they imply that there are blanket solutions to broad and genuine disagreements on the government’s role. Examples of this would be Ronald Reagan’s promise to get the government ‘off people’s backs’ and Jimmy Carter’s

pledge to ‘restore the confidence of our people in this nation’s governing institutions’ (p. 229).

Today, “we live in a time when the...bureaucracy seems to have reached a new low in public esteem” (Yarwood, 1996, p. 611). “Political messages [delivered by elected officials or candidates running for office] deriding government waste and abuse, high taxes, bureaucratic sloth, and overbearing regulations are not new” (Garrett et al., 2006, p. 228). According to Garrett et al. (2006), bashing affects government operations and policy implementation on two levels: One emotional, the other related to public policy and program management” (p. 232). Garrett et al. (2006) further explain that negative messages have dire effects on both public perceptions of government and on the leadership, relationships, morale, and effectiveness of the politician as well as an individual’s interest in being a candidate.

Reason 1: Alienation of Young Americans from Contemporary Politics. In their book, *Running From Office*, Lawless & Fox (2015) call attention to the “devastating and completely overlooked consequence of political dysfunction: its effect on future generations’ ambition to run for office” (p. 4). This political dysfunction is exemplified by numerous examples of *bashing the government* during the campaign and examples when elected officials celebrate failed policies or failed attempts to address societal problems, shut down the government, inhibit political appointments, make false claims about the intentions of their opponents, and repudiate compromise. The effect of these behaviors is that they not only create stalemates and gridlock, but they also damage both the public’s short-term political trust and confidence in government and also turn young people away from pursuing political office (Lawless & Fox, 2015; Shames, 2017).

Lawless & Fox (2015) surveyed 4,000 high school and college students, speaking at length with more than 100 of them, about “their political attitudes, life goals, personality traits, media habits, hobbies and interests, and family backgrounds” (p. 5). In their research, they found that “contemporary American politics leaves the future of American democracy on precarious footing” because today’s students “have grown up knowing nothing other than a politics characterized by nasty campaigns, partisan posturing, a media establishment focused on conflict and scandal, and political pundits who perpetually stoke the flames of public anger and dismay” (Lawless & Fox, 2015, p. 6). The current digital era and media landscape with accessibly available information as well as the 24-hour news cycle contributes to Americans’ ability to access the most negative information only reinforcing their negative perceptions (Lawless & Fox, 2015). Lawless & Fox (2015) identify that “this is not the kind of environment conducive to fostering or nurturing thoughts of a political candidacy later in life” (p. 6).

Lawless & Fox (2015) also found that “young Americans feel completely alienated from contemporary politics, are distrustful of politicians, and worse, look disdainfully upon the prospects of growing up to be a mayor, governor, senator, or even president of the United States” (p. 212). Young people have been given the impression that “political leaders are dishonest and self-interested, and that the political system is broken and ineffective” (Lawless & Fox, 2015, p. 19). In addition, young people’s mentors and sources of inspiration do not encourage them to ever consider running for office because they are also repelled from politics (Lawless & Fox, 2015). As a result, while young people have broad career interests and a strong desire to improve the world, pursuing politics as a path to achieve their goals is not of interest nor seen as a profession worth pursuing (Lawless & Fox, 2015). All demographic groups are disinterested in running for office – “black and white, rich or poor, liberal or conservative, [and] northeastern or

southern” (Lawless & Fox, 2015, p. 18). Like other books, Lawless & Fox (2015) offer suggestions related to how new technologies, national service programs, and strategic public service campaigns could reinvigorate political ambition or the desire to seek or hold political office in young people, yet they do not consider the quandary on if no one chose to run.

Reason 2: The Costs of Running Outweigh the Rewards. In her book, *Out of the Running*, Shauna L. Shames (2017), surveyed more than 750 Millennial law and policy school students to find that a large percentage, while wishing to *make their community a better place to live*, “generally perceived electoral politics as unrewarding” (p. 3). Shames (2017) identified that many Millennials identify that running for and holding office would “likely be exhausting and unrewarding” (p. 3) because “millennials view the [political] system as corrupt or inefficient and are particularly against experiencing the fundraising, frenzied media attention, and loss of privacy that have become staples of the American electoral process” (p. 231). Shames (2017) considers the *negativity, antipolitics, and incivility*, of our current political climate in her study indicating that all influence how the public perceives government. In her study, Shames (2017) identifies that many Millennials, who tend to be skeptical about large institutions, see risks and barriers when they consider running for office and few see high rewards in their career path. “Notably, they were not convinced that, even if they won office, they could do something useful” (p. 3).

Shames (2017) identifies that for a country that is as *wonderfully diverse* as the United States, those that hold elected offices are not representative of that diversity because the candidate pool lacks diversity. Shames (2017) argues that this occurs not because of systematic voter bias but rather because diverse individuals chose not to run. After all, they believe that the broken political system is not the best way to make a difference in the world. Shames (2017)

concludes her book by finding that “candidate deterrence occurs when perceived rewards fail to weigh significantly more than perceived costs” when running for political office (p. 6).

Reason 3: The Financial Implications. In their study, *To Emerge? Breadwinning, Motherhood, and Women’s Decisions to Run for Office*, Bernhard et al. (2021) write that “women’s absence from politics delegitimizes democracies” (p. 391) and focus their study on Democratic women because according to them, they are the most likely to run for political office in the United States. By examining data from an original survey of alumnae of the largest Democratic campaign training organization in the United States, Bernhard et al. (2021) studied the underrepresentation of women in the American political scene. Bernhard et al (2021) note that often this phenomenon is credited to low levels of political ambition, but the field of study has not addressed that many qualified and politically ambitious women decide not to run. In their paper, Bernhard et al. (2021) “revive the debate about family lives and political ambition, arguing that even for the most politically engaged and ambitious women, motherhood and income-earning responsibilities may suppress candidate emergence” (p. 380).

Bernhard et al. (2021) observed that an *income constraint* prevented poorer women from devoting time to political service and that a *breadwinner constraint* prevented women who were responsible for the vast majority of family income from entering political service. As part of their study, Bernhard et al. (2021) also reviewed how income and breadwinning interact with *household composition* or women who do not have financial support from other earners in the household. They theorize that when considered as a whole, these factors “suggest that the political economy of the household keeps many of the most ambitious women from emerging as candidates” (Bernhard, Shames, & Teele, 2021, p. 380). In essence, the demands of family life

and household financial burdens are barriers for politically ambitious women to run for public office.

Reason 4: Barriers based on one's perception of themselves, the unknown, or their sense of belonging. The organization *She Should Run* (n.d.) also identifies several other barriers to running for office relevant to this study besides the ones listed above. These include:

- Perceptions of oneself or one's family, such as not feeling qualified or confident; not seeing oneself as an elected official; feeling like one does not have a large network of people; not feeling confident with public speaking; feeling like one has too many flaws; feeling rejected if one doesn't win; feeling like one doesn't have the mental wherewithal to run; feeling that one doesn't have the right career background; feeling that one doesn't have the time, financial resources, would need to quit their job; fear, in general; or not feeling connected to one's community.
- The unknown, including not knowing where to start; what effort goes into being an elected official; how to campaign; or not knowing a lot about politics or public policy; not knowing why one should run; or not knowing where to find help for running.
- Sense of belonging, such as not belonging to a political party; or nobody in the community asked them to run.

In summary, we have explored what it means to have a *healthy and vibrant* democracy. In essence, they are most dependent upon having competitive elections between two or more candidates and a robust information environment to inform the voter. Local government has a scope of influence that most affects our daily lives and therefore having a highly qualified individual serving in elected office is most desirable to the voter. People have various reasons

why they chose or chose not to run for office and these vary depending upon which level of government office the candidate is seeking. Factors such as the *Great Sansdemic* and perceptions of the ability of the individual to be effective in a political climate where *government bashing* is prevalent negate the number of people interested in seeking office and as such, limit voter choice. Next, we turn to the methods we will use to conduct this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Question

As mentioned earlier, the central research question to this study is, *if a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?* More questions, identified later, will contribute towards the understanding surrounding this question. To explore this research question, I will turn to the method I intend to use to conduct the research.

Methodological Approach

For this study, I will use the phenomenological methodology because it allows me to highlight the rich descriptions and personal meanings of lived experiences related to when someone is chosen to hold an office, but never openly ran for the seat.

What is Phenomenology?

Commonly used in social science research, phenomenology was founded by Edmund Husserl (1859 to 1938) and adapted by Martin Heidegger (1889 to 1976) and others to capture personal experiences to find “the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 2018, p. 75). Phenomenological research has a foundation in philosophy and is about understanding a person’s lived experience and attaching meaning to the experience (Peoples,

2021). It asks the question of the research subject, *what is it like to experience a certain phenomenon?* When the question is presented to multiple people who have experienced the same situation, the researcher can make certain generalizations about it. Creswell & Poth (2018) identify that the main goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of an experience leading to learning what was experienced and how it was experienced.

Phenomenological research not only investigates everyday experiences, but it suspends any preconceived assumptions about a phenomenon. It is important to note that “phenomenological questions (both research questions and interview questions) are limited to experiences and do not ask about opinions, perceptions, perspectives, or any other thoughts about a topic. Within an experience, a person makes meaning of that experience, has perceptions about that experience, and interprets that experience, but the experience is neither meaning, perception, nor interpretation” (Peoples, 2021, p. 4). Researchers both honor the experience of the individual and can then construct meaning of the experience through the data analysis of the subject’s depiction of the experience and by calling attention to specific characteristics. The researcher has the goal of interpreting the event in concrete ways and comparing it to other similar types of events. By doing so, phenomenological researchers try “to understand and describe phenomena exactly as they appear in an individual’s consciousness” (Peoples, 2021, p. 5). Most importantly, phenomenological researchers “are not concerned with generating abstract concepts or hypothesis but aim to bring together the objective and subjective dimensions of experiences as lived” (Peoples, 2021, p. 5). “The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell & Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 2018, p. 75).

Using a Phenomenology Research Approach for this Study

In the case of this specific study, the phenomenon is the situation created when there is no identified candidate running for an open seat for public office and an individual is either appointed into or through a write-in campaign selected to serve in the seat. Each community affected by this phenomenon is likely different in *size*, *scope*, and *bias* as identified by Oliver (2012) and each community likely has a different type of *information environment* as identified by Gronke (2010). In addition, the reasons why one would decide not to run for political office differ between each possible candidate. A Phenomenological Research approach will capture some of these differences and aid in identifying common themes across multiple individuals who have lived this experience. As clarified by Creswell & Poth (2018), this method is best because it allows the researcher to “understand several individual’s common or shared experiences...[to] develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79).

Procedures and Instrumentation for Phenomenological Research

1. Use Interviews. As Creswell & Poth (2018) instruct the researcher to gather data from the individuals who have experienced the given phenomenon by using in-depth and multiple interviews. “Researchers [should] interview from 5 to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79). Creswell & Poth (2018) recommend asking two general questions:

1. *What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? And,*
2. *What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?*

They indicate that other questions may be asked and that other forms of data may be collected, including observations, but that these two questions will help to focus attention on data gathering leading to “textual and structural description[s] of the experiences, and ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79).

2. Use of Follow-up Interviews. This study relies upon having a solid interpretation of the meaning behind an experience as provided during an initial interview. If a solid interpretation of the participant’s meaning isn’t possible, a follow-up interview may be necessary to obtain clarification. Peoples (2021) directs follow-up interviews to be used as necessary “to address any gaps in data like misunderstandings, missing information, unclear information, etc.” (p. 50). Because so much is unknown before the initial interview, follow-up interview questions will have to be developed later, and the transcript of a follow-up interview integrated into the original analysis.

3. Use of Observational Field Notes. Creswell & Poth (2018) indicate that the use of a “predesigned form used to record information collected during an interview or observation...enables a person [the researcher] to take notes during the interview about the responses of the interviewee” (p. 169). Such a form can aid the researcher in organizing their thoughts, interview flow and process, use of interview questions, and serve as a place to record observations and reflections.

4. Generate Themes. Creswell & Poth (2018) also instruct the researcher to produce themes from an examination of important statements. The researcher should comb through the interview transcript noting important statements, “sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experience the phenomenon...[and use those to develop] clusters of meaning...[or] themes” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79).

5. Develop Textual and Structural Descriptions. Creswell & Poth (2018) indicate that the next step is to use the important statements and themes to write a description of what the participants experienced or a textual description. Creswell & Poth (2018) advise that researchers also should “write a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon, called a structural description or imaginative variation” (p. 80). Another addition could be to discuss the role of the researcher where they “write about their own experience and the context and situations that have influenced their experiences” (Creswell & Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 2018, p. 80).

6. Report the Essence of the Phenomenon. Using the textual and structural descriptions, Creswell & Poth (2018) indicate that it is important to combine them by writing a passage describing the common experiences of the participants or the essence of what was experienced.

7. Present the Common Understanding of the Experience in Written Form. Finally, Creswell & Poth (2018) instruct researchers to provide a “general reporting structure including an introduction to familiarize the reader with the phenomenon and in some cases, a personal statement of experiences from the researcher; research procedures to provide a rationale for the use of phenomenology, and philosophical assumptions and details about data collection and analysis; a report of how the phenomenon was experienced with significant statements; and a conclusion with a composite description of the essence of the phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 80).

As this phenomenological study is conducted, this researcher intends to utilize these procedures as outlined.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher of this study, my role must be one of facilitator, recorder, and observer. My role as the researcher is to attempt to access the thoughts, perceptions, observations, and feelings of the interview participants. The interviews I conduct can help me to understand specific situations and circumstances and learn what the results were. Once the data is collected, the primary role is to safeguard participants and their data and utilize the procedures outlined herein to interpret the meaning behind the data. Ultimately my role would be to “understand the beliefs and theories that inform the research” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 15).

Participants

Participants in this study will be elected officials, preferably the longest serving elected official, or the City Administrator in cities where the phenomenon occurred. Using data from the Minnesota Secretary of State’s Office or the League of Minnesota Cities, communities where this phenomenon has occurred will be identified and contacted. The specific focus will be on interviewing individuals from communities where the phenomenon occurred in 2022.

The first step being envisioned is to learn more about the data about the 2022 elections held by the League of Minnesota Cities or the Minnesota Secretary of State’s Office and to determine at what point in the election process it was generated. Given those results, there may be a need to create a brief online survey using an instrument, like Survey Monkey, to help identify municipalities in Minnesota where no candidate actually ran for openings as Mayor, City Council, City Clerk, City Clerk-Treasurer, or City Treasurer and how those openings were ultimately filled. As Creswell & Poth (2018) indicate, this sampling strategy is known as *a purposeful sampling*. “A purposeful sample...will intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination” (p. 148). Contact

information of survey respondents can be obtained from the League of Minnesota Cities or the internet and a survey can be sent to each. Using an online tool, such as Survey Monkey, would help to accelerate the completion and compilation of the data results.

At the time of this writing, the actual participants in the study are presently passively identified, meaning the communities that experienced the phenomenon are known, but the individuals who surround the open seat have not been identified. When this research commences, I intend to collect demographic data on each participant, including but not limited to age, gender, seat name, ethnicity & race, geographic location, occupation, and prior income bracket. Given the unknowns as identified above, it is difficult to predict the sample size for the study. Attempts will be made to interview as many individuals from 131 city elections that experienced the phenomenon in 2022 as possible.

Limitations & Possibilities of an Expanded Study Group

This study is limited to communities that have experienced the phenomenon of having open elected offices where no publically identified candidate was on the ballot. The interview subject will be persons who surround the seat, including elected officials and the City Manager or Administrator or others on the periphery of the phenomenon. It is believed that these persons can offer a more robust perspective due to their experience than the actual individual who was installed into the open seat, either through write-in, appointment, or another process. In addition other individuals surrounding the individual who was installed, or communities, at large will not be interviewed but could offer a different perspective.

As the study progresses, a need to interview others may arise. At present, leaders of the following groups may be interviewed for purposes of adding critical details or providing clarifications where needed:

- Other leaders, not previously identified, of municipalities where no one has run for an open office;
- Staff from the League of Minnesota Cities;
- Staff from the League of Women Voters;
- Staff from the Common Cause; or
- Other leaders or organizations not yet identified but who have insights or perspectives on this issue.

Also, depending upon the sample size, subsequent interviews may extend to the leaders of School Districts, the Minnesota School Boards Association, the Association of Minnesota Counties, or the leaders of Counties, if necessary

Recruitment of Participants

The method for identifying participants for this study are as follows:

1. Using data obtained from the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office or the League of Minnesota Cities indicating which communities the phenomenon occurred, an internet search to identify the current office holder will be initiated. The goal would be to obtain contact information of the longest serving elected official surrounding this office or the City Manager or Administrator, or the former incumbent who chose not to run for the seat. If this yields no viable source, a phone call will be placed to the city offices in search of the same type of information.
2. Contact will be initiated with the interview participants identified previously. Communicating will occur either through email or through a telephone conversation. With either mode, I will introduce myself and my background, discuss this research question, the purpose of the study, confirm that the phenomenon has been

- experienced, and request the individual's participation in an interview to be scheduled at a future date, and determine if there are any barriers for being interviewed remotely and recorded on Zoom or another electronic platform. I will reiterate to the individual that their participation is optional.
3. If the person agrees to the interview, the interview will be scheduled for a future date and time. Adjustments will be made to accommodate any limitations related to technology and the use of Zoom as the method to record the interview. An alternative option would be to record a telephone call or if time allows, record an in-person interview with the individual.

Ethical Considerations, Confidentiality, and Bias. Should I discover that I have any prior personal or professional relationships with the individual, I will note the nature of the relationship and ask them if they wish to remove themselves from participating in the interview so that I can avoid any perception of a power differential (Peoples, 2021). Before the interview, I will provide a disclosure outlining the purpose of the study and the research question, the right of refusal to participate and the right to discontinue participation at any time, and the list of demographic and interview questions. It is essential that "every participant is notified of possible threats and potential benefits of research participation and provides written consent for participating in the study" (Peoples, 2021, p. 52). At the time of the interview, I will share this information again with the individual and obtain signature on the consent.

Since the communities where no one openly ran for office are known to the public and since the result post-election is known and since the overall beginning number of communities is low, it will be difficult to keep the participant's identity anonymous. That being said, all efforts will be made to avoid politically controversial subjects that may negatively affect the

participants. In addition, I will develop a method to protect the privacy of the individuals participating in the study, the recording of their interview, and any subsequent data generated. “For the protection of participants, it is essential that researchers mask participant names as soon as possible to avoid inclusion of identifiable information in the analysis files” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 182). For purposes of this study, the anonymity of the interview participants will be protected by assigning numbers to individuals. In addition, the names of the participants, demographic data, dates of interviews, and position titles of the person being interviewed will be stored separately in a password-protected folder on a password-protected computer. A unique identifier will be used to link notes and transcripts from the interview to the interviewee. Doing so will assure that the identity information is disassociated from the observations of the interviewee and the interview results can remain anonymous. In addition, files will be kept digitally in a password-protected computer and password-protected electronic file.

Furthermore, it is also not known if personal biases or ethical issues will present themselves during the study. Peoples (2021) instructs researchers to make personal biases explicit and as indicated by Creswell & Poth (2018), ethical issues may arise “during several phases of the research process, and they are ever expanding in scope as inquirers become more sensitive to the needs of participants, sites, stakeholders, and publishers of research” (p. 54). Creswell & Poth (2018), indicate that plans should be designed to address ethical issues related to respect for the persons being studied, concern for their welfare, and justice. Since biases and ethical issues are largely unknown at present, the plan to identify each during the research process will be to journal about them. This will allow for personal reflection and developing a plan of action if one is needed.

Procedures

Use of Observational Field Notes

During the interview written notes may be taken as necessary to track key points, any key visual cues, and environmental or technology nuances.

Pre-interview

Once interviews are scheduled, a letter of introduction will be sent with the permission to interview consent form to interviewees. Before the interviews, interview questions will be sent in advance to help focus the participant on the subject and pre-identify relevant areas of insight.

While interviews could be completed in person or via telephone, for ease of transcribing the interview content and to overcome distance and logistical challenges use of the videoconferencing software Zoom will occur, if the interviewee can participate using such a method (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019).

Interview

On the day of the interview and if the interviewee can utilize Zoom, the connection will be tested and Zoom will be used to record the interview. Interview participants will be welcomed, provided a copy of the consent [signature will be obtained], a discussion of the purpose of the interview and the process for conducting the interview will be shared, and the interview participant will be assured that they may cease the interview at any time and that methods for assuring confidentiality will be taken. Demographics will be collected at the start of the interview either using a form or as part of the interview.

Interview Outline

A predesigned form will serve as a guide for the researcher to conduct the interview and gather data. It will outline the intended interview process, the necessary introductory steps,

forms or documents that need to be reviewed with the participants, collect demographic information of the participant, the purpose of the interview, the data protection methods that will be used, and the list of interview questions. This will allow the interview to be semi-structured so that all questions can be covered and yet there can be an opportunity for spontaneity.

Concluding the Interview Activities

The interview will be concluded by thanking the interview participant for their participation and offering to share the final product. The recording will be automatically ceased once the Zoom videoconference is concluded. The Zoom recording will be downloaded in both a digital multimedia video (.mp4) and audio (.mp3) format. These files will be saved to a secure file on a password-protected computer. After the download, the quality of both recordings will be verified. An easy-to-remember taxonomy to file and name the files will be utilized. Next notes noting reflections of the interviews will be sorted into descriptive and reflective information categories.

Data Collection Procedures

This phenomenological research is intended to highlight an experience as it is lived and how it is experienced. As suggested earlier, data will be derived from interviews with individuals experiencing the phenomenon. It is expected that the interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes and will be conducted by myself. Follow-up interviews, if they are needed, may take between 30 and 60 minutes. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom or another agreed on and easily assessable alternative that allows recording. These interviews will be recorded, and the recording will be transcribed. If, at any time, the participant requests to stop the interview, the interview and the recording will stop.

Electronic Transcription

Since, “transcription is one step qualitative researchers across the world take on their way to managing and analyzing recorded data and transcription is also a crucial aspect of the data management process for anyone conducting advanced data analysis” (Matheson, 2007, p. 548), a Voice Recognition Software (VRS) software can be utilized to automatically transcribe the digital recording and ease the time-consuming task of transcribing the interviews manually (Matheson, 2007). Because of security protections, history of use by researchers, ease of use, and cost, Happy Scribe [at <https://www.happyscribe.co/about>] has been chosen to transcribe the uploaded audio file into text form. Happy Scribe allows for the playing of the audio file in sync with the text file to assure an accurate transcription. Peoples (2021) indicates that it is important to listen to participant voices because of nonverbal cues or how something is said. Nonverbal cues account for 65% to 70% of communication (Peoples, 2021). With this, it is important to listen for “certain inflections, tones accentuation, tempo, acceleration, modulation, and things that may go ‘unsaid’ [because they] are all part of the data” (p. 54). By using Happy Scribe, I can achieve this.

During the transcription review, errors in words and spelling will be corrected; however, little effort, unless it helps to enhance or clarify meaning, will be spent on correcting punctuation, capitalization, or the delineation of new paragraphs. Happy Scribe will also be used to identify the speaker, collect demographics, and automatically note the timestamp of the various text. Upon completion of the review and editing phase, the transcribed file will be downloaded into a Microsoft Word file and saved to a secure folder on a password-protected computer.

After reading the initial transcript, a follow-up interview may be needed to fill gaps in information, such as clarifying incomplete, unstated, misunderstood, missing data, or any other area that seems unfinished or misunderstood.

Data Analysis Procedures

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), “data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data...for analysis; then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes; and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or discussion” (p. 183). Alternatively, Peoples (2012) writes, “the term *data analysis* is not completely in line with phenomenological inquiry simply because *analysis* means to ‘break into parts’ whereas phenomenological inquiry seeks to understand a phenomenon as a whole” (p. 57). Because of this, Peoples (2021) identifies that the method of analyzing phenomenological data is emergent with a goal of presenting “a description from essential themes of an experience in a way that is comprehensible and identifiable to anyone who has had that particular experience” (p. 58). Peoples (2021) challenges researchers to transcend “the mundane nature of each description to reveal the essence of the phenomenon” (p. 58). Given this, the following data gathering, and analysis procedures will be utilized as suggested by Peoples (2021):

1. Results of the interview transcription will be reviewed and field notes will be added.
2. The entire transcript will be read to understand the participant’s complete story. Irrelevant or unnecessary language, like filler linguistics [phrases such as um, uh, well, or you know], will be removed.
3. Preliminary meaning units exposing a feature or trait of the phenomenon will be created.

