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Mary Grace Golden

Harding University, mgolden@harding.edu

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Unpacking Political Identity in First-Time Voting Christian Women: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

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Thesis Advisory Committee:

James L. Huff, Ph.D.

M. Laurie Norton Diles, Ph.D.

Lori Klein, M.P.A.

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Thesis Advisor(s):

James L. Huff, Ph.D.

M. Laurie Norton Diles, Ph.D.

Honors College Representative:

James Miller, Ph.D.

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**Unpacking Political Identity in First-Time Voting Christian Women:
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Mary Grace Golden

Department of Communication, Harding University

COMM 4410-02: Honors Thesis

Dr. James Huff and Dr. Laurie Diles

Abstract

As political science tends to focus on polling and statistical analysis to examine individuals' voting behaviors, the reasoning behind constituents' decision-making process is often left in the dark. This is particularly true in first-time voting women who come from religious backgrounds that uphold complementarian gender values. This study focuses on the following research questions: How do women experience their political identity in relation to their gender identity? How do women experience their political identity in relation to their religious or faith identity? How do women experience their political identity in relation to voting for the first time? I answer these questions using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) on interviews with first-time voting Christian women (n = 4) from the south, two of whom voted for Donald Trump and two of whom voted for Joseph Biden in the 2020 presidential election. Through in-depth IPA analysis of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual elements as well as individual and cross-case analysis, I found the following themes: establishing political identity through social identifications, maintaining both agency and communion in political identity in relation to family, and struggling between agency and communion in political identity amongst peers. My findings provide a framework for the psychological experiences and commonality that provide contextual depth of framing how first-time voting Christian women examine and experience their identities amid political participation.

Keywords: political identity, qualitative methods, interpretative phenomenological analysis, first-time voters, 2020 election, Christians, women

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Introduction

The transition to adulthood is a tumultuous time in the best of situations. Thoughts change, locations alter, and what once was integral to an individual's identity is often thrown into question. The confusion is all the more prevalent within political identity as first-time voters must decide not only who to cast their ballot for, but how to come to their own decisions, process their emotions, and determine their commitment to an overall identification that they are still attempting to understand. The right to cast a ballot is a vital part of the American political system, with a staggering 158.4 million people casting ballots in the 2020 presidential election (DeSilver, 2021). Though data on demographics and candidacy preference is recorded, the reasoning behind constituents' decision-making process is often ignored.

The concept of political identity is often blurred in an avalanche of demographics that tend to lead to little understanding of why people participate politically in the ways that they do. In this study, political identity is understood as "a person's self-conception based on their ideology regarding the underlying goals and ideals about how a social and political system should work," (Jung & Mittal, 2020, 55). Political identity is indicative of individuals' journey into adulthood as they navigate new labels, establish or reject commitments, and exercise one of their core American rights. Through political identification, individuals can explore viewpoints that are different from their peers or parents as well as explore how to maintain those relationships within continued agreement or disagreement. Having the tangible decision of casting a ballot forces a label to their vote, but individuals are free to either connect with that label and commit to the identification of a political party or maintain their freedom to explore and reject the commitment for the time being. Political identity truly coalesces the experience of entering adulthood as individuals must make a concrete choice that either joins them with their

previous way of being or forges a new path. However, political identity is constantly in flux as decisions or reasoning behind decisions change as individuals choose whether to commit to one way of identification or continue their exploration into the future (Arnett, 2004).

Being apathetic and unaware of politics is no longer an option to emerging adults growing up in an age of social media, social justice movements, and general publicity of the 2020 election. Though saturated in a partisan environment, many emerging adults are attempting to find sense, truth, and identification without committing to one “side” or another. These emerging adults oftentimes have their experience lost in a wave of demographics and statistical analysis when their thoughts and feelings are truly key in both their identification and political participation. Many of these emerging adults have their experience or opinion ignored, unable to be taken seriously and unable to process what they are experiencing due to their age and the lack of investigation conducted. The hardship of emerging into the political world of adulthood is only aggravated in the experience of first-time voting Christian women coming from a complementarian background as they have the added layer of woman-ness and Christian identity to unpack.

Christian women coming from a complementarian background are a unique group that has often been a misunderstood portion of the population but severely underrepresented in current literature. Though often viewed as a privileged population, with fairly good reason, Christian women in the Southern U.S. have been continually lumped into the lens of extreme conservatism (Gonsoulin, 2010). As evidenced in Gonsoulin’s work, “conservative Christian women have a more intensive view of mothering, a stronger pro-life stance, a younger age of childbearing, a higher number of children and a lower education level.” Thus, their viewpoints, though made up of complex thought, experience, and understanding, are often left in the dark as

people tend to write their perspective off as that of an uneducated naïve woman who is primarily concerned with household matters. This bias could also cause women to feel as though they must fit a particular mold and hold expected viewpoints based upon others' understanding of their identity. Women coming from a complementarian background, or a background where men and women have different roles within church contexts, are also coming from a unique place as they are used to being led by men and seeing men represented in leadership roles during religious participation (Pope-Levison & Levison, 2005). Though most of the United States is made up of women and the majority of voters are female, women are underrepresented in leadership roles in politics (Sanbonmatsu, 2020). The combination of growing up while being led by men in religious participation offers the women studied a unique perspective on their roles and identities within political participation.