4. Preliminary meaning units will be broken down further to identify final meaning units or themes, informed by the understanding of the participant's description.
5. Themes are reported under each specific question with quotes of specifics or experiences being added to create a broader understanding. This is called creating a situated narrative.
6. Situated narratives are combined into general narratives where themes of all participants are integrated. This unifies the participants' accounts.
7. The final step is to discuss the themes that were embedded in most of the participants' descriptions of their experiences. This step joins the major themes into a thorough general description.

Use of Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software

Since Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) software is now being used to undertake the task of qualitative coding, the use of a CAQDAS has been investigated (Silver, 2015). Peoples (2021) advises researchers to code phenomenological research *by hand* because using a software requires more work. Peoples (2021) also admits that “how a researcher uses qualitative data analysis software makes all the difference in producing a quality phenomenological research study” (p. 67). Peoples (2021) suggests the following steps to enrich the coding of phenomenological data using software:

1. When coding or memoing, consistently remember that the words being read were shared by a person who lives within the world context and is connected to others.
2. Stay immersed in the information and the entire experience rather than using the software to reduce the data into smaller, more manageable parts.

3. Write down personal reactions to the data being analyzed. This action will illuminate areas of personal revelation or provide you with a frame of reference.
4. Listen to the participants' voices from the video or audio recordings so that you can sense their experiences on a deeper level and stay immersed in the experience of what is being stated.
5. Reread the entire transcript at any point when you feel distant from the stories.
6. Share participant transcripts [after identifiers have been removed] with other researchers, have them read them, and discuss what stands out to them. This will help validate understanding.
7. Stay in touch with other phenomenological studies and works of other philosophers.
8. Take breaks from the data analysis so that you can unconsciously gain further insights into the phenomenon that you may miss when being too immersed in and present with the data.
9. Supplement the data analysis compiled through the software analysis with a vivid portrayal of the phenomenon (pp. 67-68).

Considering these steps, I intend to utilize qualitative data analysis software to aid in coding. Delve [<https://delvetool.com/>] is a qualitative data analysis software that is simple to use and allows for consistent coding between various interview transcripts.

Data Analysis, Sorting, and Coding. Electronic interview files can be imported into Delve. Delve can be used to match keywords and sort sentences together based on the keywords. These similar clusters of sentences will be reviewed and each sentence coded using a fluid, “custom-built” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 185) method where codes are identified through the meaning conveyed by the sentence. Codes will be sorted into themes similar to emergent ideas.

Once codes and themes are established, electronic files will be saved in Microsoft Word in a secure folder on a password-protected computer.

Based on past learnings, it is important to remember to remove interview text unrelated to the core of the interview and unrelated statements made by the interviewer or interviewee during the interview before loading the interview transcript into Delve. Doing so will eliminate irrelevant text and reduce the amount of coding that will be needed to address irrelevant statements.

Strategies for Validating Findings and Achieving Reliability

A strategy for validating findings is for “the researcher [to] disclose their understanding about the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to the qualitative research study from the outset of the study so that the reader understands the position from which the researcher undertakes the inquiry” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261). I intent to document biases and follow the data to its natural conclusion, rather than trying to validate already known research. Another strategy would be to provide a detailed description of participants’ experiences where the patterns and themes are put into context. Finally, it is anticipated that this study will use multiple participants, each being of a different background, serving a different community, and likely unaware of the other. Doing so will create a broader and more in-depth meaning of the phenomenon.

Interview Questions

The problem this research is trying to contemplate and further contribute value to the existing body of research is if *a healthy and vibrant democracy* is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?

Peoples (2021) recommends, “When interviewing participants, researchers can give participants

a brief introduction about the focal point of the research to set the tone and then ask participants to describe their lived experiences as if to someone who had never heard of the phenomenon being studied” (p. 53). I intend to do this.

Peoples (2021) recommends a semistructured interview protocol and this method will be used for this study. “Semistructured interviews allow students to keep a balance between focusing on the research topic and allowing for a disciplined naturalness in phenomenological research [whereby the participant is allowed to share] other information that may end up being relevant to the study.” (Peoples, 2021, pp. 52-53). Given this format, the following interview questions will be asked of the participant albeit, as encouraged by Peoples (2012), I may change the interview questions as appropriate because new questions arise.

For Elected Officials or City Administrators

Demographic Questions. The following demographic questions will be asked:

1. What is the current elected office you hold?
2. What is your age, race, and gender?
3. Are you single or in a financially interdependent relationship?
 - a. *If in a financially interdependent relationship*, how would you define it and how long have you been in it?
4. Do you have dependents and if so, how many?
5. How long have you lived within the community you now represent?
6. At the time of being installed in your current office, what was your living arrangement – meaning did you own your home, rent, or have another arrangement?

7. Were you employed before being installed in office? If so, what type of employment did you have, and for how many years? Are you still employed there? Has that employment time been reduced since your installation?
8. If you would be willing to share, what is a rough estimate of your annual income?
9. What is your highest level of education?
10. Had you served in a prior elected office? If so, what was the office?
11. Do you have aspirations for higher elected office? If so, what are those?
12. What would you describe your political affiliation as?

Community & Environment Questions. The following questions about the local community and environment questions will be asked:

1. What is the type of community you represent? [City, School District, Township, etc.]
2. How large is the community you represent?
3. What is your experience of how the community receives its local news and information, including information about local government seats open?
4. How did your colleague get installed into the position?
 - a. *If a write-in*, how was he or she selected?
 - i. How many votes did he or she obtain and what percent of the total votes cast were cast?
 - b. *If an appointment*, what was the process and terms of the appointment?
 - c. *If neither a write-in nor an appointment*, how was the seat filled?

Core Interview Questions. The following questions about the phenomenon will be asked:

1. What is your experience of a healthy and vibrant democracy?

2. As an individual near a person installed into an elected office without being named on the ballot, describe your experience both before and after the installation occurred. [Meaning, what have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?]
3. Can you describe the contexts or situations that influenced the selection of this individual into the office.
4. Describe your experience of the circumstances surrounding the election before the seat was filled.
5. Can you describe why the installed individual didn't choose to openly run [have his or her name appear printed on the ballot] for the office they currently hold?
6. Can you tell me what your experience was of voter knowledge of the installed individual's qualifications, background, vision, goals, etc.?
7. What do you believe inspires or motivates your new colleague to serve in elected office?
8. What is your experience of the big issues the community is facing and how you are helping to address those needs?
9. What is your experience of the reaction of the voters?

For Individuals on the Periphery of the Phenomenon

Demographic Questions. The following demographic questions will be asked:

1. What is your current employment?
2. What is your age, race, and gender?

3. If you would be willing to share, what is a rough estimate of your annual income?
4. What is your highest level of education?
5. What would you describe your political affiliation as?

Community & Environment Questions. The following questions about the local community and environment questions will be asked:

1. What is your experience of a healthy and vibrant democracy?
2. What is your experience of why people run for local elected office?
3. What is your experience of why people continue to serve in local government office after gaining the seat?
4. What current challenges do you feel local city governments face?
5. What is your experience of the local news environment, meaning where do voters obtain information about local elections or City business?
6. What are your thoughts about the consolidation, erosion, loss, and closures of local newspapers or radio stations?
7. What are your thoughts about using social media to communicate city business?
8. Should the voter or member of the public be able to easily access local elected public officials? What are your thoughts and why?

Core Interview Questions. The following questions about the phenomenon will be asked:

1. Often local municipal elections have experienced situations where there is no identified candidate on the ballot for election of Mayor, City Council or City Administrator, if elected. These positions have been filled through write-in

- candidacy or appointment. Are you familiar with this phenomenon and what has been your experience of it?
2. What do you believe are the barriers to running openly for a local election (meaning why would candidates not place their names on the ballot)?
 3. Do you feel the people installed in the office through write-in candidacy or appointment hold the same commitment to serving the community as those who choose to have their name on the ballot and won their seat? (Meaning do they make the same effort?)
 4. Do you feel that these individuals demonstrate the same responsibility to the voters?
 5. For a newly elected individual, what is needed most?

Chapter 4: Data/Findings

Introduction

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, a healthy and vibrant democracy is resilient in the face of change, protects the dignity and rights of each individual, removes barriers to equitable participation, exposes undue influence, relies upon checks and balances, reigns in overreaches of power, respects the rule of law, nourishes independent journalism, fosters an environment for the population to flourish, and encourages leaders to act with integrity, compromise, utilize facts, and nurtures the common good. To realize these goals, democracies require that there be a connection between citizens and representatives, and they rely upon the informed participation of citizens (Michels, 2011). The level of citizen participation impacts the quality of democracy. Citizen participation takes many roles, including that of voter and elected representative.

As it pertains to local elections – those for City, Township, School Board, and other offices – we know little about the electoral politics in these communities even though the daily decisions made by local government have a more direct impact on the population. At the local level, who runs for office is determined by their ownership interest in their community, having a strong sense of civic obligation, and being encouraged by their family, friends, neighbors, or through their ambitions. At the local level, who runs for office and how they conduct themselves determines whether the government operates as a true democracy, a plutocracy, an oligarchy, or a de facto autocracy.

Our democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for elected office and the field of study often assumes that in elections someone will always run. This study, however, doesn't rely upon such an assumption and asks the question, what are the effects on a healthy and vibrant democracy if the ballot was empty with no obvious candidate running for an

elected office and the seat was filled through a write-in campaign where a majority of the voters did not select the winner? It is assumed that the electorate solves the problem of not having candidates on the ballot by writing in a candidate or if no write-in candidate is viable, a willing individual is appointed into the open office but that may not always be true. Doing so, however, not only removes the competitive environment of elections but also removes the information environment necessary to inform the voter and inhibits the ability of the voter to select the best candidate for the office. If a vacuum is created in the information environment because no one is running for office, what does this mean for informed citizen involvement and a democracy reliant upon such a principle? Since local governments have a massive influence on American society, what does this anomaly mean at the local level and to the principles of democracy?

This study was conducted using the phenomenological qualitative research method because it allows me to highlight the rich descriptions and personal meanings of lived experiences related to when someone is chosen to hold an office, but never openly ran for the seat. Phenomenological research is about understanding a person's lived experience and attaching meaning to that experience. It is the goal of the phenomenological researcher to construct meaning of the experience through the data analysis of the subject's depiction of the experience and by calling attention to specific characteristics.

Establishing the Purposeful Sample

As described previously, in 2022, Minnesota experienced 131 city and township elections where the seat was filled through write-in. Data from the League of Minnesota Cities was compared against data from the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office and the study sample was further narrowed by sorting out township elections from city elections. This allowed me to identify 84 city elections where the phenomenon occurred. All of these 84 city elections were in

rural Minnesota and took place in cities having populations from as low as 10 to just over 9,000. A majority or 70 elections took place in a city with less than 500 residents.

Through further analysis, it was discovered that cities with a population of less than 500 residents most often had no official city website depicting relevant city information, including who was on staff or who was serving in elected positions. Without an official city website, it was determined that these cities had no official source of information maintained by the city and therefore, a decision was made to further narrow the study sample to cities with a population greater than 500 residents. Cities with a population greater than 500 often had city websites listing the relevant information of who was their city staff and/or elected officials. This decision yielded 14 cities that would ultimately be invited to be part of this study. The breakdown by population is depicted in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Study Sample: Population Range and Count of Cities

Population Range	Count of Cities in the Sample
500-1499	10
1500-2499	2
6500-7499	1
8500-9499	1

Note. N = 14

Recruitment and Outreach Efforts

As discussed in Chapter 3, participants in this study were intended to be elected officials, preferably the longest-serving elected official, or the City Administrator in cities where the phenomenon occurred during the 2022 election. To connect with the intended study participants, it was necessary to identify who those individuals were and identify if they would be willing to participate in this study. To complete this identification, the City Administrator was identified from the city's website and an email (see Appendix A) was sent to 13 cities on November 3,

2023. For the fourteenth, during the gathering of email addresses, it was discovered that one city did not have a city email published on its website. This city, instead, relied upon a web-based form on its webpage to initiate contact. For this city, contact was made using the webform and emails were sent to all the other cities. The email provided information about the purpose of the study and invited the city administrator to participate or help identify participants for the study, specifically a city council member or mayor, preferably the longest-serving member.

Within seconds of sending the email invitation, a reply was received from one city indicating that the published city email was not valid. The email address was verified, another email was sent, and another error message was received. Considering this barrier, efforts were made to call this city with the intent of describing the study and asking for leads on possible participants. Unfortunately, the outgoing voicemail message from the published city number *was odd* but a message was left regardless. No call back was received from this city and in the subsequent weeks, a web search was conducted to identify the contact information for the city administration, mayor, or city council. Once obtaining the necessary information, contact was initiated again.

Responses to the 14 contacts began to trickle in. Within days, two City Clerk's responded with a list of possible interview participants. Those individuals were emailed on November 9, 2023, inviting their participation in the study. Having received no further responses, a follow-up message was sent to all 14 communities on November 12, 2023. This yielded two additional responses indicating that my email had been forwarded to city council members. Again, no further contact was received.

On November 20, 2023, a subsequent email was sent to the mayor and city council members for 8 cities who published the email addresses for those individuals on their website.

Unfortunately, 6 of the 14 cities only published the names of the mayor and city council members and did not publish email addresses for those individuals or a telephone number. Of the 8 cities that had published the email addresses, only 5 also included telephone numbers. Again, responses began to trickle in. On November 28, 2023, the first interview was scheduled for December 1st, 2023 using an email invitation similar to Attachment B.

Believing that email contact was not yielding significant responses, contact via telephone was initiated on November 28, 2023. A brief script was used to introduce myself, and the project, and request participation in an interview or a referral to an individual who might be interested in participating in the study. When no one answered the initial telephone call, messages were left using the information from the script and inviting a return call. As a result of this effort, a second interview was scheduled on November 29, 2023, for December 1, 2023.

One city staff from one of the 6 cities who didn't publish contact information for their elected officials agreed to participate after receiving the telephone inquiry and after reviewing the interview questions and consent declined in a follow-up phone call. Considering this staff's position, the individual was asked for the contact information for the mayor and the city council members. The response was curious and quickly provided. The "mayor would not be recommended [and] the city council members are not allowed to speak to such things" (C13). This response was similar to another city staff who declined to be interviewed but when pressed for the contact information of the mayor or city council responded that she "wasn't comfortable providing their private contact information" (C12).

After each interview, recommendations for additional participants were sought from the interview participant. In a snowball sampling strategy, the hope was that if participants had a good experience they would be willing to help recruit other interviewees (Marcus, Weigelt,

Hergert, Gurt, & Gelleri, 2017). This yielded mixed results and a chance to promote the study and find additional participants at a regional city meeting.

After these recruitment activities, 2 cities responded and indicated that no one from the city was interested in participating in the study. Four cities didn't respond in any way. In the end, 9 interviews were scheduled and 8 were held due to one individual dropping out at the last minute.

Concerned about the surprising lack of response, I consulted with my dissertation committee about methods to proceed and they suggested extending the invitation to individuals on the periphery of the phenomenon, meaning persons who are aware of the phenomenon but were not serving the actual communities experiencing the phenomenon during the 2022 election. Such agencies and organizations included the Minnesota Secretary of States Office, the Minnesota Association of Small Cities, the League of Minnesota Cities, the Southeastern Minnesota League of Municipalities, the Citizen's League, the League of Women Voters, and others. On January 6, 2024, an email similar to the one in Appendix C was sent to these organizations inviting their participation in this study. Ultimately, this yielded another 6 interview participants for a total of 14 participants.

According to Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot (2013), "most qualitative methodologists openly recognize the lack of standards for sample size. At the same time, some qualitative methodologists are not troubled by the lack of guidelines, even considering the vague nature of sample size guidelines as a reflection of the qualitative orientation to research" (pp. 11-12). Given the lack of guidelines on what constitutes an adequate sample size, it was determined that 14 participants were sufficient.

Settings

As discussed in Chapter 3, most participants in this study were interviewed using Zoom Video Conferencing and participated from either their home or their work sites with myself located in a quiet room without distractions. In one instance, a participant was located at their worksite and was interrupted by a colleague, and in another instance, a participant was located in their home and had to move between rooms because their pet cockatiel was *extra talkative* that morning. Besides these instances, there were no notable or unique circumstances about the settings of the interviews.

Participant Demographics

In this section, I will highlight some key demographic information related to the study participants. As illustrated in Table 4.2, the participants included 6 females and 8 males. Seven participants were under age 55 with the youngest being age 37. Seven participants were older than age 55 with the oldest being age 76. All participants were Caucasian. Ten participants were married, 2 were single, and 2 did not supply their marital status. Income levels ranged from a low of \$30,000 per year to a high of \$150,000 per year with efforts made to limit income to only the income of the individual participating in the interview and not any other household member. It is important to note that the income of the study participant may have been obtained from multiple sources and not just the position the participant holds or held at the city level of government. One participant identified that the highest level of education they obtained was a high school diploma, 6 had obtained their bachelor's degree, 6 had obtained a master's degree, and 1 had obtained a doctoral degree. Related to political affiliation, 4 identified as Democrats, 4 identified as Independents, 2 as Nonpartisan, 1 as Republican, 1 as a Libertarian, 1 didn't

identify an affiliation, and 1 identified as *Omnipartisan*, stating that they *liked elements of all parties*.

Table 4.2

Participant Demographics

Participant Number	Gender	Age	Race	Marital Status	Full-Time Income Level	Highest Level of Education	Political Affiliation
1	Female	46	Caucasian	Married	\$120,000	Master's	Nonpartisan
2	Male	43	Caucasian	Single	\$94,000	Master's	Unknown
3	Female	63	Caucasian	Single	\$60,000	Bachelor's	Democrat
4	Male	67	Caucasian	Married	\$100,000	Master's	Democrat
5	Male	64	Caucasian	Married	\$45,000	High School	Republican
6	Female	52	Caucasian	Married	\$52,000	Bachelor's	Independent
7	Female	37	Caucasian	Married	Withheld	Bachelor's	Independent
8	Female	44	Caucasian	Married	\$85,333	Master's	Democrat
9	Female	62	Caucasian	Married	\$30,000	Bachelor's	Omnipartisan
10	Male	66	Caucasian	Married	\$128,000	Bachelor's	Independent
11	Male	76	Caucasian	Married	\$75,000	Doctorate	Democrat
12	Male	57	Caucasian	Unknown	\$125,000	Master's	Independent
13	Male	38	Caucasian	Unknown	Withheld	Master's	Nonpartisan
14	Male	42	Caucasian	Married	\$150,000	Bachelor's	Libertarian

Table 4.3 illustrates additional demographic data obtained from study participants. Of the 14 participants, 8 came from communities that experienced the phenomenon in 2022 and 6 were on the periphery. Three individuals were currently serving in the role of city administrator or city clerk, 1 of the individuals was a retired city administrator, 4 were members of the city council, 2 were mayors, and 4 were in the roles of associate director, director, or program director. All but 2 owned their home and lived in their respective city between 8 and 52 years with an average of 26.05 years for the participants who disclosed homeownership status. The populations of the cities represented by these participants ranged from 544 to 7,472 persons.

Table 4.3***Additional Demographic Information of Study Participants***

Participant Number	Connected to Phenomenon or on the Periphery?	Role	Did the participant Own or Rent in the Community	Length of Time Living in the Community (in years)	City Population
1	Connected	City Council Member	Own	18	7,472
2	Connected	City Administrator	Own	15	927
3	Connected	City Council Member	Own	38	544
4	Connected	Mayor	Own	31.5	764
5	Connected	City Clerk - Elected	Own	31	640
6	Connected	City Clerk - Nonelected	Own	52	544
7	Connected	City Council Member	Own	8	7,472
8	Periphery	Associate Director	Own	NA	NA
9	Periphery	Executive Director	Own	NA	NA
10	Periphery	City Clerk/City Administrator - Retired	Own	33	2,458
11	Periphery	Mayor	Own	14	1,775
12	Periphery	Program Director	Unknown	NA	NA
13	Periphery	Executive Director	Unknown	NA	NA
14	Connected	City Council Member	Own	20	2,027

The demographics of the study participants do support the finding from the literature review presented in Chapter 2 that indicates, “local elections are dominated by homeowners, the educated, and the long-term residents – people who have strong emotional and material connections to their communities” (Oliver, 2012, p. 84). An overwhelming majority of participants in the study were homeowners and long-term residents of their city. In addition, a majority of the participants had obtained higher levels of education, including a bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral degree.

Data Collection

In this section, I will discuss data collection methods. As indicated earlier, 14 individuals participated in the study. Interviews with each of the 14 were held remotely at a place of the

participants' choosing, either their worksite or home. Thirteen participants were interviewed by video and one was interviewed without video using the Zoom teleconferencing feature.

Interviews were recorded using Zoom. Each interview was intended to take approximately 60 minutes with many taking approximately 45 minutes, 1 taking 33 minutes, and 2 taking approximately 90 minutes. All participants were interviewed only once.

Besides the variations noted above, no further variations from the data collection plan described in Chapter 3 occurred.

Themes

Introduction

A phenomenological researcher has the goal of constructing meaning from a lived experience through the data analysis of the subject's depiction of the experience and by calling attention to specific characteristics as identified by the person being interviewed. A key question in phenomenological research is, *what is it like to experience a certain phenomenon?* As it pertains to this study, the common phenomenon is the experience of having an empty ballot for a city election and having that seat filled through a write-in. Understanding the experience of the participants is key to this body of research.

As a phenomenological researcher I was concerned with how participants would interpret the interview questions and if their responses would really be about their experience of the phenomenon or would it be more about their "opinions, perceptions, perspectives, or any other thoughts about a topic" (Peoples, 2021, p. 4). Peoples (2021) indicates that "within an experience, a person makes meaning of that experience, has perceptions about that experience, and interprets that experience, but the experience is neither meaning, perception, nor

interpretation” (p. 4). In essence, people derive meaning from their experiences, and perceptions, interpretations, and perspectives are all part of *experience*.

I was also concerned that I would not be able to always identify important statements that required further explanation. Mostly, this concern was about the interview and largely was unfounded as I became more comfortable with the participant, the interview process, and the technology being used. As I completed each subsequent interview, I became more comfortable with being able to ask clarifying questions as was needed to understand meaning.

Upon completing the interviews, I viewed or listened to all video and audio recordings so that I could become more familiar with the possible overarching themes. This understanding was further enhanced after I read the transcripts of the interviews. These exercises allowed me to note possible themes and establish the basis of a coding taxonomy.

Transcripts were uploaded into Delve Tool and the coding process began. Upon completion of coding all the interviews, I reviewed the coding taxonomy that had developed through the coding exercise and identified methods to consolidate the array of codes into larger themes. Those themes are described further in the next sections.

Theme 1: Local Government is Ground Zero for a Healthy and Vibrant Democracy

According to participants, local government is ground zero for a healthy and vibrant democracy. To them, a healthy and vibrant democracy at the local level is one where decision-making is transparent and relies upon facts. Local voters largely trust their local elected officials to make decisions to better their community without regard to personal agendas. These participants indicated that voters and elected officials rely on facts, are engaged and participate, have a healthy exchange of ideas with debate, and stress the importance of listening to each other. They expect their leaders to work together to achieve the common goal of bettering the

community. Participants indicated that when disagreements arise, it is important to have open dialogue, learn more, and respond civilly. Finally, participants indicated that a healthy and vibrant democracy creates the opportunity and provides the knowledge for everyone to participate in the democratic process, such as participating in local campaigns and witnessing debates among residents with different perspectives.

“It comes down to the needs and wants for constituents and being able to advocate on their behalf as well as see what balance that with what makes most sense in the long term for our city. I think that at the end of the day, we all should be on the same page and wanting what's best for our city and that we don't have ulterior motives that somehow benefit us as individuals. I think that you can disagree with your fellow council members and still be able to look them in the eye and still be able to have a conversation and have a relationship with those individuals.” (P1).

“Transparency is a key thing...one of the biggest things for me and what I fought most for was transparency.” (P1).

“I think that you can disagree with your fellow council members and still be able to look them in the eye and still be able to have a conversation and have a relationship with those individuals” (P1).

“So every year when it came time for budget approval, ordinance approval, everybody came down to the high school gym and sat in the stands and you actually approved by show of hands out there. It's not secret ballot to approve the budget. Elections are secret ballot, but other than that, you're raising your hand for those approvals. We make attempts to bring people in” (P2).

“To me, a healthy and vibrant democracy is where candidates stand, step up to run for a position, are dully elected by the population they serve and serve” (P3).

“Community engagement to me is the core. But at least at my level of government, I can't speak for state or national. I don't have a lot of familiarity with that. But for us, it's always been engagement is really driven, and I think we tend to have a lot of participation in our city council meetings. And I think that I like that because we are at ground zero in terms of government. You can't get any more local than city” (P4).

“Well, I would say that the elected officials need to listen to their constituents and do what's good for the community. People listen to each other and then you make the best decision for everybody” (P5).

“I would say that our council, mayors, they work for the good of the whole. We've never had that person that's on there trying to push one certain agenda item. You might say, okay, they don't get on just for a new street and then get off, for instance, they look at the whole of the community and it's always been pretty good that way” (P5).

“I think being open and honest” (P6).

“But to me, a healthy democracy is when everybody has the opportunity and the knowledge to participate in the democratic process. So, I see a healthy democracy in the actions and the events and the initiatives that we do here at the league and certainly that our local leagues do across the state as well. And I also see it in just our direct impact with legislators during the session, we're there, we lobby, we're getting people involved and bringing them to the Capitol and really expressing our views and opinions” (P8).

“That's the healthiest way to engage with the voters and inform them. I think that's the other part of a healthy democracy. And when you get to the forms of how people get their news, it's healthy to have people get plenty of information so that they're well-informed” (P9).

“Candidates that are not trying to use the political position for personal gain. And I know it happens a lot, but I don't think that's healthy. Their priorities are not correct if they're not looking for the overall public good as opposed to their own personal. I know that's pretty basic, but I wish people would just say it and live it more” (P9).

“Participation would be one thing. Never hesitating to which they do with regularity, voice their opinions on various public policy issues.” (P11).

“I guess my positive experience of democracy has been being involved in local campaigns to get some folks elected to the council” (P12).

“At the end of the day, when an election's over and someone's won, you pull together and hope that they do good for your community. People can have civil conversations even if they disagree” (P12).

“We live in one right now, right where people can exchange ideas and talk about things that matter to the public. People can participate and weigh in and have their feedback heard and understood, and that they can trust people that they elect to make decisions, to make good ones for them, maybe even sometimes, if they don't know all of the details or maybe don't even know about the things that elected leaders are deciding for them” (P13).

Theme 2: Knowledge of Civics is Lacking and How Government Operates Remains a Mystery

The participants identified that the public lacks a foundational knowledge of government, how it operates, and the roles of the players. They expressed concern about the lack of civic education and awareness among the general public and how this deficiency contributes to

misunderstandings. They shared that the public lacks awareness of governmental structures, decision-making ability, and positions within government. For instance, they observed that many citizens attending council meetings do not understand the processes involved. They cited observations where the public was confused about the various governmental structures - how they function, how they interact and interconnect, what decisions can they make, and their authority or limitations. For example, participants noted that citizens often contact the wrong offices for their complaints. They also noted that local government is unique and requires a specific skill set. Participants speculated that this lack of awareness or knowledge can contribute to the lack of engagement or participation in local government.

“I spend a lot of my time just trying to figure out from either the league or a lawyer or whatever what we can and can't do. There's so many nuance things, and I, even to this day, don't know when I can and can't say things sometimes just knowing that I'm trying to make sure that we're doing what we need to do” (P1).

It's clear that some people have no idea how the local government is set up. We'll get tax complaints or tax resistance. People will get their tax bill, and they'll mention a new school facility that was built three towns away and no, that particular project, that school has nothing to do with the tax bill that you got for the city...but they lump it all together. They know enough to know that it's local government, but they don't know where they're at or how those lines are connected. My theory is high school and middle school civics classes are severely lacking” (P2).

“I think there are fair amount of people that can't tell you who the mayor is. That don't know. Not that I expect to be known by everybody, but that couldn't tell you who the city administrator is. We kind of joke about this sometimes with the council, but it's a real issue. I get

calls from neighboring communities about potholes or police complaints or something like that. And then, so you start talking about the complaint, and then you ask street address. And they give me a street address that's in a neighboring community or out in the township. They don't know what that means, and they don't care. There was what they see as a government service. There was poor snow plowing. So, they called the closest city hall that they can think of, and that's us. And now they want to know, why aren't you fixing this road?" (P2).

"I think he kind of got humbled when he realized the process isn't as easy as just saying we're going to do it and then we just do it. And I think a lot of people who voted for him were in a similar position where they just didn't understand really how city government works and what some of the issues really were" (P3).

"So there's this perception or misunderstanding of just what can be accomplished by the chief official" (P4).

"It [Civics] certainly was part of my education in grade school, high school and college, but there's a disconnect there, and I'm not really sure why, but I think it contributes significantly, at least to elected positions, where people don't understand how government works, so why would they want to actually dive in? But one of the things I've observed over the years, which kind of surprises me a little, but maybe it shouldn't, is just the underpinnings, the fundamental knowledge of civics and how local government works in the first place. I don't want to call that ignorance, but that lack of awareness, I think contributes somewhat to the lack of engagement or participation. I been quite surprised over the years how often people would come, citizens, residents, would come to a council meeting and didn't really know the first thing about how the processes work, how motions take place and votes. And then of course, with Minnesota, you have the open meeting law. And so a lot of times there's surprises. Know the council hasn't been

discussing this amongst ourselves for the last two months. The conversations that we have, the discussions we have take place right there at the council table, during the council meetings” (P4).

“And I don't know what's contributing or causing that kind of lack of awareness or knowledge, whether within elementary and secondary education these days, whether civics is not particularly covered anymore” (P4).

“I think a lot of it is just not knowing what to expect” (P7).

“Most people, they had civics in 10th grade. It was a long time ago, and they probably weren't listening anyway” (P10).

“So the challenge is in that regard is not understanding, I think, the uniqueness of local government relative to the business that they might be in or if they're in academia or in a nonprofit world. What we do at city is different from all those. There are elements of every one of those in what we do, vice versa as well. But it's different. And you don't just wake up and know how to do it. Not that there's a right way, but there's many perspectives, there's many ways to approach this work (P10).

Theme 3: The Public Needs Regular, Unfettered Access to Elected Officials

Several participants in this study indicated that the public needs regular and unfettered access to their elected city officials so that those officials can *get it right*, referring to the decisions before them. Unfortunately, this access has often been limited for reasons that are unclear but appear to be related to protecting the time of people who are in essence *volunteering* for their city leadership role but have often have full-time jobs elsewhere. By carrying out this desire, the elected official is disconnected from their constituents and receives little or filtered information that may not accurately reflect the perspectives of the public and may lead the

elected official to make decisions that are not well supported. One participant described the potential for abuse when a gatekeeper controls access to or limits communication with elected officials. Another participant suggested providing contact information for all council members and offering non-confrontational committee meetings regularly to allow public access to the elected official. Fortunately, some Cities have processes in place to allow for public testimony or open forums and others have modified their hearing schedule so that more people can participate. They stressed the need for elected officials to receive and listen to input and explore options with the knowledge obtained so that the elected official *can get it right*. Overall, the participants encouraged elected officials to ensure their constituents are able to contact them. They also stressed the responsibility of elected officials to listen to input and consider all information, even if it may be spun or not entirely accurate. Ultimately, officials want to build trust with their constituents and show that they care about their concerns.

“It is definitely a time of brainstorming and exploring options and listening to input”
(P2).

“And he does work, so that contributes. I know what that's like when you have a full-time job, availability is a little bit more challenge” (P4).

“Yeah, absolutely. Our public officials need to be accountable to the public. They need to be easily reachable, and they need to be available. It's important for people to be able to access them because we put them in office in the first place. Right. And so, I think that is really key. And I see how frustrated people get when they feel like they are being sort of left out or they can't get in touch with their elected officials. We see problems crop up. When that happens, I think that's really important” (P8).

“I feel that I have seen situations like that where the city clerk or city administrator is the gatekeeper. And that is a situation that is just ripe for abuse. If that gatekeeper doesn't like a person or an organization or just a position on a certain topic, and they know that that person is going to present that position, that is not their role, that is not their job to thwart communication. Now, I would say there are some mayors and council members that like having a gatekeeper. They notice that it reduces the amount of contact that they get, and they may appreciate that. They may think that's good. And unfortunately, it's not good. It is not good for the elected official. It's not good for the, I'll call it the political process that the council needs to go through. It's just not healthy in so many ways. And the resentment that can build up in the residents who feel cut off, they feel unheard, they feel ignored, they feel totally blocked from being part of the process unless they're right there in the city council's face. And that's exactly how it ends up coming forward. They get so frustrated that by the time they actually come to a council meeting to discuss the topic, sometimes they're just flat out irate because they have not had a chance to work it through at the earlier level when they are less worked up. The key there is that elected officials still have control of that amount of access. If you don't want to take phone calls after 09:00 p.m., don't, you can still have some control over this. So you need to just decide as an individual, if you're an elected official, when do I want to allow access to me and when do I need to shut it off? And that way people can call you when you're ready. I consider it part of the responsibility of being in elected office is that your constituents, your residents need to be able to contact you. I think any information you can get, whether you think it's all quite true or real, or if it's being spun a little bit, you still need to hear it and think it through, that kind of a thing”

(P9).

“First of all, here's a phone number of all of us. Here's where we work. And anytime you want to talk to a subset of the city council, we've got committee meetings every two weeks that you can come in and meet with these two or those two. It's non-confrontational” (P10).

“The tradition that many cities have of an open forum before the council meeting where there's ten or 15 minutes and everybody can sign up and they've got two minutes to say whatever they want to. And the city council and the staff will look at them and nod, but never say anything in response because it's just an open forum” (P10).

“I certainly enjoy and try to make myself as accessible as possible and try to get around to community events so people feel they have that opportunity for personal contact” (P11).

“I think at a local level in particular, there just ought to be more opportunities for listening sessions of some sort, not linked to an election, not linked to some big controversial issue in the community” (P12).

“There's a transaction that happens when someone goes into a ballot box and casts a ballot for a Mayor or a Council Member or a local official. What they're saying is, we trust you to get these things right. We trust you to do these things for us, and we trust you to listen to us if we've got a problem. And so all of the local officials that I've ever worked with, they all want to know. They want to know what the public's thinking. They care deeply about listening, and not listening to prove a point, but listening to make sure that they're getting it right. It isn't important to be right, it is important to get it right. And that's what I think our local officials do when it comes to providing access to themselves, to the public. They want to make sure they're getting it right, not that they're just right” (P13).

“They set their Park and Planning Commission meetings, like at 5:30 instead of at 7:00 or at 8:00 at night, because they found if people went home, they couldn't get them to come back

out. But if they stacked the meetings right next to the day, it was easier to get commissioners to volunteer. They got more public participation” (P13).

Theme 4: Cities Face Multiple Challenges

Rural Minnesota Cities face multiple challenges. Cities often are rethinking how they govern, their key structures, and how they are approaching the delivery of services to their residents, especially with a declining and aging tax base. To name a few priorities, cities are responsible for plowing and repairing local streets, delivering clean drinking water, maintaining sanitation and sewer, providing emergency services, incentivizing the building of new housing, repairing existing housing, and inspiring businesses to locate in their community.

Within this section, participants cited specific concerns they have with city politics and services. They identified concerns to be:

- public’s bandwidth,
- environment of uncivil politics, partisanship at the city level, and concerted efforts of misinformation,
- tight fiscal and human resources,
- lack of investments in affordable housing, maintaining the existing housing stock, and demolishing or repurposing blighted properties,
- limited childcare, a necessary component of economic growth,
- development of new businesses and industries and the new jobs that come with them,
- aging infrastructure and the ramifications of having *kicked the can down the road*, and the
- fragile emergency services infrastructure where there are not enough resources for police, fire, and ambulance services.

These areas of concern are discussed in greater detail below.

Bandwidth. Participants in this study identified that the public's *bandwidth* or the "computational capacity, ...to pay attention, to make good decisions, to stick with our plans, and to resist temptations" (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013, p. 42) is taxed inhibiting their fundamental capacity to process information in a meaningful manner. Participants cited that the current era of information overload can make it difficult to gain collective action and attention. Participants identified that local governments are competing for the public's attention with other political and civic issues, as well as personal obligations. According to interview participants, people do not pay attention to local politics until they are forced to.

"So then we were actually making a very educated decision, and we're able to bring that down knowing that we would bring it down significantly. But we left it at that. Obviously, we explained that. We shared that. We said that in multiple ways. In multiple meetings. And then the tax credits came out or the tax forms came out with the prelim taxes on it, like two weeks ago, I think, now. And everybody lost their damn minds. And of course, nobody's been paying attention, right? Nope! And so once we've explained what was going on and everything, people were fine with it and whatever, but they weren't paying attention despite the prior explanations" (P1).

"Nobody pays attention to their local politics. I just don't think people pay attention until all of a sudden, they have to pay attention" (P7).

"It is an era of so diversified and information network. That you just don't know how to muster collective consciousness and action" (P11).

"The public is being asked to care about and think about a lot of things politically right in the political sphere and the civic sphere. And so local governments are fighting for the public's attention in that regard, they're also fighting for the public's attention in regard to the idea that people have families, they have other commitments. And society is in the middle of this

grand reprioritization right now, where everyone's trying to figure out who they are and what they want to be in this post pandemic world. And people are trying new things and trying to figure that out” (P13).

Uncivil Politics, Partisanship, and Misinformation Inhibits Progress. Participants cited uncivil politics, partisanship, and the spreading of misinformation as a distraction from making progress on the City’s business of the day. They cited many examples of how civil conversations providing factual information led to better and faster decisions that have broader support but expressed concern about the lack of understanding among citizens regarding their decision-making processes. They also cited how certain individuals, *keyboard warriors*, use social media to continue to spread misinformation and how this behavior isn’t helpful.

Participants believe that clear communication and explaining decisions are key to gaining public support, and they are working to improve communication. Participants expressed concerns about keeping partisan politics out of city hall. Additionally, the lack of civility in some communities is causing disruptions in meetings. Finally, some people are running for office to hinder progress or further their own interests.

“What happened was that we had to set our prelim tax, and because we didn't have an audit yet, because we didn't know what our budget really was what we were going to have for the amount of money coming back, we had asked the department heads and the City Administrator to put together their budget of needs and wants and see what that was. And that came out to, like, a 69% levy, which I think at the end of the day is like, I think 12 or 13% for what you would see on your tax. But we said very clearly multiple times, we are going to set our prelim at this, because in the past, our council has set it at like, oh, I feel good about 4 or 5% without even knowing what the wants and needs are of the city. Anyways, keyboard warrior shared misinformation

and all these people came to our council meeting. We explained what was going on very clearly, very calmly, and then we're able to bring it down to, I think, 20%, which actually is going to be under what average taxes for cities around us, which is like 8%. But they were more worried about their buddies, like, yelling at them for having a percentage versus actually being able to articulate what that actually entailed. Nobody got up to say anything because they heard the shit to get all these people to our council meeting. But then when they actually were there and started to realize that the conversation was very calm and very understandable and very thoughtful, it was a very different story” (P1).

“And I think that a lot of the times when we don't explain why we've made decisions, that there's a lot on Facebook, they did it because they're money hungry and not actually about what's happened and all those types of things. And I think that one of the things that we're actually trying to do right now is actually get a communication specialist on staff because I personally believe you can never over-communicate. But anybody that I've talked to so far about any of the decisions I've made to be honest, they've been okay with because I've been able to really explain what it was and why we made the decision. And I don't know if that's necessarily something that all of our council members are able to do, which I think also provides somewhat of some pushback and frustration” (P1).

“When it was explained what we were trying to do, it made sense to them. When I've been able to explain where we're coming from, most people agree” (P7).

“It can be hard to get things done at the local level. There's so many activist groups and different pressures that get put on elected officials” (P8).

“Partisan politics is a concern of mine...one of my worries actually, the last few years was what I sensed was a creep of politicization coming into the council chambers of the partisan

politician, that's a better word, partisanship showing up. We had partisan politics, but we had words and language that were being thrown out every once in a while, power words from one party or the other party, so to speak, where you knew what that meant. And it didn't do any good for what we were doing. In fact, I had one or two times where with the mayor, it's just him and me talking about whatever it is we're talking about. And he would slide into using a few words that I'm trying to refer to without. I don't even know what the words were, but I told him the best thing that he could do, the best thing that I could do for our community and for our government was to keep partisan politics out of city hall and to try to avoid the power words that we hear on TV and the radio and try to keep us caring about potholes and garbage and swimming pools and things like that and not get caught up in the national debates (P10).

“A lack of civility. I think we're seeing that kind of across the board in many communities, school board meetings that are completely out of control. Hundreds of parents who I think often have been misled by people with a very clear agenda, encouraged to show up and disrupt meetings, prevent participation from happening, prevent discussion from happening. I see that at some of our township council meetings as well” (P12).

“Increasingly, I'd say over the last 10 to 15 years, I see a lot of people running for either to gum up the works and prevent the town board from doing anything, people with very libertarian, anti-government perspectives who don't want to see laws enforced, don't want to see local ordinances passed, don't want to spend any money on any professionals because they don't believe that expertise has any value, or people actively running to further their own interests” (P12).

“It was a constructive conversation that produced a reasonable regulation that everyone seemed able to live with” (P12).

Tight Resources. Local governments face competition for resources, including money, volunteers, and employees. Participants cited concerns with the rising costs for city infrastructure and competitive wage rates, which can burden small communities with low tax bases, declining and aging populations, and fixed incomes. Delaying investments in the past has caused an accumulation of priorities and placed further pressure on city budgets. The city's small tax base limits their ability to take on big projects and some cities have seen very adverse situations resulting from this behavior of *kicking the can down the road*, such as the increased costs of doing so. Participants indicate that city officials are striving to provide services at the level that residents expect without raising taxes too much.

In addition, as the rural population ages and declines in number, fewer individuals are available to serve on special city committees, councils, task forces, etc. While civic engagement is important it is reduced and there are fewer citizens involved in special committees or projects. In addition, those who ultimately run for political office have less experience or knowledge.

Finally, there are challenges with recruiting and retaining good employees due to the competition for resources. Participants emphasized the importance of courageously reinvesting in staff and personal and professional development. However, it can be challenging to convince citizens of the connection between paying taxes and the provision of services as demonstrated by a recent walkout of an entire Police Department due to salary disparities.

“We've had to raise taxes in the last two years significantly, partly because our previous councils were more worried about what the percentage raise would be versus actually what we needed to do to take care of our city” (P1).

“Everything at this point is budget-centric. That's what people are looking at. They're looking at what their tax bill is, their utility bills, all the checks they write out. So there's a real strong emphasis on keeping costs down or cutting costs” (P2).

“Demographically, our part of the neck of the greater Minnesota generally is aging, and it's accelerated, or even beyond that here. Small communities up here are both aging and declining in terms of population” (P4).

“But again, that's where the community and the civic engagement comes in, where you try and involve citizens, particularly with committees and activities and projects, and try and build that interest in the hope that when time comes and people have to file for office, that there's some significant interest in that. So it's an ongoing challenge and one that I don't think will likely go away anytime soon” (P4).

“We don't have a real big tax base, so there's not a lot of money we can get to do like, say, big street projects, that kind of thing. With our tax base, it's hard to do a lot of different things. I mean, you just kind of survive is what you do.” (P5).

“Many of our predecessors have not wanted to raise taxes in any way. And so many of the things that we have been putting off are now in dire need. So, we did have to have a pretty strong levy increase, which has not gone over well with others. And yet, others completely understand where we are coming from. But a levy increase is not a tax increase. I would say, of course, obviously the people don't want taxes raised.” (P7).

“The entire Police Department just walked out. And it's really an issue of salary disparities. And again, it's a case of Cities feeling really strapped for budget and they're not bumping up the salaries to be in line with what other agencies, such as the Sheriff's departments might be able to offer” (P9).

“Residents tend to want more and more services, but not necessarily more taxes. And so that's the challenge, is providing services at the level that residents want or expect without pushing taxes higher, at least not too much, trying to stay within the realm of acceptability for the community” (P9).

“But the courage to reinvest. The courage to reinvest not only in the community's infrastructure, but in staff development and the courage to almost force personal, professional development, not just of staff, but of council members and mayors, of everybody, to really foster the sense of what I'm doing does matter, and what I'm doing is best done by someone who's doing it intentionally and not just because I was elected” (P10).

“Obviously costs are rising at a rapid rate for a lot of the inputs into the city, as well as competitive wage rates. So those are challenges for small communities that have a very low sort of market valuation tax base and a lot of whose citizens are on are retired with fixed incomes. And so when we try to sustain the normal operations of government and do anything innovative, it sometimes appears to be a huge burden added to them. And we regularly discuss how we can balance out, not making that too great a burden, but continuing to enable the city to survive and thrive” (P11).

“Particularly at a time when people don't want to often pay more taxes to support those initiatives or don't see the connection between paying taxes and those services being provided (P12).

“I think one of the most significant challenges right now that local governments are facing are this great competition for resources that exist. Budgets are tight. Money is tight. It's hard to find good employees right now. It's hard to retain good employees. So when we think

about the challenges that local governments face, it's that competition for everything from money to people" (P13).

Housing and Blighted Properties are of Concern. Several participants identified a lack of affordable housing as a major concern. The existing housing stock is old and there hasn't been much new construction in rural Minnesota. Participants cited methods they are taking to be able to invest in or trigger others to invest in building new housing. They look at the quality of their housing as attracting new residents and creating an environment to incentivize businesses to locate in the community. As far as blighted properties, many are taking action to clean these properties up. Some are using their Economic Development Agency to tear down or redevelop blighted buildings and properties. Some cities have given away lots for free to those who build on them within a designated timeframe. Participants also mentioned wanting to upgrade houses with new insulation and solar power. Overall, housing is a major concern for cities and is hindering the ability to attract and retain employees.

"They have quite a few blighted buildings. And so we've been looking into identifying which ones those are. And if there are grants and things like that that we could help raise those buildings and then also build new buildings in that area" (P1).

"Housing is a real concern right now. I'd say housing would be our biggest kind of concrete thing that we're looking at. We're at a point where people are. We think we're losing out on employers and employers are losing out on gaining people because of a lack of. And of course, affordable housing sets off all sorts of bells and whistles now for people. But because of a lack of housing that is affordable to the potential employees, whether it's the schools or the hospitals, stuff like that, there's a real concern over just a lack of housing. There hasn't been a

lot of new housing built in the last two decades that isn't higher end vacation homes. There hasn't been a lot of building for the average middle-class family, for a homestead” (P2).

“I think housing market is tight here. We don't have a lot of available houses” (P3).

“Trying to address some of the housing needs, because you have to have places for people to live if you want them to move into your community. And the existing housing stock is actually significantly old, too. Housing is a gigantic issue throughout Minnesota and throughout the country” (P4).

“Another thing the EDA is used for is there's a forfeited property in the community. Our EDA will take that property and then we have control of it where we can tear it down, resell it, redevelopment. And we've done a lot of that.” (P5).

“We would like to be able to upgrade those houses, put in new insulation, upgrade to solar power” (P7).

“We have been good about trying to give housing. The city owned a bunch of land and actually gave it away, the lots away, if you built on it within two years. So that has helped there” (P7).

Childcare Centers are in Limited Supply. Participants identified the need for childcare in rural Minnesota where they are in limited supply. Childcare Centers both support working parents and act as a support service to further economic development and growth. They are expensive to operate, but according to participants, *necessary*, because without adequate childcare, residents of the community are limited in their ability to participate in the workforce. In addition, a participant cited significant challenges with licensing Childcare Centers in Minnesota when compared to North Dakota. In that community, families now bring their children out of state for childcare. Regardless of barriers, cities are taking action in support of

childcare centers, such as paying for licensing and getting places up to code. One group helped pay for licensing and food services for teachers until they could become licensed. They are also looking to buy a closed elementary school to expand daycare services.

“I think the other part, too, is we're really advocating on the leniency and of some of the laws surrounding just childcare in general, but then also getting somebody up here that actually does the licensing. I think a big part in the delays that we really encountered with this childcare center were due to the fact that everybody was in the Cities, and nobody wanted to come up here and do that little inspection and then go back down. Right. And so, we've really been so reliant on just this one hub of individuals in the Twin Cities to manage all this stuff.” (P1).

“We helped pay for the licensing for the teachers, and then we helped them with their food service until they were able to get the correct licensing for the school food” (P1).

“And then daycare. So I know the city has helped a lot on that with helping pay for the licensing, getting places up to code so daycares can open. We are currently in the process of looking to buy one of the elementary schools will be closing after this year, and we're looking to buy it ourselves. So there is a daycare also in it so that can expand along with different land that then houses can be built on” (P7).

Economic Development and Jobs. Like housing and childcare needs, participants expressed the need for their local cities to invest in economic development and jobs to grow and diversify the local economy, but many cities lack industry and a strong tax base. Some cities are offering tax credits as incentives for building. Many expressed a desire to grow local businesses in the area and simultaneously expressed concern about the limited resources available to support such efforts.

“Our new EDA person has been amazing and has really been pushing to get more industry to come to town” (P1).

“Like every other community, economic development is huge. Wanting to grow and diversify the economy, particularly in our neck of the woods, mining and logging are, mining more so, are still very big economic drivers. We don't have a lot of industry, so we don't have much of a tax base” (P3).

“We're not going to gain any big industry in town. There's just no way we could because we don't have anybody to work” (P5).

“We don't have hardly any businesses. We just got a dollar general two or three years ago, which is amazing because we have no other grocery store in town” (P6).

“Our tax credits had recently expired, and we reviewed them and then we put them into place again. So it's an incentive, right, to build in town” (P7).

“Another thing is we are opening a position for a marketing and advertising person within the city to help bring businesses in, to help bring people into our community, to spend money within our businesses in downtown area” (P7).

Aging Infrastructure Needs to be Replaced. According to participants, many rural communities need to make or have already made key investments in utilities or infrastructure - sewer lines, wastewater treatment plants, drinking water, roads, sidewalks, and bridges. Participants cited that cities have been dealing with outdated and aging infrastructure, a common challenge between and among cities. For example, one city has sewer lines that are over 100 years old and are beginning to cave in. Without these investments the ability to draw new businesses and jobs to the community is limited and improving the infrastructure is crucial to the city's growth and attracting businesses.

“Our downtown has been kind of rough in a lot of different ways, but one of them would be the walkability again, and the ADA accessibility. We, for whatever reason, at some point decided to put bricks downtown instead of cement. And so, we got a million-dollar grant from the ADA, and we're in process of, it's our turn to get our main streets done. We will have new walkable, ADA accessible sidewalks and are hoping that kind of helps out with just the overall feel of our downtown, too” (P1).

“Apparently there were certain constituents who just complained about not wanting a sidewalk in front of their house. And so we have a very disjointed situation where we don't have a very walkable city because there were sidewalks at one time and then they just let them go. And so, there's like, in my neighborhood, I can tell you I have sidewalks on our quarter going all the way down, but there are no sidewalks down my street to the end except for, like, two houses that have sidewalks in front of them. So, it was just a really bizarre situation. And so, we're really trying to make our city a lot more walkable so kids can walk to school and feel safe and do those types of things” (P1).

“I think one of the issues was that we had just completed a very large, extensive, and expensive utilities project and street project, and it did increase taxes quite a bit” (P3).

“Although we did a rather massive infrastructure project in our community over the last several years, replacing almost everything under the streets in terms of water, sewer, probably over 90% of the community was done over the last five years. So we made a huge investment and made a decision to focus on infrastructure thinking if we got the infrastructure in place, we'd be far more attractive in terms of the community and trying to grow into trying to draw businesses” (P4).

“Many of our roads are extremely outdated. Our public works and water/sewer have told us that we are at the brink if we do not do something. It has just been pushed off for 10 to 15 years of just not doing anything” (P7).

“It's a struggle and an overarching problem that cities are going to be facing and already are - aging infrastructure. I'm talking sewer lines, wastewater treatment plants, just any kind of infrastructure in their community, but I'm talking about the core infrastructure. Like, again, the sewer lines are under the streets, and they might be 100 years old or more. They're not going to last. In fact, some of them are already just caving in, and it's happening in so many cities” (P9).

Emergency Services: Police, Fire, and Ambulance. Participants shared that there is a crisis in emergency services, specifically city ambulance, volunteer fire departments, and police. Cities are facing challenges in keeping their ambulance services alive due to partial or poor reimbursement from Medicare, Medicaid, and third-party insurance. The reimbursement rates are not sufficient to cover the costs and therefore cities in rural Minnesota, which often provide this service, experience large losses. As it pertains to fire, one participant shared that their fire department struggled to find a chassis for their rescue van since 2020. Another participant shared that recently an entire police department walked out on contract negotiations.

“There seems to be a growing coverage of the crisis in emergency services that's going on, particularly with volunteer, so called volunteer fire departments” (P4).

“We had to have a special meeting last week because we finally found a chassis for our fire department, for their rescue van. We've been looking since 2020” (P6).

“Some very current challenges for local government, EMS, ambulance services, there are a number of, especially the small cities like you're looking at, that are struggling to keep their

ambulance services alive. The compensation or the reimbursement for such services? It's not compensation really. It's reimbursement from Medicare and Medicaid and things like that is only partial. Every call is a loss, it loses money. And so how do you make that system work. This is a huge issue in Minnesota right now. And it's not just the EMS that the cities are wrestling with right now that also is related to fire services, police services. You maybe have heard of one of our small towns that their whole police department just walked out.” (P9).

Theme 5: Vacant Ballots are More Common Than We Believe

Having a vacant ballot and an open seat filled through write-ins in rural Minnesota City elections is more common than one would think. There just isn't a *flood of interest in serving*. Participants noted that smaller cities often struggle to find candidates for local elections. In one instance, there were no candidates for two council seats and only one write-in candidate for another. The lack of interest in running for office is a common phenomenon in smaller cities and sometimes write-in candidates end up winning. While city councils are actively seeking candidates, finding willing and qualified individuals remains a challenge.

“There wasn't the flood of interest we have had over the years. On occasion, there's more than one person filing for an office, but in this instance, it didn't seem to be the case. They had a mayor and two council seats up. Nobody filed for the two council seats. And they had one person do a write-in campaign for one council seat. But that was a real challenge, and I believe they ended up having to declare whoever got the second number of write-in votes. And I don't think there was an active campaign to the other council seat. Of course, the person has to be willing. Sometimes people get their names written-in and they have no interest whatsoever. Sometimes it's a joke. I had a write-in campaign, somebody running against me once just because somebody at the bars thought one of the bartenders would be great. And so they had an active kind of

write-in campaign. But had he won, I have a strong feeling he would not have wanted the job.” (P4).

“I am familiar with this, and it happens, as you have noted, quite often in the small cities. And the smaller the city, the more likely it is to happen” (P9).

“We’ve had a number of times where the seat hasn’t been filled on the ballot and the write-in has won” (P10).

“The idea that people aren’t running for office is something that I think we’re aware of organizationally and something I’m aware of...I don’t know if it’s gotten better or worse, but it’s certainly a factor in a number of communities across the state. Generally, smaller cities have been the ones that have struggled the most with fielding at least one candidate or one person that’s interested in running. But I will tell you that it’s something that comes up in conversations that I have with folks, that city councils are looking for other people to step up and serve and are looking for good candidates. And I’ve been really impressed” (P13).

Theme 6: Why are Ballots Left Vacant?

Participants identified various reasons for why ballots are left vacant some of which are similar to those identified in Chapter 2, but others are specific to small communities and haven’t yet been identified in the literature. Within this section, participants cited the following reasons why the ballot is blank:

- timing,
- confusion about who’s running, if anyone,
- the belief that someone else will do it,
- no one actually wants to run,
- succession of a well-liked and appreciated leader was poorly planned, and

- recruitment opportunities are limited.

These areas of concern are discussed in greater detail below.

Timing. Participants expressed that their cities have had several midterm appointments in the past due to council members resigning mid-term. They typically do not conduct special elections but rather add someone to serve the remainder of the term as required by state statute. In addition, candidates who are new to the community decided not to file for an open council seat as they believed someone with more history and involvement in the community should run instead.

“We've done quite a few midterm council appointments” (P2).

“We typically don't conduct a special election per se. It's not an unusual thing, at least in our community, where we've had council members leave midterms. The process, and because of when in the term they resigned, State statute required they be added. It wasn't so much a special election we just added to serve the remainder of the term. Yeah, I think the timing was such as where we decided not to appoint somebody” (P4).

“He wasn't sure if he was going to run. And we kept prodding and poking and saying, ‘Hey, just a couple more years. A couple more years.’ And then by the time he decided not to run, it was too late because you had to have filed by a certain date” (P6).

“The filing deadline passed without anyone filing for the two open council seats” (P11).
“So my experience was that one of the candidates that was the one that I put my time and interest behind was a guy that I'd served with on the library board. He was very new to the community, and bless his heart, what he said was, well, I would have run and filed, but I felt that since I was so new to the community, there should be somebody with much more of a history and involvement in the community to run for the office. And then no one filed” (P11).

Confusion About Who's Running if Anyone. Two participants shared their observations about not knowing if an individual they liked was running for the open seat. This sometimes creates scenarios where no one had filed to be on the ballot by the deadline or candidates found themselves scrambling to file at the last minute and then running against their well-liked neighbor.

"I probably wouldn't have run against him because he was somebody that I really liked. It got down to the last minute, and I was waiting to see if he had put his name in. He must have walked in right after me" (P7).

"So we come to the reality that the filing date comes and no one had filed for either of the two available or two open council seats, but one of the current councilors had filed for the mayoral seat along with myself" (P11).

The Free Rider Problem - Someone Else Will Do It. Participants cited situations where a write-in candidate ran for office but did not file because they believed someone else would seek the job. In essence, there is a belief in local communities that someone else will do it. They cited that in small communities, people often wait for someone else to run and when no one is identified, they enter so that the seat can be filled. One participant named this problem the *free rider problem*.

"My understanding is that when it was clear that there weren't people when August came and went and there wasn't filings, that he was asked by others in the community to step up and do a write-in campaign" (P2).

"I think the deadline just kind of came and went, and then it came out in the newspapers or whatever that there was nobody running. So I think that's when he kind of decided to throw his head in the ring through a write-in vote" (P3).

“And people are largely running unopposed or waiting for their neighbor to run” (P7).

“And the key to all of this, of why some people just say it's not for me, is that they know someone else will do it. I call it the free rider problem. That's an abuse of the term free rider, but I think there's a little bit of play there that makes it not totally inaccurate to call it a free rider problem, where people just know that somebody else can do it” (P9).

“People will not put their name on the ballot because they know the community as a whole is going to write-in so and so” (P9).

No One Wants to Run. Several participants mentioned instances where they were running for an elected office and had no competition. One participant specifically mentioned a write-in candidate, while others noted that nobody else put their name in for the position.

“I know there was one year that we had nobody running for mayor, and that person, there was a write-in candidate” (P3).

“There was nobody running against me for mayor” (P4).

“There was nobody running for that position” (P5).

“I don't believe anybody else put their name in” (P7).

Succession Planning. According to participants, often seats have been held for a long time by one specific, respected individual. When that individual no longer wishes to serve, dies, moves away, or resigns while in office, there is no one trained to take on the duties of the vacancy or a person waiting for the individual to step aside. One participant cited an example where a mayor repeatedly got reelected through write-ins because he did a good job and the community trusted and appreciated his efforts. This occurred despite him not filing to be a candidate or wanting to continue in the position. Eventually, he had to firmly tell residents not to

write him in again and had to suggest another council member who he knew would do a good job and told people to vote for him instead.

“I think that the individual that had been in that position probably had been in that position a little too long. In addition, one of our council members passed away. Also, the last elected official ended their term, and then nobody put their name on the ballot for running for that seat” (P1).

“Yeah. And that was because the council person's seat that he didn't openly run, he ran for mayor. So then that left that council person seat empty, and nobody in the community ran for it. So then it was just an at-large write-in spot, you might say, because usually every two years, there's council positions, so it's always vote for two. Usually there's a vacancy because somebody moves out of town, takes a different job, and they have to leave, and they leave a vacancy because you have to be a resident.” (P5).

“Well, what happened was our mayor took a different job in a different community, actually in South Dakota” (P5).

“A couple weeks, maybe before the election is when he finally said, ok, I'll do this” (P6).

“This individual got reelected to the mayor's seat over and over and over, and it was all through write-ins. And he would say, I'm not running. I'm not running. Do not write me in. And too bad, so sad, you're back. You got written-in again. And so, he served another term a little bit begrudgingly, but he always did a good job. And guess what? That is why they kept writing him in, because he did a good job. It took multiple times of this before he really said, ‘all right, now, people, I'm serious. Do not write me in again, because this time, I won't serve. I will not. I will refuse.’ He had to get really firm with his residents, and this is something you can do in a small town. You can get the word out in a very clear way that this is it. I'm done. And the other thing

that he did is he said, 'I want you to vote for so and so.' In other words, he picked one of the council members that he knew would do a good job and that he knew would run if there was not going to be another write-in campaign for him. And so, sure enough, the next guy got elected, and he does a great job, too. But I'll tell you what, those folks that get written-in over and over like that, will continue to serve and continue to do a good job. That is why it's happening; it is that people like that person. I don't want to say it's a popularity contest, but it does mean that that person is popular in the sense that people appreciate that person. They feel like they can trust that person. And in a small town, if you know that someone can do a good job and you trust that they have the right perspective, that they're not trying to do something for personal gain or anything like that, then it's a temptation for people to say, let's bring so and so back. Let's elect him or her. They've been doing a good job. Let's keep them. That's sort of a mentality. And they also, I think, know they can tell when a person like him actually loved the job. He knew that he couldn't do it forever, but he actually loved it" (P9).

"He ran for city council, got on there, ran for reelection, won, and then resigned. And he said he didn't have time" (P10).

"Well, anyway, by hooker, by crook, they get roped into the processes and like I say, it seems seldom that actually somebody resigns from the council. Many times they don't run again" (P11).

"I will say that recently, a couple members of our town board, one had a very serious heart attack and wasn't able to fulfill his commitment. A couple of other cases where people resigned midterm and the town board did the same thing, appointed someone to take their place" (P12).

“Reaching out to people, finding people, getting them connected with what it means to serve in their community. City councils are looking for other people to step up and serve and are looking for good candidates” (P13).

Recruitment. Several participants cited citizen pressure and family encouragement to be key factors in motivating individuals to run for office in small communities. Building community-mindedness through involvement in smaller groups can also lead to increased interest in serving. Current officials may also actively recruit and endorse candidates to continue their legacy or bring in new perspectives. Some participants expressed regret for not actively recruiting candidates when there were no other options. Long-standing community leaders aim to connect individuals with opportunities to serve and gain experience. One interviewee was encouraged by their spouse to run for office and received support on social media.

“The person didn't really have a personal, internal motivation to run, but did it as a kind of a service to the community, to the people that had specifically asked him that there's an open seat, there's nobody running for it. We think you'd do a good job back in that seat. So it was a citizen pressure, I guess, in a good way. But they were asked” (P2).

“So it's like you have to get them involved in these smaller groups first, and then they kind of become that, develop that community mindedness and start looking at other opportunities to serve” (P3).

“I think they had family members who may have been pushing the candidacy a little bit or encouraging it” (P4).

“People have been willing to recruit friends, and sometimes they stick with it, and sometimes that's not what they expected, and they move on. But that's helped a lot. It's just reach out, bring somebody to it, to the next meeting. It's helped” (P4).

“When that happens, the current mayor, the one that is getting written-in all the time, they have to actively recruit someone to run and put them forward and say, I have great confidence in this person, sort of give their seal of approval. This person is going to do just as good a job or better than I did, and we need to support him or her in a small town. They just continue to do such a good job that the public says, bring him back, bring her back, whatever. And it goes on and on. I don't know if it's completely healthy in that it might be good to get someone new in, but you do get new council members in, and so those people can balance it out a little bit” (P9).

“I went back to him and twisted his arm a little bit and told him I'd give him all the help I could to get his message out there. In retrospect, had I known that nobody was really going to file, I would have literally held public meetings, called them and stuff. And said, let's get out there. Let's find some talent here and get them on the council. Let's look at the silver lining and go about recruiting somebody. We need them to do things well.” (P11).

“There's like a group of people that have been around for maybe 8 to 15 years. It seems like sort of that band of community service elected officials that have talked more and more about reaching out to people, finding people, getting them connected with what it means to serve in their community. Sometimes that means that they're appointing them on a Park or Planning commission to give them a taste of what this looks like.” (P13).

“I did not run for a write-in campaign. My wife asked if I would be interested. I said, ‘if I would get votes I guess I'd consider’. She encouraged people on FB messenger to vote for me a few weeks prior to the election” (P14).

Theme 7: Barriers to Running for Office

Again similar to the reasons cited in Chapter 2, participants identified various barriers to running for local office; however, some appear to be unique to small communities where the community is close-knit and neighbors have an incentive not to upset their neighbor. Within this section, participants cited the following barriers to running for office:

- owning a local business,
- time commitment,
- being viewed by and answering to your neighbor,
- fear and safety concerns,
- public criticism for an underappreciated and thankless job,
- nasty campaigns,
- costs outweigh the benefits, and the
- steps and rules for running and holding a local elected office are unclear.

These barriers are discussed in greater detail below.

Owning a Local Business. According to statements made by two participants, small business owners are hesitant to run for council positions due to the fear of negative impacts on their business. This concern stems from the possibility of losing customers if people disagree with their decisions as a council member. The lines between business ownership and serving on the council can become blurred, making it a challenging decision for some and acting as a deterrent to political involvement.

“They're afraid that being on the council could cost them business. If people get angry at them for whatever reason, they will say, well, I'm not going to shop at so and so's store anymore. And so, they're afraid that it could hurt their business” (P9).

“If you own a small business in your community and it's like a retail type business or one where the community has to buy your wares, oftentimes it's harder for those folks to run for office just simply because they don't want to be in a spot where they've got to make a decision or do something that some people might disagree with because it might have business impacts for them. The lines between what it means to serve on the council and operate a business get blurred and that becomes challenging and that becomes hard.” (P13).

Time Commitment and Enjoyability. According to participants, cities are seeing declining interest in community involvement and many individuals decline to run for city office because of the time commitment involved or the length of the term. Serving on the council involves attending monthly meetings, serving on other city boards and commissions, and preparing for meetings – which can take multiple nights per week. Family commitments and other activities inhibit a person from seeking office. In addition, besides valuing their free time, many people do not want to commit to a job that is not enjoyable. One participant also mentioned the extra work, attention, headaches, and commitment that come with public office. Finally, some people do not want to be constantly contacted by their constituents.

“But like I said, he just didn't feel like he had the skills or the time to continue in that position” (P3).

“It could be the time commitment. I mean, if you do have something of an understanding of what's involved beyond a city council or a Mayor, it is a little bit more than just showing up. Once we have monthly meetings, showing up once a month and just voting on a couple of things and walking away. There is involvement. And again, as I said earlier, we have some standing committees and some other commitments. And so, Mayor and the Councilors have some responsibilities beyond just our business meetings. And that can be off putting, I imagine, for

people. And I know that watching my adult children, people are really busy, that so called spare time is really tough to come by” (P4).

“A big part of it was that it was a two-year commitment, not a four-year commitment. I believe that contributed significantly. I don't think that's the only reason, but I think that might have been maybe probably carried as much weight as anything, the fact that it wasn't committing to four years” (P4).

“There are a lot of meetings. If you're in a very active community, you're not just on the council.. But as part of your council seat, you also get to serve on other city boards and commissions. So, it's not just the council meetings you go to. It may be the Economic Development Authority board, it might be the Planning and Zoning. Or it might be the Library board, where it's pretty quiet, but it's still a time commitment. There's just all kinds of different boards and commissions in a typical city, and you're not going to be on all of them, but you're going to be on enough of them that you'll be gone at least two nights a week. At least! That for some folks is just not acceptable. They just can't do it. So again, it's that time commitment, not only for the meetings, but prepping for the meetings, going to events to learn about a topic. There's a lot of time commitment” (P9).

“Sometimes people don't want to be inundated with contact. They don't want the phone calls” (P9).

“He ran for city council, got on there, ran for reelection, won, and then resigned. And he said he didn't have time” (P10).

“Well, in addition to a younger generation that doesn't seem either to have the available time or interest in donating their talents and time to community organizations, it seems to be a

declining attribute of a lot of folks. There are exceptions, of course, but we all got through it, remained involved with raising a family and pursuing a job” (P11).

“And I think people value their free time to an extent that they don't want to give up time for a job that they know is probably going to be just not fun. A lot of the time, people don't want to put themselves in that position. A lot of people don't want to put the time into campaigning, even in a small township like ours” (P12).

“Another big challenge or obstacle for people seeking office in communities are just family commitments, and it's that competition for time that I talked about earlier. But everybody's doing more. Everyone's kids are more programmed. People are increasingly working further away from where they live. So the idea of coming back home at night after a 30 minutes commute or 40 minutes commute only to go back to city hall to have a council meeting is something that people don't always want to do” (P13).

“Didn't want the extra work, attention, headaches, and commitment” (P14).

Being Viewed by and Answering to Your Neighbor. Participants expressed reluctance to take public positions due to fear of personal backlash. Small cities have a close-knit community where people know each other and don't want to stir the pot or make anyone angry. Small-town politics is personal, and constituents have access to their representatives in various settings, making it difficult to get away from public scrutiny. People in rural areas don't want to be blamed for problems at city hall, and they assume every phone call will lead to someone screaming at them. In addition, people are hesitant to put their names out for public comment due to fear of character assassination or the possibility of past mistakes being brought up. Being a public official is a responsible position that requires showing up and acting responsibly, and some people are not sure if they are ready for that level of commitment.

“I think the other thing, too, for rural areas, and what I've kind of found anecdotally is that people, especially in the Midwest, are really not excited about stirring anything. And I think that they're so worried that if they make the wrong decision, their mom's friend's going to call them, and then they're going to call them and tell them, ‘Why the hell did you vote that way?’” (P1).

“It's very hard to talk people into taking any of them positions because if you're on a planning and zoning, for instance, with variance issue, everybody knows each other in a small town and nobody wants to stir the pot, make anybody mad” (P5).

“One of the key things is that politics in a small town, it gets very personal. In a larger city, you're just one of a sea of people. Even if you're in wards or districts, you may still serve 10,000 or 20,000 people. In a small town, it's very personal. When you serve on council or as a mayor in a small town, your constituents have access to you at the public school, at church, at the grocery store, the gas station, in your front yard when you're trying to mow the yard. I was just trying to weed the flower bed or mow the yard or whatever, and it took three times as long to do it because they would pull over and say, ‘I got to talk to you.’ And I would always go and talk to them, of course, because you can't just say, ‘Hey, go away.’ That would not have worked. So that's why I say it's a real personal thing.” (P9).

“They don't want to get blamed if things go wonky at city hall, and they know that even if they didn't have any part in the problem, they may still get blame thrown their way. And they assume that every phone call is going to be someone to scream at them.” (P9).

“I have to answer constituents. I have to do the work. It's in public. It's a responsible position. You need to be act responsibly and you have to show up. Not so sure I want to be that

way. And then just the whole ego thing, the hurt feelings. It's a big deal to put your name out there and know that you might lose. And what do I do when I lose?" (P10).

"I think it's a hesitancy of a lot of people to just hold themselves out for public comment and profiling, because you see in the larger media so many cases of character assassination, and you never know. None of us lead perfect lives, and you never know what in your past, I think, may come up in the context of that to make it appear for someone else's benefit that you're less qualified than you should be for the office" (P11).

Fear and Safety Concerns. Participants mentioned that running for local office can be daunting for many people due to fear of making a decision that could potentially harm their personal or professional relationships, embarrassment if they don't win, and the possibility of facing hostility or even personal threats. Some individuals may also be deterred by the current antagonistic atmosphere at city hall. These concerns are especially prevalent for those living in small cities where putting oneself out there can be intimidating or personally embarrassing if something doesn't go well. Despite the desire to do what's right, serving at the local level can be risky and may ultimately lead to individuals deciding not to run for office.

"I think the reason that people just don't even run, for that matter, is that they're so fearful that they're going to make some decision that's somehow going to come back and haunt them in some form, whether that's a relationship they have or their employer or their boss or something. Also, I think that you live in a small town and to put yourself out there is incredibly scary. And if you don't make it, that's pretty embarrassing. And sometimes you're not there to make friends. You're there to do what's right" (P1).

"I think there's sometimes that just that fear of what if or the fear of putting it out there and then you don't win and then that feel of public shame" (P7).

“There could be something going on, and it may be that nobody wants to run because things are so antagonistic at city hall, and nobody wants to be part of that mud-flinging episode” (P9).

“And increasingly, I think there's just a lot of people who don't want to continue serving at the local level because of all the vitriol or even personal threats in some cases. One of our town council members had a window shot out in her basement and she had been on the council for probably a decade and decided not to run the next time because it's just like, I don't want to risk my family's safety and this is crazy” (P12).

Public Criticism for an Underappreciated and Thankless Job. According to some participants, working in local government is a thankless and underappreciated job. When things go right, there is little recognition, but when things go wrong, there is a lot of criticism. One participant who was on the planning commission decided not to run for office due to the negative atmosphere in their town and not wanting to subject their family to it.

“You know, I think it's a pretty thankless job” (P1).

“It's a very underappreciated or unappreciated thing to be in local government. I won't say there's absolutely no appreciation, but when things go right, you're not going to hear a whole lot about it. Things go wrong. Oh, yeah, you're going to hear about it. That kind of a thing” (P9).

“It is a pretty thankless job working in local government, generally speaking. I was on the planning commission but didn't run because of the vitriol in our town” (P12).

“I didn't want to subject my family to that” (P12).

Nasty Campaigns. According to two interview participants, running for election is a difficult and competitive task and the current state of politics and the division in the nation have

made people hesitant to run for office, even if they are qualified for the job, have an interest, and are capable.

“I think a big barrier to running for elections here is that it's really nasty. It's hard to run for. It's hard. It's taxing. You have to really be up for it. It's competitive” (P8).

“People are just so turned off by politics these days that even people who would be good at the work and who might otherwise consider running, they just see our nation and the divide in it, and they also don't want to put themselves out there for that” (P12).

Cost versus Benefit. According to two interview participants, running for office at the local level requires significant time and effort, as well as expense. However, most candidates are motivated by the possibility of making a positive change in their community.

“Most people in my experience run for office because they really care and they want to make a change and they want to make a difference, especially at the local level. I think they're motivated by what's possible” (P8).

“There's a little bit of the time and effort that goes into trying to promote your candidacy and also the associated, well, not great expense that goes into most local offices” (P11).

Steps and Rules for Running for and Holding Elected Office are Unclear. A participant shared their experience running for office and the difficulties they faced. They noted that the process was not clearly explained to them and that the materials provided were difficult to understand. Additionally, there were no clear guidelines on how much money a candidate could spend, which created another barrier. The participant expressed frustration with the lack of clear rules and guidance, stating that they wanted to follow the rules but were unsure how to do so.

“One is the lack of just understanding how to do it. So the basics, right, is to fill out that piece of paper, pay your \$5 or whatever. And then you're running for office. Right. But even how to run and what posters you can have, what you can't have, how much you can spend, how much you can't spend. All of those things at the city level were never explained to me, and I didn't know what the stipulations were” (P1).

“I think the other part, too, is like, yeah, just knowing what to do in order to even run for office. Materials are available, but they are so legalese that they are not understandable. So I think that those are the types of things where it's just not clearly understanding and defining for everybody that this is the right way and this is a wrong way” (P1).

“I don't know, if it's just the government bureaucracy of it, and maybe them not wanting everybody to run and wanting to be able to have these little gotcha moments because those things aren't spelled out. Just having, like, a one pager about, like, okay, you're running for office. What does this mean? A,B,C,D. It doesn't have to be complicated. And I think we overcomplicate the process to make those barriers. And so that's what I would say about just running for office in general. In my experience, it's just been a little bit of a shit show.” (P1).

“The materials didn't clearly say whether or not the candidate could spend any particular amount of money, right. And so, I guess somebody could have called me out on that if they wanted to. Granted, it's like a \$50 complaint fee, so no one was really going to spend their own money” (P1).

“But even so, I was trying to find out, okay, I can only accept \$500 or \$250 depending on what election cycle it is from people. But it didn't expressly say how much I, as a candidate, could spend. Right. Nowhere in there. And when I called the state, when I called the county

auditor, nobody could give me that answer. And it's things like that that create these huge barriers” (P1).

“I am trying to follow your rules, but if you're not giving me those rules, how do I follow them?” (P1).

Theme 8: Why do People Continue to Run and Serve?

Participants identified various reasons why people continue to run and serve. Some are specific to living, working, and wishing to make a difference in small communities. Participants shared the following reasons:

- *It's not for the pay.*
- Community pride.
- It allows for people to connect with others.
- Making progress shaping their community and giving back.
- Their work isn't finished, and they don't wish to lose momentum.

These reasons are discussed in greater depth below.

It's Not for the Pay. Several participants mentioned the pay they receive for their meetings. One person noted they make about \$1,200 a year, another said \$1,800 a year, while another said they make a little under \$3,000 a year. Pay varies but is not significant given the time commitment. Despite the low pay, the participants emphasized that they do not participate for the money.

“\$40 per meeting...about \$1,200 a year” (P3).

\$240 a month. So a little under \$3,000” (P4).

“We get \$1,800 a year, so it's about \$150 a meeting” (P5).

“It's certainly not for the pay. As mayor, like, \$300 a month” (P11).

“They're not doing it for the money” (P13).

Community Pride. Several interview participants expressed their desire to give back to their community and improve the quality of life for everyone living there. They believe that serving in the local office allows them to make a difference and help maintain a sense of pride and belonging in their community. They shared that people who run for office are motivated by their care for their area and the belief that they can improve parks, streets, and overall living conditions. Despite some headaches, they agree to invest their time and energy because they know they can make a difference.

“They know it's a nice place to live and raise families, and they just want to kind of keep it that way” (P5).

“I wanted to give back to a community that had been very welcoming and had given a lot to us. And the community is one that I love.” (P7).

“People, in my experiences, have stepped up to run for local office because they love where they live, and they feel a lot of pride in where they live, and they want other people to feel proud about where they live. I think local elected officials want everyone that lives in their community to have a sense of belonging and a sense of place. And I think that the people that run for office want everyone to have that same sense of ownership and that same sense of belief that where they live is special and that it matters. And so people that step up to serve then do that with the idea that they think that they can help improve a park, they can improve the streets, they can improve the quality of life. And that's the thing that motivates people to run for office. And that's what I think makes them so special, is people are coming at this all from a place of a lot of care” (P13).

“Oftentimes, they're agreeing to invest their time, their energy, even a headache or two along the way, because they believe in where they live, and they know that they can make a difference” (P13).

A Sense of Connection. Participants shared that they enjoy their work due to the camaraderie, sense of fulfillment, and opportunity to meet more people in the community. They appreciate the meaning behind their work and the satisfaction it brings. The job also serves as a conversation starter and door opener.

“I love the camaraderie” (P7).

“Sometimes they do it just because they enjoy the people they're working with. They enjoy their fellow elected officials. They enjoy the city staff” (P9).

“They feel fulfilled. They understand that what they're doing has meaning, first of all. That it matters to them and their neighbors and the people around them, and it gives them satisfaction. They go, I'm learning something, first of all. I feel good about being with this group of people, even though not all the time, but I feel good about what we're doing and I think I can help” (P10).

“I get the sense it's like they don't have anything better to do. I think it gives them just a sense of connection and door opener, a conversation starter with a lot of people that they kind of welcome” (P11).

“A lot of them enjoy meeting more people in the community” (P12).

Progress Shaping their Community & Giving Back. Participants mentioned that individuals who run for office want to make a difference in their community and feel empowered by their successes. They may have a specific skill or development they see lacking and want to

contribute, or they may simply care about their city and want to improve it. Those who continue to serve in elected office do so because they see progress and enjoy shaping their community.

“I find that they find out that they can make a difference and they enjoy that. They feel empowered, like, okay, I got this first thing done, and now I want to try the next thing. I want to try to get it done for my community. And they start to realize, okay, I can make a difference. And they may not have been sure of that when they ran the first time, but once they get that success under their belt, then they feel empowered to try another thing, whatever that thing might be. They want to make a community more attractive, more livable, more viable, more economically stable” (P9).

“They want to make a difference in the town in which they live. They want to do something good. It starts with I want to make a difference, I care about what goes on here and so I've got something to contribute” (P10).

“I think most people who are in office for a long time either enjoy the power of the position and the influence it gives them and the attention, or they're in it, hopefully for some good reason, because they believe they're doing good and can advance their community” (P12).

“They thought they had something to contribute to their community, maybe a particular skill that they saw lacking” (P12).

“People continue to serve in elected office because they see progress. They see that they're actually making a difference. They get to help shape what the community is and what it looks like and how it works” (P13).

Their Work isn't Finished and Don't Wish to Lose Momentum. Participants shared that they seek reelection because of unfinished business and a desire to continue making a

difference. They believe they still have something to contribute to the community and want to prevent the loss of momentum that comes with a change in leadership.

“They still see that there's more work to do. Candidates often talk about having unfinished business and priorities that they weren't able to accomplish” (P8).

“They also find that sometimes towards the end of the term, they're in the midst of a community project, a city project, and they want to see it through” (P9).

“They still have something to contribute, they provide some benefit to the community, and they enjoy the work” (P12).

“I'm not done yet. I got a little bit more work that I want to do. And that's why I think people seek reelection, because they've gotten in, they've gotten a taste of what it means to make a difference, and they want to continue that vision” (P13).

“People run for reelection because they know that there might not be a big push of people that are interested in following them. And so they don't want the community to lose momentum” (P13).

Theme 9: Are Write-in Campaigns Viable?

Participants identified various perceptions about write-in candidates, the vetting of appointed persons, and candidate quality. Related to viability, one participant mentioned that the viability of the write-in candidate is in question, but others are supportive for the reasons outlined below.

“If we discover there's a write-in at the last minute, there's always questions on, like, can we invite them to the candidate forum? Because one of the criteria is that you have to have a viable campaign. And when you write-in at the last minute, is that really viable? Have you really

tried to campaign? And so, it comes up every year. And so I'm familiar with it from that perspective” (P8)

Perceptions about Write-In Candidates are Conflicted. Some participants shared that write-in and midterm appointments tend to show less involvement than those who were elected through the regular process. This could be due to a lack of knowledge about the role, less motivation, or not having a constituency to answer to. Conversely, some participants shared that some write-in candidates have demonstrated strong commitment and engagement. It was also suggested that a write-in candidate may be more extreme in their views and less connected with the community they represent. Overall, the level of involvement varies among write-in and appointed council members.

“I made the assumption when he did get on council that it would be a very similar experience, and it just is not” (P1).

“I would say that write-ins and midterm appointments generally seem to show less involvement than others. And whether that's an educational thing, they don't quite know what the role is or there's less motivation, I'm not sure, but there does seem to be a difference in activity level” (P2).

“There's been less involvement with the other members of the council but he does participate very frequently within the council meetings and asks questions and shares observations and opinions. He got elected and he took the oath of office and regularly has attended meetings all year. So, to that extent he's engaged. It's been a little bit more difficult. We have various committee assignments, and he hasn't expressed a strong desire to be active in that way. So, it's very council meeting centric for his engagement, which isn't inherently bad.” (P4).

“I don't take them very seriously. It doesn't feel that they have the same commitment because they're not going to the community meetings, they're not campaigning, they're not door knocking. A lot of times they don't even have websites. And so it doesn't demonstrate the same level of commitment” (P8).

“In my experience, I would say that they often do have a strong commitment” (P9).

“He was totally committed. They were surprised, I think, to be elected. That didn't dampen their commitment. They realized that they're part of it. They were, I'll say, proud individuals, and we got to make this work and do as well as we can.” (P10).

“I've had write-in candidates who probably weren't performing as strong as one might hope, but I don't think that had anything to do with the fact that they got there by write-in or appointment” (P10).

“I think they'd be much more inclined to just throw in the hat and get out of there” (P11).

“Write-in candidates are probably more likely to be extreme in one direction or another, again, because they didn't choose to run necessarily” (P12).

“They haven't had to go through the campaigning process like someone with their name on the ballot probably has had to do. And so, I think they're probably going to be much less responsive and much less conversant with the overall community they're supposedly representing” (P12).

Appointees are Vetted by a Small Few. One participant suggested that the appointment process for public positions can be problematic. In general, candidates for such positions are selected based on a letter of interest and an interview with a small group of individuals from the community, such as the city council. In one instance, a person was appointed to a temporary

position to complete someone else's term. Overall, there is a concern that the appointment process may not be fair or transparent enough.

“A lot of times, and they're appointing their friends or people that they are socially engaged with” (P1).

“We advertise locally for applicants, and then we just had them submit a letter of interest, and then the council appoints by resolution. For most of them, there was just the one person that stepped up to take it. I'd say one out of five, I think. The council had a decision to make between applicant a and applicant b. Other than that, it's usually just been somebody raises their hand and says, I'll do it. And then the council does a quick interview and then appoints them by resolution” (P2).

“He was asked by others in the community to step up and do a write-in campaign. So there was a very small write-in campaign, and I don't have verification or proof of who asked who. But that was my understanding, was that some members of the community had asked him” (P2).

“On a write-in like that, like this last election we had, we had an open seat and there was probably 30 different write-in votes for the position. A lot of 5,6,2,3 total votes. And the person that we picked had like 8 write-in votes. So, that's who we picked to take the position” (P5).

“And normally what we do is we advertise in the paper in our minutes and Facebook, if there's anybody interested in the position, we have them send some kind of a letter of interest, and then our city council will actually interview them. And then we pick from that interview, and normally we have two or three people that always come forward, and then we interview them and ask them what they feel and what they see as needing to be changed or what they like or dislike about our community, and then we pick from there” (P5).

“I don't believe that anybody wrote-in a candidate. So, then it was put out into the news, but only one applied. Then there were open interviews with the entire city council and the mayor. The news was invited to join. Other community members were invited to join that had been put out there. Nobody did. Ultimately, who voted for who or who chose who that was kept private” (P7).

“I think sometimes the appointment process for positions that are accountable to the public, like the Met council and that kind of thing, can get to be problematic from our perspective, just because we think that voters should have the right to kind of choose some of those positions” (P8).

“Ultimately, the city council appointed someone who had been a City Clerk into the open elected position” (P10).

“He got the inspiration over the preceding weekend and gathered a few family, friends, and things to vote for him. It was a casual sort of willingness to have somebody write-in his name” (P11).

“And rather than holding a special election, the town board has the authority to appoint someone in a temporary position to basically complete that person's term. And that's what they chose to do. So they appointed people. I think it really creates animus from the beginning, someone's always going to read something into that. Right? Why did this person get appointed and not this other person in a way where if they were elected and they won” (P12).

Candidate Quality. Participants cited various criteria related to the quality of the write-in candidate and why the individual was voted in:

- The individual is known and well-liked,
- The individual reflects a desire to serve.

- The individual has *less baggage*.
- The individual has the education and experience to serve well.
- The individual reflects a willingness to learn,
- The individual is young and has fresh ideas.

These qualities are discussed in greater depth below.

The Individual is Known and Well-liked. According to participants, write-in candidates are often well-known and respected members of the community, with a history of commitment to local organizations and events. In small towns, familiarity and name recognition play a large role in write-in campaigns, and popular individuals are often selected for the position. This selection process assumes that past performance is a good indicator of future performance.

“I think largely name recognition. I think it's familiarity. This person was a pretty well-known, longtime resident, had been on the council before I'd been involved. So again, my understanding is this person is, in an overall sense, just considered a good person, intelligent, logical, good intentions, that type of thing. So, there was just a general high regard for this individual” (P2).

“He's very familiar in the community. He's well-known throughout the community. And so, I think having that familiarity really contributed as well, especially when you're in a small town that really makes a difference. And the individual also is a part-time bartender in one of the local bars, which is again, not unusual in a small town. I believe he's a native of the community” (P4).

“It's just people, they write-in the bartender for the council position or they write-in just somebody that's involved in the community. You normally still have to ask them if they want to take the position, and if they wouldn't want it, we wouldn't force them to take it. So that's where

them write-in votes came into play, where we had to kind of pick somebody. I think the last one, he probably just kind of got plopped in there out of the blue. He got wrote-in and we asked him if he would take the position and he just said, 'sure'. And that's, you know, there's really no issues at hand that, you know. Okay, got him elected” (P5).

“Yeah, they know him. He's been a softball, volleyball, wrestling umpire for over 40 years. He's big in the community as far as, like the Lions. People know him. They know what he's done. They know, again, the benefits of a small town” (P6).

“A lot of times, these people, their strong commitment in the past means that they're still going to be strongly committed, even as a write-in elected official. And usually, the write-ins are what I call popular people, and it doesn't mean that they're beloved by all, but they're well known enough and appreciated in the sense of, we know so and so will do a good job. Again, that speaks to that commitment. They know that so and so will do the job justice and maybe not go 120%, but they'll hit really close to 100, and that's all we need” (P9).

“The guy I'm talking about was more popular or more well-respected” (P10).

“I was a write-in and had a good reputation in community, clients voted for me” (P14).

The Individual Reflects a Desire to Serve. Several participants mentioned the value of having a family background that emphasizes helping others is important for community leaders. One individual even chose to run as a write-in candidate because they believed their town needed better options. Interestingly, some write-in candidates who had not campaigned before were hesitant to accept the position. Overall, trust and dedication to the community were seen as important qualities for leaders.

“It's hard to make up for a family background, where there's some values communicated of taking care of your neighbor, doing good deeds for the sake of doing good deeds to help other people's lives” (P11).

“This individual thought, ‘No, I better step in because our town needs something better than those two people on the ballot.’” (P10).

“Of course, I never had the experience where a write-in said, ‘No, I'm not going to take the job.’ And these write-ins, I'm referring that capacity usually had not mounted a campaign and said, hey, people, if you write me in, I'll do it.” (P10).

“They trusted I would be dedicated to the position and community” (P14).

The Individual has Less Baggage. Several participants discussed how being an outsider with no established connections in a community can make it easier to make decisions. Lack of education or experience in certain areas can sometimes be an advantage. One of the participants was also new to the community and had no involvement in any civic organizations. The participants also discussed how individuals without a well-developed constituency are more likely to be their own person and less influenced by special interest groups.

“I'm not from here, so I'm kind of an outsider anyways. And that I don't have those probable interconnections, as some do. And so, it's easier for me to make the decisions that I do” (P1).

“You don't really know how well one performs until they get in there. Their lack of education or experience into whatever you think is important sometimes doesn't hurt them. Sometimes it helps. Less baggage in some respect” (P10).

“The other candidate was also new to the community” (P11).

“He had never had any involvement in any civic organizations while he was in his employment life” (P11).

“They don't really have a constituency. Certainly, a well nurtured and developed one. Yeah, I think they're much more their own person. On the council, I had dreaded the prospect of some special interest group gathering around somebody pushing the candidacy and getting them on” (P11).

The Individual Has the Education and Experience to Serve Well. Participants discussed how certain qualities and backgrounds contributed to the selection of individuals for leadership positions in their community. These included education, prior council experience, local business ownership, and relevant employment backgrounds. Some felt their own business experience could bring a valuable perspective to the council. The interviewees also noted that individuals with specific work backgrounds, such as contracting and public works, could better understand related issues in the community.

“She's well-educated and pretty articulate” (P1).

“I'm not sure to what extent people were aware that he'd served on the council before. I knew that because I served alongside him, but I suspect that that contributed for some people, the people who are aware of that, I'm sure that contributed to their selection” (P4).

“He was a businessman that worked at our local. He probably moved to our town ten years ago and bought a house and had a family, and he was working for a local business here and just kind of a go getter type person. And he's the guy that got wrote-in. So, he was just a local person that everybody knew, and they knew he worked kind of in administration, and I think people just figured that he'd be a good pick” (P5).

“So, he has the background, and so everybody's like, well, that would maybe be a good job for him. He's got the knowledge, at least some background” (P6).

“I felt like I had the experience of how I could help from a different mindset, from a business side” (P7).

“Sometimes their background or experience of either current or former employment actually helps them be more in touch with similar constituencies or related issues in the community. So that's been helpful. We have one guy that's a contractor, and therefore kind of understands better what the public works department is up to and a lot of times he does some snow plowing himself, things like that. We've had a realtor on. We've had retired public works employees come on board. A guy that recently retired, one of the write-in candidates from a financial advisory firm and he brings that sort of information” (P11).

The Individual Reflects a Willingness to Learn. One participant believed that the write-in made a genuine effort to learn and gain knowledge about how cities operate. Another participant believed that the write-in was learning slowly. Still, another thinks that the write-in has the potential to be a good council member if they continue to learn and grow with enthusiasm and interest.

“I felt once he got on the council and started to understand that he really didn't understand, I think he put forth a good faith effort into trying to learn. He has learned more and more about how cities operate. He actually put some really serious effort into trying to learn about what was going on” (P3).

“He's learning slowly” (P6).

“So I think we've got a moldable or malleable individual situation that hopefully will grow with enthusiasm, interest, and knowledge into a good counselor” (P11).

The Individual is Younger and has Fresh Ideas. A participant mentioned a city council member who stood out for being younger and more energetic compared to the usual older council members. The younger member attracted a base of people his age.

“He was a younger man. I mean, the city councils in this area tend to be filled with older people, usually retired, who have the time to take these responsibilities on and they are longtime constituents. I just think he was younger, more vibrant, more. I think he attracted a base of people that were more his age, which is great” (P3).

Theme 10: Leadership Deficits and Learnings Opportunities

Participants discussed various leadership deficits for newly elected officials as well as methods to fill in those deficits through learning, mentoring, and participation in professional networks. More details are presented below.

Leadership Deficits. Participants expressed the need for a solid educational process for newly elected officials. Many individuals come into office with no prior political experience and would like to learn how to be a better city council member. Some participants suggested that there is a learned skill where experienced mayors or council members let others win to achieve desired outcomes and build confidence and momentum within the body.

“I think that we need to have a really good, grounded educational process for those, because I felt like I came in and I sat on the seat for, like a year and didn't know when I could talk or when I couldn't and what was the right way to manage things” (P1).

“I'd say that's probably the biggest need, because usually these are not professional politicians who have prior elected office experience. To me, there's no shame in saying, ‘Hey, I'm new to elected office, I don't know everything, and why wouldn't I want to learn how to be a better city council member or better town board member?’” (P12).

“Nobody tells you how to be a mayor. Nobody tells you how to be a council member, and you have to figure that out” (P13).

“I think oftentimes people get elected and they assume that they're in charge now. But really serving on a city council or serving as a mayor is an art of compromise, of conversation, of disagreeing, of letting people win sometimes to get to what you actually want to get to” (P13).

Training, Workshops, and Conferences. Participants discussed the importance of training for newly elected officials. The League of Minnesota Cities provides valuable training sessions. The training is beneficial for both new and experienced officials. Participants noted that not everyone sees the need for training, but it is essential for effective leadership. The League of Minnesota Cities training is an enormously helpful tool for newly elected officials. The opportunity for newly elected officials to come together and receive basic training on how to be effective is especially valuable.

“And so I think that it would be really helpful for new candidates to be able to go through some training, and I really pushed on them all going through the league of Minnesota city's elected officials 101, I thought that was incredibly helpful and insightful for what our job responsibilities are and are not” (P1).

“We go through a process after each election where we provide education. How the city runs. The city council roles. We are pretty involved with the League Minnesota Cities new councilor training. When there's a midterm appointment, we go through that same thing with a new counselor. We go over the statutory stuff, the statewide stuff, and then kind of some stuff that's unique to our city so that they're informed of it” (P2).

“The city will pay for training through the League of Minnesota Cities. I know the League of Minnesota Cities will offer new officer or new council member training, and I guess we leave it up to the individual whether they choose to participate or not” (P3).

“There's a lot of training available for new officials if they will take advantage of it. If someone is reelected, they can continue to get additional training along the way. The experienced officials can also get additional training, but especially for the newly elected, the League of Minnesota Cities has a really good training session, and it lasts for not just a couple of hours, but over a couple of days. And that's a lot of information to take in, but you got to start somewhere, and that helps a lot” (P9).

“A realization that what they're about to do probably isn't on point with anything done in the past, a willingness and desire would be ideal to get involved, meet their peers, participate in workshops, events, conferences” (P10).

“Our league of Minnesota cities is absolutely enormously helpful tool to all the newly elected officials, particularly those that reach out to try to learn from some of their training, conferences and other things” (P11).

“Often, it's just training that is needed. And unfortunately, not everyone understands that or sees the need to be trained. So, there's a Minnesota Association of Townships and a League of Minnesota Cities, both of which do a lot to support their respective members. And they offer very affordable training that usually can be paid for by the township or the city” (P12).

“What they need most is...basic training on how to be effective as an elected official. Every year we have our elected leaders institute, which is an opportunity for newly elected folks to come together and get some basic training around what it means to be an elected official and how to be effective.” (P13).

Mentoring. Participants mentioned that they often meet one-on-one with key staff members such as City Clerks and City Administrators, who can serve as mentors and provide historical information about city activities and priorities. Newly elected officials can learn a great deal from these staff members.

“I try to meet one-on-one or meet frequently with council members, and usually when somebody comes on, that's new” (P2).

“Newly elected officials often learn a great deal from the key staff of the city, be it the City Clerk, City Administrator, Department Heads City Clerks and City Administrators can serve as mentors and in our community, absolutely, our city clerk was a wonderful mentor, and council members could go talk to him and say, ‘What do you know about this? What's been the history on this? What do you see happening if such and such activity goes on?’” (P9).

Participating in Professional Networks. One participant shared the importance of developing networks and relationships with officials from other cities to gain valuable insights and knowledge. Due to public meeting laws, it is important to be cautious when discussing topics with fellow council members, but networking with officials from other cities can provide a wealth of information and opportunities for individual growth. Participation in organizations, such as the League of Minnesota Cities, can also help build these networks. The connections made through networking can become lifelong friendships and lead to a strong network of support.

“You can develop networks and relationships with other elected officials, and not so much just within your own city, but outside your city, so that you can talk to them, because there is this thing called the public meeting law. So, you have to be careful how much you talk to your own council members that serve with you, but you can talk to people from other cities, someone

that, you know, went through a similar thing in their city, and you want to know what kinds of considerations did they have to make? And that's a huge learning experience to be able to take in, and it's very valuable" (P9).

"By participating in the League of Minnesota Cities or in the Southeast League of Cities, you develop a network. People get to know one another and trust one another. And I will say, too, that even without those City Clerks and City Administrators, they have a huge network, they connect because they do some training together through the LMC, and they get to know each other, and then they're just able to call each other up and say, 'Hey, I got a thing going on over here. I want to get your ideas on it. Tell me what you know about this sort of situation.' And they become lifelong friends, it's impressive to see the network that can build up" (P9).

Theme 11: The Loss of the Collective Societal Story and Consolidation of the News

According to participants, the decline of local newspapers is a societal trend that cannot be stopped. Many local newspapers have closed for financial reasons or have been absorbed or merged with nearby newspapers. This trend is concerning for some, as the lack of local news coverage may lead to the loss of the local news and the collective societal story for these communities. Others believe that the evolution of news sources is a natural process and that online news will become more prevalent.

Participants cited that while there are still some viable local publications, many do not cover all city issues and some often only report on major highlights. Participants mentioned that the local news media is becoming increasingly homogenous and repetitive reporting similar stories as is being reported state-wide or nationally. The lack of a local voice discussing local issues in a constructive and objective manner is a concern and is believed to hinder the ability to constructively understand and discuss local issues.

“We used to have local newspaper and then, we have a local radio station. Because of the loss of the newspaper, we don't have somebody that comes in and actually comes to our meetings anymore or anything like that they really don't report a lot on the local stuff” (P1).

“We lost our local newspaper. We still had the nearby paper, but that closed too. I'm aware of two nearby newspapers that merged together for financial reasons” (P2).

“My city did have a newspaper and it closed. It was absorbed by the newspaper in the nearby City, which was recently sold” (P3).

“For many years we had a weekly newspaper, but that went defunct four or five years ago. That City had its own newspaper, and so did the nearby city. And those merged a couple of years ago. I know it's part of a chain that owns multiple newspapers. There is a daily newspaper, or at least six days a week, but their coverage of other cities, particularly local politics and government, is very rough.” (P4).

“We have a local newspaper, but I don't think a lot of people subscribe to it” (P6).

“I don't like it. Minnesota is like the fifth, I don't know what the scale was, the fifth worst state in the nation for local paper closures. People are really concerned about it and they want to form a study group around it. And what does that mean for our democracy? Because I've heard statistics, like when local papers close, corruption goes up. Nobody's watching anymore. And so that's a concern. Absolutely” (P8).

“I do think as much as people want to say that print is on its way out, I don't know. I see a lot of people reading the news and interacting, especially with those local papers” (P8).

“I think that as we go through time, the sources of news, they just continually change. And it's a very gradual thing. And we're going through it right now. The way people get their news is evolving, and it's very much more online, of course. Even the newspapers, I think, know,

okay, paper is, will it hang in there or not? And so, they're trying to do the dual track. They've got the paper paper, and they've got the online paper. I think that's just, it's going to happen. It's just a natural evolution of things" (P9).

"It's sad that we don't have the local newspapers like we did before, but that's the way it is. It's a societal thing that none of us can stop. There's a reason that there aren't many local newspapers anymore, and that's that people don't value them. There's a lot of value in those newspapers, but obviously the trend is consolidation" (P10).

"I think it's tragic, but I can also understand it a lot goes into trying to keep the act going. I wouldn't say the current owners are real pros at it, but it's nice to find a few viable information, local information sources that if people want to. We have the Timber J is one of the publications in the area here. We just became acquainted with relatively newer publication further west, The Defender, I think it's called. And those become, they actually do cover local news stories. Not like the church circle meeting, who's pouring coffee and things, but they do get the big highlights of things. And then we have a almost daily newspaper out of Virginia, Minnesota. As long as we bring the news to them, they don't usually shy away from it. After the last week, momentous activities we're involved in and I just called up the reporter I know there and I said, here's a story for you. And he goes after it in his professional way and that will enable a lot of people to understand that particular public decision. There are avenues of information, but not as vibrant as they were. And when you're competing against outside multimedia platform environment that many times is just trying to create fear, confusion and disinformation, that's hard" (P11).

"I think we've lost so many independent small newspapers over the last couple of decades. It's a real shame. We have a local once a week newspaper that comes out, but it rarely

covers township issues unless there's some controversy. So, I don't think people learn much about township stuff through that. But they do learn about the news in other, nearby communities. I think in a lot of other communities that's probably also true.” (P12).

“It's the same news we hear on national news media over and over and over again. You could switch the channel at night at 06:00 when the national news comes on and the headlines are all the same right across the table. With the exception of their one personal interest story at the end of the news, it's pretty much all the same what gets covered. And it's a very superficial slice of the news. Otherwise, it just feels like it's all the same news and often all the same perspective on the news. So, I think we really are hurt greatly by that lack of a local voice to discuss local issues in a constructive way” (P12).

“I think, for a lot of city officials or for a lot of communities across our state and where people access their information, it used to be easy because there used to be at least a weekly paper in just about every community across the state that ran important stories about things that were happening in the city, happening in the school, maybe happening on a church calendar, all of those things. And it became the place where people could go, a single source for information. But increasingly, as local newspapers are sort of in the decline right now, or as local newsrooms aren't staffed the way that maybe they once were, people are getting their information from a number of different places around what's happening in their city” (P13).

“I worry about that because I think newspapers helped us tell our collective story about who we are as a society. They reflected what we valued by the pictures that we put on the front page or by the stories that get run on the radio. And so, I worry about that. I'm concerned about that. I think it's something that we need to pay attention to...And I think that's something that we don't know yet or can't be in a place to judge or say that's good or bad or the right thing or the

wrong thing. I think it just kind of is. They were an important part of how we kept our history, our collective history” (P13).

Efforts to Preserve the Local Newspaper. Two participants referred to efforts by city officials to save their local news source. One city formed a group to rescue their local newspaper that was about to close, relocated it, and made it available to every household in the area for free.

“A few years ago, the owner of it sold it, along with the other papers he held to a regional newspaper down here. And the buyer snuffed out the City News and incorporated it into his regional paper. The one steady employee of the news on-site said, ‘The heck with that. I’m going to restart the City News.’ And she did. So, it was only down for about three weeks. She started up again, and it took a year or a year and a half to reach official newspaper status. But it was interesting to watch that kind of be in the middle of that because there’s some lawsuits involved, too. It gave us the experience of, as a community, being part of that regional group, a newspaper that covered probably three or four counties, which gave us a lot of information from other communities, but it was harder to find ours” (P10).

“What several of us did was form a group to rescue a weekly newspaper in town that was closing. We managed to do so. We moved it to a new location, got some new owners, and it’s distributed free of charge to every household in the area” (P11).

Theme 12: Rural Minnesota Cities Have Created New Information Environments

Given the decline of local newspapers, cities are engaging with new methods of sharing the news and are creating new information environments. Participants in an interview discussed the importance of sharing information and the ongoing challenge of informing citizens about community happenings without a local newspaper. They noted that it is necessary to get information to the public because people need to be well-informed. Despite these challenges,

cities are trying to engage with the public through different means, such as social media, city websites, and informal conversations. The participants expressed that cities need to share accurate information with the public if they want to avoid spreading misinformation. To maintain credibility, they suggested providing raw information straightforwardly and factually, without a particular spin. Some participants emphasized the importance of two-way communication, even if negative feedback is received.

“It was a very key conversation during a strategic planning process we had a couple of years back. How do we inform the citizens of what's happening in our community? It's an ongoing, moving target for us, trying to figure out what the right mix is and if we can kind of find that sweet spot. But I suspect it's one of the things that will not go away. It'll be an ongoing struggle” (P4).

“If they just put the raw information out, that is actually more convincing, quite frankly, because if people start to feel like, well, they're just spinning this, just, it's not for real. To keep that credibility, they need to just be sort of a Joe Friday – Just the facts, ma'am – and put it out there, not a boring way, but in a very straightforward, factual kind of way, and then let people decide, is this a good thing? Is this a bad thing? Is it something that should be changed, whatever, and just kind of get the dialog started? Because that's a good source of information and feedback is if you don't try to front load it with a certain perspective of here's what we want you to think, that kind of approach. You know, it's amazing how people will find their way to get the news that they need” (P9).

“I also think that cities, in particular, have recognized the importance of making sure people know that there is a good common story that's out there and have found ways to share information maybe that are different. I think cities just, they have to evolve with the changing

landscape of the ability to share information. They've just got to make that move right along with them. And I think most are trying to do that. The small towns, it's harder. They have less staff. It is very much more hands on. So, you have to have that city clerk or other staff person who's adept at either updating the city website or updating the city Facebook page or do whatever. And those that are able to make that happen are doing well” (P9).

“It's not just a one-way street, it's just not putting the information out, it's getting information back in. And sometimes it's not very nice. Sometimes it's a little bit rough. But at least you know. At least you know that. Okay, so and so is not happy about such and such” (P9).

“I think, as far as the ability to share information, I think cities just, they have to evolve with it. They've just got to make that move right along with them. And I think most are trying to do that. The small towns, it's harder. They have less staff. It is very much more hands on” (P9).

“I don't think it's beneficial for that to happen in terms of getting the word out, having people well-informed. I think we're required then to think differently about how we get the word out” (P10).

“I'm discouraged by neighbors who say I don't watch the news anymore because it's all negative, and yet they spend their time in a social media space where, in my experience, a lot of that discussion is just as negative, right? Only now it's negative and very personal. So, yeah, I unfortunately don't see a lot of positive venues for that kind of, again, healthy, democratic discussion and debate to happen” (P12).

“And in some communities, maybe that's a productive thing, and there are good, useful conversations, but I think in a lot of them it is that spread misinformation or organize people against or in favor of a particular thing, and it's very compartmentalized the discussions” (P12).

“I think a lot of cities are doing a really great job sharing information and engaging with the public on things that matter. The news may not be neatly kept right now in a newspaper like we're used to, but there are a number of different ways where I think cities are engaging and trying to make sure that their information gets out. Some of it's a little bit more formal, like Facebook or on social media or on the city's website or newsletter and other places are those informal channels. Know you talk to someone while you're at the grocery store” (P13).

“I think cities have really recognized and understood that there's this quest for information or for knowing from the public and are doing their best to fill it in. I also think that cities in particular have recognized the importance of making sure people know that there is a good common story that's out there and have found ways to share information maybe that are different” (P13).

“I think cities have to do that if they want to be viable and relevant and if they want the public to have the right story about what's happening and not the speculative sort of what's going on over there type story” (P13).

Use of Community Functions and Venues. Participants shared that in small cities word of mouth is a common way of spreading news. The local bar, café, grocery store, and community meetings are all places where people gather and exchange information. While the accuracy of the information can be questionable, these venues are still a source of information for many. Generally, with the changing news sources in our communities, small cities may not be as tight-knit as they used to be, but they still rely on word of mouth to stay informed.

“There's a lot of word of mouth” (P4).

“My first thought was the local bar. A dozen or so of the guys go up there either for coffee or play cards” (P6).

“You know, the teeny tiny towns, another news source for them is not newspaper or online. It is the street corner. It's the local café. It's all these different things. They have their own network, so to speak. If you go to a small town, there's always one café that has the dice table where the people, both men and women, but a lot of times the guys are playing dice and they're sharing the news. Now, how accurate it is, well, that's another good question. But it is some version of the news. And if people don't trust the news from there, they'll at least know where to start digging. They'll know there's a topic that they want to learn more about” (P9).

“Small towns aren't what they used to be in terms of everybody knows everything and what's going on, but there's still a good mechanism. Know, spread a rumor, so to speak, or spread news through word of mouth. There aren't many places to go and have a cup of coffee and sit for 3 hours or sit with the local bartender or barber” (P10).

“Traditionally, we hold two community meetings, one in the spring and one in the fall, where we feed people and then present one topic or another. One of them is focused on a volunteer recognition, organization type thing, and the other one's focused on a distinguished individual thing. But they also provide the forums to kind of bring the community up to date on what's been going on, give them a limited voice at the meeting. It's not really a public meeting in the sense of a decision-making event” (P11).

“You talk to someone while you're at the grocery store” (P13).

“They help share that story at a basketball game when they're having coffee at the cafe at church on Sunday” (P13).

Use of the City Website, Newsletters, and City Staff. Participants mentioned that city websites and council meetings are important sources of information for citizens. The city website is a primary means of communication, especially if it includes video recordings of council

meetings, minutes, and full council packets. A participant shared that they produced a summary of the council meeting and distributed it to subscribers via email. Some cities also publish a newsletter that provides updates on community events and decisions. This newsletter is inserted into a weekly magazine publication and distributed throughout the town. Finally, the city administrator, public works director, city clerk, and maintenance crew are also important messengers for community news.

“A lot of people do get their news from the website, which is a source of a lot of people's information” (P1).

“We do record our council meetings. There's a video recording that's made available off of our website so citizens can watch after the meeting is posted” (P4).

“If they do care, they tune in there, they can get it pretty mean now that we're talking, that being able to go to the city website, see a videotape going to the website, and see the minutes, see the full council packet, if somebody really cares, it's all there for them. I would also produce an after-council summary. It would go on our website, of course, but then the people who subscribe for that kind of news went right to their phones and their email addresses, and so they were getting the news of what happened last night” (P10).

“And to the extent we put things in the printed media, we can put them onto the web page. That and the city website seem to be the two principal ways of getting in touch with a more digital, savvy sort of segment of the local population. We spend a lot of time trying to bolster our city website. And that has also proved to stem the tide of misinformation and dissent” (P11).

“One thing that I've done that I'm very proud of, I put together a publication trying to do it at least twice, maybe up to four times a year. And it's kind of like a legal size paper folded down the middle, and on the four resulting sides, just give updates on various things that have

been going on in the community, and that in turn then is inserted into this weekly magazine publication, and then left for individuals to pick up at, like the library, the city hall counter, various places around town. And it's been really regarded as very valuable. It nips in the bud the usual ill-informed, mindless jibber jabber that goes on in coffee shops and otherwise. They can't therefore, take the position that we're not telling what's going on. We may not go into all the depth and everything, but that's been a challenge. And then when we made major community decisions in the last few years, we did a weekly segment explanations of why are we are doing something, what are we going to do, and what's it going to cost, kind of in three week increments. And then other than that, we spend a lot of time trying to bolster our city website” (P11).

“Our township puts out a newsletter, but it's been less and less frequent the last couple of years” (P12).

“I think that the City Administrator, the Public Works Director, the City Clerk, even the maintenance crew become important messengers for what's happening in the community” (P13).

Use of Social Media. Several participants shared that social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and what was Twitter have become increasingly popular in the last five years for small cities to communicate city business and share news with residents. However, there is concern regarding the accuracy of information shared on social media platforms if the page is not maintained by the city. Some participants also mentioned that misinformation can be spread via Facebook and Nextdoor pages maintained by others. Others shared that there is a lack of city staff to moderate comments on a government social media space. Despite these challenges, participants agree that social media can be an effective way to bridge the gap between the city and residents, as well as share hard news like changes in water rates.

“A decent chunk has been filled by social media, Facebook, Instagram, stuff like that, which we don't necessarily control” (P2).

“There's a little bit of competition with social media where some information may not always be the most accurate. And so we struggle with that” (P4).

In the last five years, our Facebook page has probably been getting more popular” (P5).

“We have our own Facebook page” (P6).

“We do have a Facebook page” (P7).

“I think a lot of people are on social media. I don't think it should be the only way to communicate city business, but I'm a fan. I see it with my city news coming out from the Mayor's office, like Twitter or whatever in multiple different languages. And I see them trying to really reach out and meet people where they're at. In addition, I think, that voters access information certainly on social media, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook – a lot of people get their news from those sources” (P8).

“You won't be surprised how much Facebook action there is for small cities. The Facebook pages for small cities have become really popular is because it's the really tiny cities that are the least likely to get any attention from newspapers or radio or whatever. So, they've had to create their own platform, quite frankly, to get any news out to their residents, because the traditional platforms, like newspaper, et cetera, may not be there for them, quite literally” (P9).

“That's another reason I think social media is working, is they can have more of a conversation about it rather than just a declaration. One of the best uses of Facebook ever is when the small towns have that high level of interactivity with their residents in their community” (P9).

“Social media is huge, as you know. It's a mixed bag like that, you know, as far as what's going on around town” (P10).

“I think our Facebook page is probably so far the best sort of ways of bridging the gap” (P11).

“There's a very small but very vocal group that spreads a lot of misinformation via Nextdoor, and they've created a Facebook page that just constantly spreads misinformation. This Nextdoor group and the Facebook group, I think, unfortunately, are where a lot of people get their news. I'm not even sure what would happen if our town had a Facebook page or if comments were allowed. I think what happens in resident-created Facebook pages – it becomes some sort of gripe space. I think those grips would just start showing up on the city Facebook page or the town Facebook page. I think if we had someone who was dedicated to getting information out and comments would be moderated in some way. But I know that's tough to do with a government social media space, it could be constructive, it could be a way to counter a lot of that misinformation, but we don't have the staff to do it. I don't know that people would read it. And yeah, again, I think it would be difficult to keep out the sort of comments that are meant to sabotage and incite rather than to actually create a conversation” (P12).

“Social media, that doesn't mean that they're just sharing, like, here are all the ribbon cuttings, but they're also sharing some of the hard news that's happening too. Like, hey, water rates actually have to go up, and this is what it means” (P13).

Use of Public Access Television or Streaming Meetings. Several participants described the use of community TV in small towns. They explained that local TV and public access channels often broadcast public meetings and local sports. This helps with transparency and sharing information. Some cities have been doing this for decades, and more are starting to

adopt the practice. During COVID, many meetings were streamed live, but now only the principal business meeting is televised. One participant noted that televising council meetings can reduce community participation in local politics.

“We also have all of our meetings now on YouTube and on our public access” (P1).

“And all these towns also have local TV. Now, something that not every small city would have is their own community TV. We call it CCTV. But it's a community TV, and you can get that on the public access channels. And yes, they cover public meetings, especially cover the local sports at the high schools and things like that, too. But I think there's more and more people going to that and then not necessarily a news source, but many city councils have their meetings televised. And even if it's not like live TV, where you can phone in or things like that, some places do that, but I think the smaller towns, they more or less just have a video camera going with sound, and then they broadcast it later for people to be able to listen to what was discussed, what was said, how did the vote go, that kind of a thing. And I think that's great for transparency, too. I applaud that. And that's been going on for quite some time. That's been going on for a couple of decades or more, but more and more cities are doing that. So that's not necessarily the same concept as news, but it supports the same concept in the sense of sharing information” (P9).

“We had a really vibrant scene that way until we started videotaping and televising all the council meetings” (P10).

“During COVID we did stream a lot of the meetings live. We haven't done that now so much. We do televise the first meeting, which is our principal business meeting of the month. And then we have a second meeting of the month where we've just kind of fallen out of the habit of having that broadcast and it's just kind of clean up from the first meeting each month” (P11).

Use of Local Radio Stations. Participants discussed the presence of local radio stations and their use for city news. One radio station has a dedicated reporter who attends all local meetings and posts articles online by 8:00 a.m. the following day. While some participants were unsure of the extent of local radio news coverage, they acknowledged its potential importance.

“There are local radio stations. We haven't used them for city news” (P2).

“We have a radio station, which would be our biggest news source. They have a reporter. They are a radio station. But they also have a reporter that posts all of the articles online. He goes to all meetings. That poor kid is at every single meeting, including school boards. I don't think we've run into it yet. But he is at every county commissioner meeting, every city council meeting, every board meeting, every school board meeting. I think he clones himself. I don't know how he does it. I'm not sure when he sleeps because he's required to have those articles out by like 08:00 a.m. the next morning. So honestly, I have no idea when that kid sleeps” (P7).

“Let's talk about the radio stations first. I don't listen to local radio that much, so I can't say for sure what is going on in our area as far as news but I would suspect that they still cover at least some of that” (P9).

Credibility, Reliability, Validity, and Transferability

In this section, I will discuss strategies to ensure that the findings of this study are trustworthy, dependable, unbiased, and transferrable. Phenomenological researchers have identified that there is a lack of consensus regarding the issues of reliability and validity (Beck, Keddy, & Cohen, 1994). “Disagreement prevail[s], for example, on the processes that are considered acceptable to be performed as a check on the analysis of a solitary researcher” (Beck, Keddy, & Cohen, 1994, p. 254). Leung (2015) writes, “The issue of subjectivity and contextual

ramifications has fueled incessant controversies regarding yardsticks for quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research results” (p. 324).

Given this conundrum, I achieved credibility, reliability, and validity by following my procedures, as outlined in Chapter 3, and following a consistent process from interview to interview. These steps included:

- Greeting my interview participants and thanking them for their participation.
- Engaging with my interview participants at the beginning of the interview session about noncontroversial topics, such as the weather. As suggested by Colaizzi, this step of dialoging began to build rapport and trust (Beck, Keddy, & Cohen, 1994). This dialog continued as I shared information about my background, career, and the community I grew up in. During this dialog, I would also share information about my bias as outlined in Chapter 3.
- Upon beginning the formal interview, stating the purpose of the interview, outlining the time commitment, requesting the consent, if it had not been previously provided, indicating that the interview was strictly voluntary, outlining my procedure for assuring confidentiality, and lastly, indicating *if at any time they wished to skip a question or conclude the interview they should indicate so and I would follow their wish.*
- Once the core interview began, I consistently asked the same interview questions in the same order and minimized any clarifying statements sought by the interviewee with hopes that wouldn't unduly influence the participants' response.
- Data was collected and processed uniformly as described in Chapter 3. While processing data and as instructed by Colaizzi, I read all of the participants' interview

transcripts “to acquire a feeling for them” (Beck, Keddy, & Cohen, 1994, p. 256).

Finally, I used software to analyze the data and sort the data into themes.

As mentioned above and highlighted in Chapter 3, one strategy for validating findings was for “the researcher [to] disclose their understanding about the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to the qualitative research study from the outset of the study so that the reader understands the position from which the researcher undertakes the inquiry” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261). During interviews, I indicated my prior service being employed in public service and my current career working in a nonprofit that often supports governmental agencies in achieving their goals. With each participant, I thanked them for their commitment to public service, as well as participation in the interview, and highlighted my belief that I believe firmly that public service, in any form, creates a *public good*. This strategy is similar to the one described by Creswell & Poth (2018) which calls for the researcher to “disclose their understanding about the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to the qualitative research study from the outset of the study so that the reader understands the position from which the researcher undertakes the inquiry” (p. 261).

Another strategy for validating results is for the researcher to analyze data to their natural conclusion, rather than trying to validate already known research. Another strategy would be to provide a detailed description of participants’ experiences where the patterns and themes are put into context. Finally, this study used multiple participants, each being of a different background, and serving a different community.

The processes outlined in Chapter 3 and this chapter assure transferability or if the results are applicable within other contexts, circumstances, and settings. As described by Peoples (2021), the insights shared by participants from their lived experiences may be similar to insights

from a different study sample with the same experience. Elements related to the setting, participants, and their experiences, of course, need to be considered (Peoples, 2021).

Chapter 5: Conclusions/Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn *about the implications to a healthy and vibrant democracy if no name is presented on the ballot* during a local government election. We know that democracies require that there be a connection between citizens and representatives, and they rely upon the informed participation of citizens (Michels, 2011). We also know that citizen participation takes many roles, including that of voter and elected representative. We know that our democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for elected office and as highlighted by this study, there are instances where no one is actively running for office. We know that democracy requires a free and independent media. We also know that information environments have been compromised with the loss of the local newspaper, but that communities are responding in creative ways to ensure there is a news environment – how objective it is remains to be seen. We also know that the current political climate had become toxic as candidates and elected officials face unnecessary pressure and threats (Citizens League, 2022). We know that local government is where the real-world decisions affecting the daily lives of citizens most frequently occur. At this level, voters select elected representatives who in turn make decisions on behalf of the voter but also have the greatest effect on the daily life of the voter. Finally, we know little about local government and electoral politics related to them because a majority of people who study elections focus their efforts at the national level. This research attempts to contribute to the field of study by understanding the lived experience of 8 city officials from rural Minnesota cities where the community experienced the phenomenon of having write-ins win elections in 2022. In addition, 6 individuals who were on the periphery of the phenomenon were also interviewed.

This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings from the study and relates those findings to the literature review presented in Chapter 2. It attempts to tie findings to *democratic theory* by exploring situations where no one filed to be on the ballot and how this circumstance may have affected a *healthy and vibrant* local democracy. “In the full spectrum of electoral democracy, the local elected office remains a very personal, relational, and community-focused role” (Citizens League, 2022, p. 2). Finally, this chapter provides a greater understanding of circumstances unique to small, rural communities and their local elections, information environments, and local challenges. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this study, areas for additional research, and conclusion.

Interpretation of Findings

In this section, I will create a dialogue between the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and my findings as presented in Chapter 4. I will describe how my findings extend knowledge and contribute to the community of scholars.

Theme 1: Local Government is Ground Zero for a Healthy and Vibrant Democracy

Participants identified local government as ground zero for a healthy and vibrant democracy. To them, a healthy and vibrant democracy is one where decision-making is transparent and relies upon facts, a trusted elected official, a commitment to better the community, and a healthy exchange of ideas. According to the literature, a healthy and vibrant democracy is resilient in the face of change, protects the dignity and rights of each individual, removes barriers to equitable participation, exposes undue influence, relies upon checks and balances, reigns in overreaches of power, respects the rule of law, nourishes independent journalism, fosters an environment for the population to flourish, and encourages leaders to act with integrity, compromise, utilize facts, and nurtures the common good. From the interviews, it

seems that rural Minnesota cities demonstrate these qualities of a *healthy and vibrant democracy* daily.

As it connects to the research question – *If a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?* – it is important to note that small, rural communities do not stand for large amounts of political rancor, paralysis in decision-making, and division. These communities are *managerial democracies* and depend upon people working together for the betterment of the community. The citizens of these communities rely upon the government working for them. Cities are responsible for plowing and repairing local streets, delivering clean drinking water, maintaining sanitation and sewer, providing emergency services, incentivizing the building of new housing, repairing existing housing, and inspiring businesses to locate in their community to name a few. Because these priorities affect the daily lives of *one's neighbor*, there is pressure on elected officials to act, compromise, and function without stalemate. Hence, local government is ground zero for a healthy and vibrant democracy. Local elected officials appear to have little choice in delaying decisions intended to benefit community residents – tolerance for stalemate, given the intimate nature of the relationship between elected officials and the community, seems low.

Theme 2: Knowledge of Civics is Lacking and How Government Operates Remains a Mystery

The participants in this study identified that the public lacks a foundational knowledge of government, how it operates, and the roles, responsibilities, and authority of the players. They expressed concern that the public doesn't understand the jurisdiction of the various levels of government. They identified that the public is unaware of the roles, responsibilities, and limitations of authority of the various officials, both elected and nonelected. They also indicated

that the public believes various elected officials have more *power* than they yield. They suggested that “*most people...had civics in 10th grade...a long time ago...and probably weren’t listening anyway*” (P10) or that “*high school and middle school civics classes are severely lacking*” (P2) and speculated that maybe “*civics is not particularly covered anymore*” (P4). Through this speculation, the study participants expressed concern that the lack of civic education contributes to the misunderstandings of government operations cited above. This is concerning when considering the *healthy and vibrancy of democracy*.

In Chapter 2, this study identified that citizen involvement in democracy is core to democracy and that democracies rely upon the *informed participation of citizens* (Michels, 2011) to be healthy and vibrant. The quality of democracy is impacted by the level of citizen participation and whether the citizen is informed and knowledgeable. Education and knowledge-building are key. As citizens increase their civic skills, they become *more knowledgeable as they increase their involvement and participation*. Michels (2011) suggests that “citizen participation has a positive effect on the development of *knowledge, skills, and virtues*” (p. 290). Knowledge is deemed important to citizen involvement and through knowledge, the citizen can carry out their core duties in an informed way. Given this, it seems that possessing a basic and working knowledge of civics is necessary for the citizen to carry out their core duties competently and effectively.

Next, this study argues that *candidate quality and competitive elections* create the basis for providing the voter with more *knowledge* about the various choices of candidates for office. Lipsitz (2011) finds that our American democracy depends upon competitive elections and campaigns, especially negative campaigns because they inherently create *information environments highly desirable for exposing voters to more information and a higher quality of*

information. In these environments, candidates supply more information about their candidacy and vision for the future – highlighting issues and how their platform intends to tackle the issues. And, conversely, these environments shed light on the platforms of their opponent(s) and their failings (Lipsitz, 2011). As suggested by Gronke (2010) “voting begins with *information*” (p. 148), and *information* “...is necessary in a democracy if voters are to make *informed decisions* about their representatives” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 2). Again, competitive campaigns create information environments and information environments create knowledge. Knowledge is important to the voter as the voter decides upon which candidate they wish to cast their vote.

But what value is the *knowledge* of political opponents if the voter doesn’t possess a basic working understanding of government? For instance, if the voter has gained information about political opponents through competitive campaigns and strong information environments, but does not understand the purpose, responsibilities, duties, and authority of the office the individuals are running for, is the voter knowledgeable enough to make an informed decision matching candidate to open office? If the voter doesn’t understand the office, does the voter lack the precision to decide which candidate would be appropriate and effective within the office?

In essence, at a basic level, would one hire a plumber to complete electrical work on their home? Both professions – plumber and electrician – are inherently different and each person within those professions possesses different skills, knowledge, and ability. Certainly, a plumber might be able to do some basic electrical work and vice versa, but does the plumber have enough knowledge to ensure the proper wiring of one’s home to the required specifications? Is the plumber licensed to do electrical installation and is the plumber willing to risk their license should something go wrong after the electrical installation? The example seems basic, but it

highlights a core concern, if the voter isn't educated on the job, how would they know who they should hire to complete the job effectively and intelligently?

Knowing that *knowledge* is important to the voter for choosing their candidate for elected office and that *knowledge* is important to and during other forms of citizen participation, it does not seem to be a far reach to suggest that establishing, reestablishing, or maybe, reinforcing, a basic knowledge of civics is important, especially knowing that a majority of people last studied civics while in high school and that over time people forget. A basic knowledge of civics seems important to assure *quality citizen participation* in democracies – to provide the voter with the ability to understand the office and appropriately match the candidate with the office. As I have asked before if a voter doesn't understand how a city government operates, the issues faced by the community, and the role of the open seat with all its responsibilities, duties, and authorities, how can the voter effectively evaluate if a candidate is the right person to serve in the seat? How does the voter evaluate if the candidate has the right background, experiences, knowledge, skills, and abilities if the voter doesn't understand what the seat is responsible for or how it impacts government operations? Knowledge of government or civics is necessary to assure voters to make informed decisions.

As it pertains to the research question – *If a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?* – knowledge of democratic functions, processes, structures, and roles is interconnected to informed voting and citizen participation, like running for office. It seems reasonable that democracies can be strengthened or *be healthier and more vibrant* if the constituent, the voter, and the individual running can identify what is needed in the role and identify an appropriate fit. Without having a uniform understanding of government, the citizen

lacks the power to be effective in their participation and can form conclusions based upon questionable assumptions. Likewise, the voter can form conclusions about a candidate's fit for an elected seat based on questionable assumptions. And probably most importantly, the public desires a candidate running for office and ultimately making decisions, if elected using valid assumptions. If any are compromised, democracy becomes less healthy and vibrant.

One might ask if the public received civics lessons in secondary school, why the public demonstrates a poor recollection of government operations? To introduce a new concept, I would suggest that it is largely because of *the loss of learning over time*. Commonly known as the *Ebbinghaus forgetting curve*, the loss of learned information over time contributes to the lack of knowledge of government operations because it was often learned during the secondary education years but not reinforced in adulthood (Murre & Dros, 2015).

Briefly, Hermann Ebbinghaus, a German psychologist, found a lawful relation between memory retention and time since learning. Ebbinghaus hypothesized that memory retention declined over time, that the speed of forgetting depends on several factors such as how meaningful or difficult the learned material is, physiological factors such as stress and sleep, and that the rate of forgetting doesn't vary much between individuals (Murre & Dros, 2015). He asserted that the best methods to strengthen memory included learning techniques that aid information retention and repetition (Murre & Dros, 2015).

Based on this theory, public knowledge of government or civics is strongest immediately after a lesson and it can be reinforced and improved greatly through ongoing learning. So, to ensure that democracy is healthy and vibrant, it is necessary to continue investments in basic civic education well into adulthood and ongoingly to dispel questionable assumptions about government operations. Doing so will help unveil the mysteries of government to the public and

make it more transparent to individuals who rely upon it or wish to serve it. Finally, these efforts will help to support one of the core principles of democracy – *having an educated citizenry where citizens can evaluate information, weigh the positives and negatives, and make decisions on what best fits their interests.*

Theme 3: The Public Needs Regular, Unfettered Access to Elected Officials

As mentioned in Chapter 4, several participants in this study indicated that the public needs regular and unfettered access to their elected city officials. They argue that this access assures that the elected official is connected to their constituents and that the elected official receives unfiltered information about their desires. The participants stressed the need for elected officials to listen and receive input. By using this input, the elected official can explore options and accurately represent the needs of the constituents in their decision-making. This allows the elected official to *get the decision right*. And if they don't, the constituent can ultimately hold the elected official accountable at the ballot box during the next election. In the words of one study participant, *"It's important for people to be able to access them because we put them in office in the first place"* (P8).

Another participant said that it is not the role of the city clerk or city administrator to act as a gatekeeper, especially if they dislike someone. It *"is not their job to thwart communication"* (P9). Reasons why communication may be *thwarted* are not entirely clear and may include wishing to protect the time of the elected official who at a city level is not compensated highly for their effort and may also be balancing a full-time job with their part-time elected position. Participants identified that such efforts to manage access to the elected official can cause unfavorable reactions, including allegations of favoritism and building frustration and resentment among constituents.

What this researcher discovered during the midst of completing this study is concerning and unanticipated. Small cities with a population of less than 500 often do not have an official city webpage or a published list of who currently holds the seat of mayor or city council much less a list with the contact information for those individuals. This begs the question, how is a constituent able to connect with the elected official without a published method to communicate with them, absent white pages or running into that individual at a community venue or visiting that person's home? Perhaps the community is so small, that the individuals know already how to contact one another, but that may not always be a true assumption, especially if the constituent is new to the community and has yet to learn the identity of the mayor or city council member. Some cities rely upon counties or others to publish such information, but that scenario may not always be the case and sometimes the information is out of date if it is published. Finally, cities that do publish the names of officeholders may not consistently publish their contact information, presenting the same lack of access.

Next, participants expressed concern about non-elected city staff acting as the gatekeeper for the elected official. This researcher also encountered this barrier when asking city staff for the contact information of the mayor or city council members of certain communities who had not published their contact information on the city website. In these instances, some nonelected staff acted as gatekeepers and refused to share the elected official's contact information even though the individual was a public official. In addition, this individual also made decisions for the elected official that effectively denied access without first inquiring as to the individual's preference. As one city staff said, the "mayor would not be recommended [for participation in the study, and] the city council members are not allowed to speak to such things" (C13). It was a curious predicament when this statement was made. The subject matter of this study wasn't

identified as highly controversial and the researcher was left wondering, *why the mayor would not be recommended and why city council members are not allowed to speak to such things.*

Maybe it was because the subject was a study rather than a concern of a constituent. Regardless, the individuals in these elected positions could have opted out or declined, but their choice to participate was disallowed because access was denied even before they could consider participation for themselves. In essence, a barrier was created by an individual who wasn't elected without the elected individual even considering the request or knowing of the request. This result was like another city staff who declined to be interviewed but when pressed for the contact information of the mayor or city council responded that she "wasn't comfortable providing their private contact information" (C12). Again, *are they not elected individuals? Do they not have a responsibility to be accessible to the public? How do their constituents access them, especially if they are new to the community?*

Unfortunately, this researcher had not anticipated this barrier and therefore, it was not sufficiently discussed in the literature review presented in Chapter 2 or the methodology presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 2 discusses constituencies having access to the ability to vote and the historical iterations of providing more or less access to the ability to vote. Chapter 2 also makes mention of the fact that democracies require there to be a connection between citizens and representatives. This researcher did not anticipate that voter access to their elected official would be limited and especially limited by non-elected staff *gatekeeping* for elected officials either with their permission or without. Certainly, this is a learning of this study and one that others need to be aware of.

Considering this situation in relation to the research question – *If a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly*

runs, what are the implications? – it is concerning and likely warrants more study at all levels of democracy. For purposes of this study, the fact that others *gatekeep* for elected officials doesn't fit the phenomenon under study but this action may certainly have impacts on the health and vibrancy of the democracy. We know democracies depend on a bond between voters and elected officials. "Legislators are accustomed to hearing from constituents expressing opinions about issues of the day, and procedures exist that mandate that executive agencies allow time for public comment before proposed regulations become final" (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003, p. 7). Oliver (2012) contends that the real challenge is for elected officials to communicate their accomplishments, rally their supporters, and again, avoid political mistakes. The elected official can only represent the voter effectively if they know of the voter's needs and the elected official can only be voted back into office if the voter is satisfied with their efforts. This demonstrates the exchange of communication that needs to occur between both. Limiting access to elected officials is concerning when considering the health and vibrancy of democracy and more study is warranted.

Theme 4: Cities Face Multiple Challenges

This study has found that cities in rural Minnesota face multiple challenges. Participants identified that cities are often rethinking how they govern, their key structures, and how they are approaching the delivery of services to their residents, especially with a declining and aging tax base. Participants cited concerns with the public's ability to pay attention to local government issues; today's environment of uncivil politics, the introduction of partisanship at the city level, and concerted efforts of publicly broadcasting misinformation; tight fiscal and human resources; the lack of investments in new affordable housing or maintaining the existing housing stock, and demolishing or repurposing blighted properties; childcare limitations, a necessary component of

economic growth in rural areas of Minnesota; the development of new businesses and industry and the new jobs that come with them; the aging infrastructure and the ramifications of having delayed needed investments in regular maintenance; and the fragile emergency services infrastructure where there are not enough local resources for police, fire, and ambulance services.

As one considers these areas of concern, one also needs to remember the vast breadth and scope of local government with nearly 90,000 local governments controlling “roughly a quarter of the nation’s gross domestic product [and collecting] more in revenue than the federal government does in income taxes” (Oliver, 2012, pp. 1-2). In addition, “three in four Americans [live] in a community under 100,000 in size” (Oliver, 2012, p. 3). Given this, local governments decide and enforce many things that affect the daily lives and safety of their residents.

As it pertains to elections, local elections are largely more intimate events involving a smaller number of voters for offices with limited powers where the benefit of the power is applied more evenly across the constituencies. Oliver (2012) indicates that while national elections are highly ideological, local elections are about managerial competence, where how smoothly the basic operations of local government are running is assessed by the voter. Candidates for local office lean towards the virtues of civic duty, responsibility, or social obligation instead of ideology or self-serving motivations (Oliver, 2012).

Given the size and scope of local government on the lives of residents and the challenges identified as part of this study, it seems reasonable that cities need to have competent, caring, knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated *managers* holding elected offices and leading efforts to solve local issues, no matter how the individual arrived at serving their community. These elected managers are facing large challenges within their small community and need to be able to effectively lead and address the challenges of local government.

As it pertains to the research question – *if a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?* – if a city is to be *healthy and vibrant* it needs to have individuals willing to step up to serve when asked to address the vast issues facing it. Health and vibrant democracies rely upon having a supply of informed citizen participants.

For local cities, it appears that *having someone in the role might be better than having no one in the role*. As we have learned in Chapter 4, cities have methods to train, mentor, and develop new and existing leaders. Given this access to learning, the need for citizen participation, and the demands of projects on local communities, having an additional person, albeit one that may not be fully versed in government operations, participating seems to be necessary to divide the necessary work. A division of labor may help to ensure democracies are healthy and vibrant.

Theme 5: Vacant Ballots are More Common Than We Believe

According to the literature review discussed in Chapter 2, who runs for office, who wins, and who leads government is essential for the voter to understand both at the national and local levels. When no one runs and seats are filled without any public vetting, the core principle of democracy related to an informed voter is lost, and the public has no quality information environment available to help it understand the new leader or their positions on important issues. According to Shames (2017), “A small pool of candidates can decrease the quality and importantly hamper citizen choice, which is the key ‘crowdsourcing’ element that is supposed to make democracy better than other forms of government” (pp. 3-4). Current studies don’t seem to highlight incidences when the ballot is blank but rather focus on the shortage of the public employee workforce, identifying methods to inspire people to run for an elected office, and

identifying barriers to running for office and methods that could be enacted to remove those barriers. The preexisting literature in essence doesn't reflect this phenomenon.

This study has focused on just such a phenomenon and participants have shared that having a vacant ballot and an open seat filled through write-in in rural Minnesota City elections is more common than one would think. This researcher is struck with the perception that this phenomenon *is almost expected* by the participants who were part of the study. As stated by one participant, there just isn't a "*flood of interest*" (P4) in serving at the local level. The lack of interest in running for office is a common phenomenon in smaller cities and often write-in candidates end up winning an open seat. While city councils are actively seeking candidates, finding willing and qualified individuals remains a challenge in rural communities where the *free-rider principle* appears to be at play.

Given this phenomenon and as it pertains to the research question – *if a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?* – drawing upon the research, it means that information environments are nonexistent, campaigns are small if they exist at all, and the core principles of democracy related to informed voters and citizen participation cannot be fully realized. But are these conclusions entirely true? What this researcher has learned is that often, in small, rural cities, voters already know of the person who has been written-in to a seat. These communities are often close-knit and voters know what qualifications and motivations the write-in brings with them. Sometimes, these write-ins have been recruited by other leaders, and to the best of their ability the community is rallying behind the individual. Most importantly, small, rural communities appear to be unconcerned about *information environments* formed by competitive elections as long as they have identified someone willing to serve. In addition, if an individual

has little experience with government operations, they have identified mechanisms for educating, mentoring, and developing any elected official or city staff so that they will be successful in their role.

Given this, the only area of concern might be related to not having a majority of voters endorse or vote for the candidate, and even in those circumstances, there is an opportunity for the write-in to carry out their duties differently because they have no identified constituency. In these situations, an elected official may be able to make decisions more *freely* than others. Also, given that these communities are often close-knit, the discomfort of *answering to your neighbor for your actions* still provides oversight and a check to poor leadership even before the seat is up for reelection the next time. Certainly, this phenomenon needs more study as the value society places on democracy appears to be deteriorating, and that deterioration can only contribute to having fewer individuals interested in exposing their lives to the public.

Theme 6: Why are Ballots Left Vacant?

Study participants provided greater detail, many of which seem to be unique to elections at the city level, about why ballots are left vacant. As Oliver (2012) writes, elections “are much different in larger democracies than smaller ones” (p. 5). Participants in this study indicated that issues related to the timing of filing ballot paperwork, confusion about who may be running as the filing deadline approaches, believing that someone else will run or not want to run, poor succession planning surrounding a well-liked leader who decides not to run, and limited recruitment opportunities for well-qualified candidate as a reason why ballots in small, rural cities are often blank. Certainly, blank ballots erode the system of representation principle of democracy where citizens delegate decision-making to representatives.

As it pertains to timing, participants identified situations when people were asked to run, but didn't decide until after the filing deadline. When this scenario occurs it creates *confusion as to who is running* because individuals may not know who is considering a run for a political office. They may file themselves because they believed *someone should run* only to find that they are now competing against their neighbor, who they would have voted for had they known that individual's intention to enter the election. The theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2 discussed local elections and didn't identify this as an issue. Certainly, the evidence presented in Chapter 2 didn't focus on small elections in cities with a population of less than 500 individuals. What makes this a critical understanding is that the likelihood of running against one's neighbor is higher in smaller communities than in larger ones because elections are more intimate.

Participants also identified that the voters in small communities are often waiting for someone – anyone – to run for office, defined in this study as the *free rider problem*. In the words of one participant, “*People just know that somebody else can do it*” (P9). While waiting for *somebody else to do it* the problem is that, often no one steps up by the time of the filing deadline, and communities are left with blank ballots with the question of *who's going to fill the seat*. Ultimately, these communities identify someone to serve and *trust* them to make the right decisions. *Trust* in small, rural city elections seems to be more prevalent and yet, is often unspoken.

Participants cited poor succession planning and recruitment as another contributing factor to why small cities have blank ballots. When an individual no longer wishes to serve, dies, moves away, or resigns while in office, there often is no one trained to take on the duties of the vacancy or a person waiting in the wings prepared for the individual to step aside. As a method

to counteract this scenario, some individuals suggested that having current officials actively recruit and endorse others helps to continue their legacy and bring in new, wanted perspectives and skills. This exercise is another demonstration of the *trust* city residents place in others.

One might wonder, should there be *succession planning* or *recruitment* as it pertains to elected office? Considering that these local elected positions are more *managerial* than *ideological*, this logic seems to fit well to ensure there is a name on the ballot. In small local communities, political parties, which are used to recruit in larger elections, are mostly nonexistent. Absent the *political party machine*, local communities must rely upon other mechanisms to generate interest, build capacity, and recruit new individuals to serve. Given the nature of the position and the lack of political machinery, it seems reasonable that other methods of recruitment be present, including involvement in various city committees or task forces.

Chapter 2 identified that the phenomenon of having no one to run for office might be occurring because of the workforce shortage and the Great Sansdemic. To review, *The Great Sansdemic* is a time of not having enough people to replace the existing workforce due to low birthrates, the exodus of the baby boomers from the workforce, and the low participation of working-aged Americans in the workforce. It was surmised that these trends not only affect business, industry, and healthcare but also government operations and participation in the election of candidates. No participants cited this as a reason for why ballots were blank. The question of having fewer individuals in the labor force affecting the lack of candidates remains open for other researchers to study.

So, how do these aforementioned factors pertain to the research question – *if a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?* Key to all appears to be the fact that people know of

each other in small communities and *trust* that the community will ultimately select a competent and capable individual to serve. In addition, small communities do not possess the political machinery necessary to build capacity in successors and therefore existing officeholders need to be more mindful of providing opportunities to members of the public who may be interested in one day serving in an elected position. Again, like so many other researchers, this researcher, through the previous statement starts focusing on identifying ways to encourage more people to enter the race. What is core to this finding is that the democratic principle of a system of representation is eroded, but not entirely, as small rural cities have learned a method to fill open seats albeit without a competitive election and a strong information environment. Absent those, the voter's knowledge of the candidate is negatively impacted, although not entirely.

Theme 7: Barriers to Running for Office

In Chapter 2, research suggested that people may not be running for office because people are not interested due to the negative effects of government bashing, the costs of running outweigh the rewards, financial implications, and barriers based on one's perception of oneself, the unknown, or their sense of belonging. Chapter 2 also admired the *Great Sansdemic* and how labor shortages might be contributing to the lack of persons wishing to work for the government or participate as elected officials. As shared in Chapter 4, participants in this study largely added more detail and a more expansive list of barriers that were not considered within the literature review.

First, participants did not directly cite the lack of interest young people have in serving in elected office as was discussed in Chapter 2. Participants did; however, suggest that *the lack of enjoyability* of the office was a deterrent for people serving in public office. This suggestion was similar to Shames (2017) who indicated that *negativity, antipolitics, and incivility*, of our current

political environment influence how Millennials view the lack of rewards when running for office. To review, *government bashing* damages the public's trust and confidence in the government and turns people away from pursuing political office. Lawless & Fox (2015) summarize this effect, "Americans feel completely alienated from contemporary politics, are distrustful of politicians, and worse, look disdainfully upon the prospects of growing up to be a mayor, governor, senator, or even president of the United States" (p. 212). According to participants, this approach to politics is toxic, driving more people away from participating or wanting to hold political office and serve their community. Given this, it seems reasonable that society or political campaigns reexamine whether a change needs to be made in this approach. To examine this problem more thoroughly, more study is needed.

Interconnected with this finding, participants identified fear and safety concerns, where a decision could potentially harm their personal or professional relationships, be embarrassing, and bring a lot of criticism, hostility, or threats. Nationally, news reports, after the 2021 election, are bountiful with politicians, their spouses, judges, or public employees and volunteers being harmed or threatened. One prime example of this behavior from the national level is from October 28, 2022, when far-right conspiracy theorist David DePape attacked the 82-year-old Paul Pelosi [the husband of Nancy Pelosi – the 52nd Speaker of the United States House of Representatives] with a hammer during a home invasion (Rodriguez, 2023). One participant in this study said, that being an elected official is "*a pretty thankless job*" (P1) and another said, "*One of our town council members had a window shot out in her basement and she had been on the council for probably a decade and decided not to run the next time because it's just like, I don't want to risk my family's safety and this is crazy*" (P12). These nasty behaviors and personal attacks inhibit people from running and therefore impact the health and vibrancy of our

democracy. Greater study needs to be done to understand both the drivers and methods to reduce such threats. As part of the evaluation, researchers need to determine if it is advantageous and morally acceptable to foster such an adverse political environment where people in public office or delivering public services are harmed.

Participants also identified that being viewed by and answering to your neighbor is a barrier unique to serving a small community. In small cities, there is an unspoken incentive not to stir the pot or make anyone angry because small-town politics is personal and has a direct impact on neighbors. For instance, some believed that small business owners would be ideal leaders, yet they also identified challenges when the lines between business ownership and serving the community become blurred. Political involvement by a business owner is deterred when some in the community stop supporting the business because of disagreement over a decision. Withdrawing support can cause small businesses to fail and therefore small business owners often turn away from political interests.

The literature did not discuss these types of tight-knit communities where elected officials have a closer relationship with their neighbors, who may not like their decisions and the elected official has an incentive not to stir the pot or make anyone angry. In larger communities, constituents are further removed from the decision-maker and therefore it may be easier for the elected official to blend in with the community-at-large when a decision is unpopular. Certainly, in larger communities, voters are less likely to know where an individual lives or who their immediate and distant family members are. Therefore, the likelihood of fear, intimidation, or harm is lower, but not nonexistent. In smaller communities, this finding seems unavoidable. Further study of small communities could consider how these forces impact decision-making within the community.

Participants considered that the time commitment of the office was a deterrent for people serving in public office. Specifically, doing meeting preparation, attending meetings multiple nights per week, and being inundated with contact from constituents takes time away from family commitments, other enjoyable activities, and possibly the individual's full-time job. The literature did mention the time commitment as a barrier to running for public office, but it did not discuss the time commitment needed to serve in office, especially when the elected position is part-time and the office holder is dependent upon outside employment. It seems the public has high expectations of their elected officials and accessibility is one of those expectations. A study on accessibility could provide best practices on how elected officials in small communities best manage their time and balance their full-time career and part-time elected duties, including being accessible to their constituents.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, participants identified the lack of procedural clarity as it pertains to running for and holding office. They noted that the election process was not clearly explained to them and that the materials provided to guide someone's campaign were difficult to understand. Additionally, there were no clear guidelines on how much money a candidate could spend, which created another barrier. A participant expressed frustration with the lack of clear rules and guidance, stating that they wanted to follow the rules but were unsure how to do so. Perhaps, this is a benefit of having political parties involved in larger elections, but for smaller elections, we have learned that local governments shun political party involvement at city hall. Given this, maybe for smaller elections, there could be a peer group of advisors outside of the municipality who could be consulted on certain campaign activities.

Not knowing where to start; what effort goes into being an elected official; how to campaign; not knowing a lot about politics or public policy; not knowing why one should run; or

not knowing where to find help for running was discussed in Chapter 2. The finding in the paragraph above adds to that body of research, especially as it pertains to small campaigns. At a minimum, it seems that an easy-to-understand and accessible guide for how to run for office could be created and distributed as an aid.

So, how do these barriers pertain to the research question – *if a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?* We know from the literature review that voters benefit from competitive elections and the strong information environment created by such campaigns. We also know that campaigns with multiple individuals running for an office provide the voter with a choice. When barriers are created and people choose not to run for an open seat, elections are neither competitive nor is there an information environment created. Related to write-in campaigns, few people are in the know about who is interested in serving and persons are voted in without having a majority of the voters deciding who should represent them.

While we have learned that there may be benefits for the write-in to not have a constituency, there remain concerns if a small group of voters elect an individual and the other voters didn't know who was being written in. Transparency in the election is compromised. Transparency is a key feature of democracy. While voting is done in secret, ballots exist to display the names of the candidates running for a certain office and to ensure that voters are aware of their options. When the voter is not aware of their options the health and vibrancy of democracy is eroded.

Theme 8: Why do People Continue to Run and Serve?

Participants identified various reasons for why people in rural cities continue to run and serve in elected positions. They identified that it's *not for the pay* but rather their desire to give

back to their community, a sense of connection or camaraderie with other community members, shaping their community for the benefit of others, and some seek reelection because of unfinished business, and a desire to continue making a difference.

As we learned in Chapter 2, when a democracy is small, such as a city, the intentions of those who seek public office will lean towards the virtues of civic duty, responsibility, or social obligation instead of ideology or self-serving motivations (Oliver, 2012). The findings of this study, seem to validate this previous finding. In the words of one participant, “They want to make a difference in the town in which they live. They want to do something good” (P10).

In addition, Oliver (2012) suggests that, “local politicians tend to be older, more educated, and more professional than the general population” (p. 113) and are “long-term residents of their communities” (p. 87), and “are property holders” (p. 87). Participants in this study ranged in age from 37 to 76. A majority had obtained higher education with 13 having received a bachelor’s degree or higher. Lastly, a majority of participants had lived in their community for 15 years or more. These results substantiate Oliver’s (2012) findings on age, education, occupation, length of time in the community, and home ownership status. These results may suggest that Lawless & Fox’s (2015) suggestion that *young people are alienated from politics* is also substantiated because no one over age 37 was interviewed for this study. However, there may be other reasons why the study sample did not have participants younger than age 37. Certainly, this is another area of study – *In what ways do younger people serve small, rural communities?*

What is surprising and new is that participants in this study cited *a sense of connection or camaraderie with other community members* as a reason why they continue to run and serve in elected office. The previous literature did not discuss this finding and therefore it is new.

Certainly, given the size of the communities participating in this study, it is not surprising that holding elected office can also be a *social activity* for some individuals. If one's goal is to give back, shape, or improve their community, *community building* is necessary and core to *community building* is "bringing people together and creating a sense of belonging" (MeltingSpot, 2024, para. 6). *Camaraderie* is core to community building and to achieving the goals of the individual – shaping their community for the benefit of others.

As this finding pertains to the research question – *if a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?* We know from this study that whether candidates have their name on the ballot or not, there is a commitment to serving their local community to the best of their ability throughout the term of office and maybe beyond. In the words of one participant, *"They find out that they can make a difference and they enjoy that. They feel empowered, like, okay, I got this first thing done, and now I want to try the next thing. I want to try to get it done for my community. And they start to realize, okay, I can make a difference. And they may not have been sure of that when they ran the first time, but once they get that success under their belt, then they feel empowered to try another thing, whatever that thing might be. They want to make a community more attractive, more livable, more viable, more economically stable"* (P9). This means that there continues to be an investment of labor in the health and vibrancy of democracy and at the local level this commitment is valued.

Theme 9: Are Write-in Campaigns Really Viable?

Participants identified various perceptions about write-in candidates, the vetting of appointed persons, and ideas about candidate quality. Study participants were conflicted in their perceptions of write-in candidates with some believing write-in candidates show less

involvement than those whose names were on the ballot and others sharing that write-in candidates display a strong commitment to their community. Overall, participants identified that appointees, like write-in candidates, are vetted by a small few and that the process may not be transparent enough. Lastly, participants identified that certain qualities make write-ins more successful and accepted by their community, these include being known and well-liked, having a desire to serve, having less baggage than those who were on the ballot and may be indebted to various constituencies, being educated, and experienced in certain areas, reflecting a willingness to learn, and having fresh ideas.

The literature indicates that we “need people who are ready and willing to run for office” (Shames, 2017, p. 18) as well as transparency of the candidates and their goals or positions. This creates an information environment allowing voters to learn more about the candidate, their qualifications, and their future intentions. In the situation of write-ins and appointments, we know that this information is held by a select few. In the case of the write-in, it is held by the group that wrote the candidate in, and in the case of appointment, it is held by the group that voted to appoint the individual into office. In either case, the voters as an entire block are denied knowledge and choice.

Given this, as it pertains to the research question – *if a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?* – the results are mixed. Certainly, voter knowledge of the candidate and the information environments from competitive campaigns are suppressed. Voter choice and election transparency are also compromised. While this is true, we have learned that write-in candidates in small cities are often well-known and well-liked by the community at large.

Lastly, we know that the community at large often *trusts* these individuals and provides mechanisms for them to further their knowledge.

Theme 10: Leadership Deficits and Learnings Opportunities

Participants discussed various leadership deficits for newly elected officials as well as methods to fill in those deficits through learning, mentoring, and participation in professional networks. They shared a common belief that there be a solid foundation of education, mentoring, training, and participation in professional networks for newly elected officials. They also indicated that this foundation already exists in rural Minnesota and it is valued.

Rarely did the literature mention training on *how to run for office* or *how to serve in local government offices*. Given that many local elections are *more managerial than ideological*, it seems important that local governments invest in the education of their elected officials. Tactical decision-making by these local elected officials may be more complicated than navigating politics and sharing ideas. In addition, this study learned that often the materials created to aid one in initiating a campaign are difficult to understand. From Chapter 2, we know this to be a barrier and it seems that if ballots are to have names on them, creating easy-to-understand *guidance documents* would be beneficial.

When considering the research question – *if a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?* – having strong candidates and elected leaders is essential and the only way persons can be strong is to have opportunities to further their knowledge. In small communities, furthering opportunities for education, mentoring, and networking is beneficial given the managerial nature of the elected position. Voters certainly expect their elected officials to have some knowledge of government operations and methods to get things done.

Theme 11: The Loss of the Collective Societal Story and Consolidation of the News

According to participants, the decline of local community-focused newspapers is a societal trend that cannot be stopped, and many local communities have lost their source of local news as a result. Participants mentioned that the local news media is becoming increasingly homogenous with similar stories being reported across various sources and a lack of focus on local news items. As a result, they feel the collective societal story within small, rural cities is being lost. The lack of a voice discussing local issues constructively and objectively is a concern and is believed to hinder the ability to understand and discuss local issues. Some communities have fought against this trend and invested resources in preserving their local news sources, but these efforts are few. In the words of one participant, *“Because of the loss of the newspaper, we don't have somebody that comes in and actually comes to our meetings anymore or anything like that. They really don't report a lot on the local stuff” (P1).*

From Chapter 2, we have learned that democracies depend upon citizen involvement and that involvement is enhanced through information and education. Democracies expect citizens to evaluate information and make decisions on what best fits their interests. Without information, the citizen is left less informed and less certain on various issues. The loss of information sources, such as the local newspaper, contributes to the citizens having less objective information from which to draw to make an informed decision.

Given the research question – *if a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?* – when local newspapers or other local news sources disappear an information vacuum is created and the community-at-large loses their ability to easily learn about city issues and solutions or hear an objective view about various items. In addition, the collective local

community story is lost. Through this erosion of the news environment at the local level, democracy becomes less healthy and less vibrant. This is because the objective information necessary to inform and educate the voter and the local community is absent. Further study of this issue as it pertains to small communities is warranted and as discussed below, there is hope on the horizon.

Theme 12: Rural Minnesota Cities Have Created New Information Environments

Participants identified that with the decline of local news sources, cities are implementing and utilizing new methods of sharing information and their local community news. Participants agree with the literature on the importance of sharing information, assuring the public is well-informed, and identified the ongoing challenge of informing citizens about community happenings. Participants expressed that it is vital to share accurate, straightforward, and factual information without a political spin to maintain credibility and avoid misinformation. In the words of one participant, *“If they [cities] just put the raw information out, that is actually more convincing, quite frankly, because if people start to feel like, well, they're just spinning this, just, it's not for real. To keep that credibility, they need to just be sort of a Joe Friday – Just the facts, ma'am – and put it out there, not a boring way, but in a very straightforward, factual kind of way, and then let people decide, is this a good thing? Is this a bad thing? Is it something that should be changed...”* (P9).

This study has found that local communities are sharing information in a variety of ways. Some utilize community functions and venues, many depend upon their city website – especially if it includes video recordings of council meetings, minutes, and full council packets, and others generate newsletters or utilize city staff as messengers. Many found value in the use of public access television and radio stations as a method to share information. Lastly, several participants

shared that social media platforms have become increasingly popular and valuable for small cities to communicate city business and share information with residents.

Participants expressed concern regarding the accuracy of information shared on social media platforms if the site was not maintained by the city. Some participants had identified that these platforms can quickly be used to spread misinformation if they are maintained by others, like *the keyboard warrior* discussed in Chapter 4. In addition, if the city maintains the social media account, some participants expressed concern that city staff didn't have enough time to moderate comments. Given these concerns, caution was expressed if the public chooses to receive information through these platforms.

Similar to the discussion on Theme 11, democracies depend upon citizen involvement and that involvement is enhanced through having methods to obtain information to inform the citizen. As demonstrated by this study, rural Minnesota cities have recognized this and have invested in creative ways to *get the word out*. As long as citizens view the information with a critical eye, these creative initiatives create a more robust information environment.

As it pertains to the research question – *if a healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon having a supply of candidates to run for office and no one openly runs, what are the implications?* – being able to utilize different methods of distributing information is important especially when local newspapers or other objective sources of communicating the news disappear. But the key here is *objectivity*. Is the information *free from bias* allowing individuals to draw their conclusions? Participants in this study cited a commitment to just providing the facts. Doing so enhances the health and vibrancy of our democracy.

Limitations

This study was impacted by a variety of limitations. Some are highlighted below.

First, it was unclear how the original dataset provided by the League of Minnesota Cities was obtained and the data analysis procedures that were used. This limitation was mitigated by comparing results against data from the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office. Data from the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office was publicly available, however much of it was published in raw form without clear descriptions as to what the dataset represented or what the various data fields meant. To mitigate this, this researcher depended upon staff interpretation and definitions. Finally, this researcher is not overly skilled in interpreting raw data results or reading code. Efforts were made to double-check data to ensure an accurate and valid dataset.

Next, as discussed earlier, this researcher attempted to contact city staff first as participants were being recruited. This resulted in a limitation in that city staff may have had unanticipated influence in which elected officials participated or didn't participate in the study. Another limitation related to recruitment includes having first emailed possible participants rather than first calling the individuals to initiate interest in the study. This researcher wonders if more individuals from a larger number of cities could have been recruited had the elected official been contacted directly first or if individuals would have been contacted first by telephone.

Unfortunately, there was no racial diversity in this study because all participants identified as Caucasian. This may be reflective of the demographic make-up of rural Minnesota Cities who participated and who served these cities in leadership roles, or it may not be. It may also be reflective of *diverse individuals choosing not to run* as identified by Shames (2017). Certainly, this study has been limited in terms of the interplay of race and lived experience.

Lastly, all interviews were conducted using Zoom where each participant was at a place of their choosing. Certainly, results may have been different if the interviewer joined the interviewee in person. A greater rapport could have been established, meaning it is possible that

being in person could have further enhanced the relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study provides greater insight into how small, rural Minnesota Cities manage the phenomenon of not having a name on the ballot for the local election. The findings are rich with opportunities for additional research. Throughout this chapter, recommendations for future research have been identified. In addition, throughout this study, no results substantiated the theory that the *Great Recession* may have impacted if there was a name on the ballot or not. Further study could be conducted to see if there is indeed a relationship between the available workforce and blank ballots. The existing literature has identified that local governments are understudied, especially as it pertains to elections. This is one additional study, certainly there are more.

Implications

This study illustrates several implications for a healthy and vibrant democracy if ballots remain blank in small, rural city elections. Many of those have been discussed earlier. In addition, this research compliments a 2022 study, *Serving in Local Elected Office: Why people run, decline to run, remain serving, or step down from office, and the impact on local government*, conducted by the Citizen's League and the Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce, which was discovered by this researcher well after this study commenced (Citizens League, 2022). That research effort interviewed and surveyed 80 individuals from 70 municipalities within the 7-county Twin Cities Metro area. This research is different in that this study was conducted in rural cities with a population of less than 500 residents. As we have learned from this study, the political environment in these small cities is more intimate than the

expansive and competitive Twin Cities Metro area. Like that report, this study finds that *learning and mentoring programs are critical for candidates and elected officials.*

Conclusion

This study has examined the definition and meaning of the concept of democracy, as well as the moral foundations, obligations, challenges, and overall desirability of democratic governance as it pertains to small, rural Minnesota cities. Furthermore, the sheer nature of this study and its stated reasons for being conducted demonstrate a commitment to democracy. As such, this study is true to *democratic theory.*

Through the lens of the shared lived experiences of the research participants around a phenomenon, this study has furthered knowledge of local government and elections. It has examined the unique factors of small, rural communities and how they contribute to local elections, vacant ballots, candidate quality, community challenges, educational opportunities, and information environments. It has also highlighted an important key point – often local communities with a population of less than 500 individuals *trust* their elected officials to act in their best interest without political rancor. This likely is possible through the size and interconnectedness present in small communities. For instance, if a name is not on a ballot, the community trusts that someone will step forward and run for the seat. The community then trusts that the person will do a good job as their chosen elected official. And the community has a stronger ability to hold the person accountable given the intimate nature of the size of the community and the vicinity of the individual to their neighbor.

When I began this dissertation, I did not set out to identify one key theme, but as I conclude writing, it appears a primary focus in this document stresses *education attainment* and *knowledge building.* This concept is further reinforced by the value Thomas Jefferson placed on

education and his belief that a well-educated or well-informed citizenry is a great defense against tyranny (Carpenter, 2004). As one rereads this document, it seems that this theme is common across the various roles of the voter, the elected official, and the public. *A vibrant and healthy democracy is indeed dependent upon having an educated citizenry* and this document advocates on behalf of that goal.

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Appendix A

E-Mail Invitation 1

Hello -

I am a doctorate level student at Hamline University and am in the process of completing my dissertation. For my study, I am looking to interview a member of the City Council, preferably the longest serving member, or the Mayor and/or the City Administrator. I am wondering if you could help identify the individual in those roles for me or would you be willing to forward this email to them for their consideration?

My study intends to explore the phenomenon when an open seat for local public office has no identified candidate on the ballot for the election. Typically, these open seats are for Mayor, City Council, City Clerk and City Treasurer and are filled through write-in candidacy, appointment, or another method. The purpose of my study is to identify factors that are present and influencing persons not to seek elected office as demonstrated by not having their name appear on the ballot before the election. I am also seeking to understand the local news environment and the availability of information about the election for the voters prior to the election being held.

I have reviewed election data obtained from the League of Minnesota Cities and compared those results against data obtained from the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office for elections in 2022. The league of Minnesota Cities data identifies that this phenomenon was experienced in 131 local municipal elections for the positions of Mayor, City Council, City Clerk and City Treasurer. Many of the municipalities have populations less than 500. I am specifically looking to study elections in municipalities with a population over 500, which is why I am contacting you. The dataset identifies that your community experienced this phenomenon in 2022 and has a population of over 500.

It is my intent to interview the longest-serving City Council member or another City Council Member or City Mayor or City Administrator for this study. The interview would take approximately 60 minutes to complete. If possible, the interview would be conducted via Zoom using televideo or via the telephone, if that is preferred by the participant. If neither option is possible, I can also arrange an in-person interview. Participation is voluntary and is much appreciated. There are no identified ramifications for not participating.

If the participant does choose to participate, they will help to provide important insights into this understudied topic. Through my research, the participant will contribute to the available knowledge on local government elections, processes, and news/information environments available to voters. In addition, the participant will aid in understanding the leadership implications of when there is no one identified on the ballot.

Please forward this email to the person in the roles described above, if you wish. Or please provide me their name and contact information so that I may contact them directly. For convenience, I have attached an Informed Consent to Participate in Research and the list of Interview questions for their review. These documents may help answer some additional questions.

You can contact me at: [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED] if you have any questions or wish to participate in this study.

Thank you for your consideration and assistance.

Sincerely,

Thomas J. Ruter, Doctoral Candidate, MPA
Student Researcher

Appendix B

E-Mail Invitation 2

Thank you for responding to my request for an interview.

When are you available to participate in a 60 to 90 Minute interview? Will using the Zoom televideo or telephone options work for you to participate?

Attached you will find a copy of the interview questions that I intend to ask as well as the Informed Consent to Participate in Research prepared for this study. These documents may help to answer some additional questions you may have. If at any time you wish to skip a question, you are invited to tell me to do so. As a reminder, participation in the study is voluntary and there are no identified ramifications for refusing to participate.

As mentioned in previous communications, my study intends to explore the phenomenon when an open seat for a local public office has no identified candidate on the ballot running for that election. Typically, these open seats are for the Mayor, City Council, City Clerk, and City Treasurer and are filled through write-in candidacy, appointment, or another method. The purpose of my study is to identify factors that are present and influencing persons not to seek elected office as demonstrated by not having a candidate's name appear on the ballot before the election. I am also seeking to understand the local news environment and the availability of information about the election for the voters before the election is held.

To inform this study, data from the League of Minnesota Cities was compared against data from the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office for elections in 2022. The League of Minnesota Cities identified 131 municipal elections in Minnesota where this phenomenon occurred. As the longest-serving City Council member and elected City Clerk, I believe that you have valuable insights to share.

Thank you for considering participating in this study. Please let me know your availability and if the Zoom option will work for you. To participate via televideo on Zoom, you would need a computer or smartphone, a camera, and a microphone. To participate with Zoom by telephone, you would need a telephone connection.

You may contact me at: [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED] if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you for considering.

Sincerely,

Thomas J. Ruter, Doctoral Candidate, MPA
Student Researcher

Appendix C

E-Mail Invitation to Persons on the Periphery

Good Morning -

I am a doctorate-level student at Hamline University and am in the process of completing my dissertation. I am interested in interviewing you for my study and am wondering if you would be willing to participate?

My study intends to explore the phenomenon when an open seat for local public office has no identified candidate on the ballot for the election. Typically, these open seats are for the Mayor, City Council Member, City Clerk, and City Treasurer and are filled through write-in candidacy, appointment, or another method. The purpose of my study is to identify factors that are present and influencing persons not to seek elected office as demonstrated by not having their name appear on the ballot before the election. I am also seeking to understand aspects of the local news environment and the availability of information about the election for the voters before the election has been held.

I have reviewed election data obtained from the League of Minnesota Cities and compared those results against data obtained from the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office for elections in 2022. The League of Minnesota Cities data identifies that this phenomenon was experienced in 131 local municipal elections for the positions of Mayor, City Council, City Clerk, and City Treasurer.

I have already interviewed persons in communities where this phenomenon has occurred. Those individuals have served in the role of Mayor, City Council member, or City Administrator. I am interested in adding greater depth to the study by interviewing you as an individual with additional insights. The interview would take approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete. If possible, the interview would be conducted via Zoom using televideo or via the telephone option, if that is preferred. If neither option is possible, I can also arrange an in-person interview. Participation is voluntary and is much appreciated. There are no identified ramifications for not participating.

Through my research, the study will contribute to the available knowledge on local government elections, processes, and news/information environments available to voters. In addition, the participant will aid in understanding the leadership implications of when there is no one identified on the ballot and the local news environment.

For convenience, I have attached an Informed Consent to Participate in Research for their review as well as the Interview Questions. These documents may help answer some additional questions.

You can contact me at: [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED] if you have any questions or have any other individual who would be willing to participate in this study.

Thank you for your consideration. Your time is much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Thomas J. Ruter, Doctoral Candidate, MPA
Student Researcher