In this study, I seek to understand the barriers women have faced and the tools and experiences they have used in overcoming these barriers of underrepresentation, navigating conversational conflict, and experiencing their identity while entering their adult lives. Unpacking political identity in first-time voting Christian women allows women with complicated, layered identities to be illuminated throughout the formation of their beliefs, the expression of those beliefs, and the application of those beliefs to the world outside of themselves. As this is a group that has been stereotyped primarily as thoughtless conservatives, the truly complex thought processes and experiences they have gone through have seldom been explored or represented. In understanding how these women approach the formation of their beliefs and the sharing of those beliefs, barriers in productive conversation can be identified and rectified to progress communication and forward progress in the representation of the perspectives that have often been brushed past through political identity narrative.

Background

First-time voting Christian women represent a unique population of voters in the United States, far more significant than previous research has shown. First-time voters constituted approximately 13% of the population who cast their ballots in the 2020 presidential election, while women represented a majority of the United States population at 50.8% as of 2021 (NBC News, 2020; United States Census Bureau, 2021). According to the Pew Research Center, in 2021, 70.6% of the United States population identified as Christian with 25.4% Evangelical Protestant, 20.8% Catholic, 14.7% Mainline Protestant, 6.5% Historically Black Protestant, and the remaining percentages falling into other categories (Pewforum.org, 2021). Though each group navigates leadership differently, many of these dominant sects of Christianity uphold complementarian values (Gordon & Conwell, 2018). In this study, complementarianism is understood as the theological view that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities in religious leadership and participation (Colaner & Warner, 2005; Gonsoulin, 2010). The data is indicative of high populations of all of these demographics, leading to the conclusion that first-time voting Christian women are both significant and relevant in the investigation of political influence in the United States.

Though research has been conducted on first-time voters, women's political participation, and the political participation of Christians, little research has been conducted on those who represent the combination of the demographics. Additionally, prior research has focused primarily on quantitative analysis that identifies demographic information, (File, 2014; Prager, 1986; McDermott, 1997.) but often leaves the reasoning and identification behind constituents' actual decisions in the dark. Thus, our study is necessary for investigating a demographic that is

significant in the United States' political system and has been underrepresented in literature. Understanding the reasoning behind participants' identification through our idiographic study will allow for focus on particular phenomena rather than the broad brushstrokes that current nomothetic literature paints over the experience of Christian women who are voting for the first time (Smith et al., 2009; Whitehead et al., 2018; Stauffer & O'Brien, 2018).

Furthermore, an idiographic investigation of political identity within the phenomena of voting for the first time as a Christian woman allows for a unique perspective of the journey into adulthood. The phenomenon is evidenced by the theoretical concept of agency and communion. Agency is essentially the existence of an individual, manifested in "self-protection, self-expansion, and mastery of the environment" whereas communion is an individual's participation in a larger organism that can manifest "union, love, and intimacy" for that individual (McAdams et al., 1996). Those who are emerging into adulthood are often faced with conflict between their desire to be agential, in control of their own life and decisions, and their desire for stability within a community. As Jeffrey Arnett explains, moving into adulthood is an "unsettled" time where emerging adults both "revel in being freer they ever were in childhood" as well as process uncertainty as they are unsure where their explorations will lead (p. 3). Political identity allows this phenomenon to be explored as individuals are faced with a decision of whether or not to vote, who to vote for, if they will vote as their family or friends do, if they identify with a party, if they want to commit to that identification, what it means to explore, and much more. The agency and freedom of adulthood, represented in the convoluted phenomenon of political participation, comes with instability that can be mitigated within a communal atmosphere.

Additionally, individuals can maintain their agency by avoiding commitment and continuing their exploration of their political identification. Arnett states: "From their late teens

to their late twenties [individuals] explore the possibilities available to them . . . and move gradually toward making enduring choices,” (Arnett, 2004, p. 3). Emerging adults oftentimes are utilizing political identification to demonstrate their agency; thus, it is a relevant and poignant area to investigate in the overall structure of identity. Though political identity does not necessarily define an individual’s entire identity, many aspects of identity coalesce to form political identity which goes on to inform other aspects of holistic identity in adulthood, making it a useful tool to aid in the understanding of an emerging adult’s overall identification process.

To understand political identity in first-time voting Christian women, the concept of *political identity* must first be understood. As previously discussed, political identity was defined as “a person’s self-conception based on their ideology regarding the underlying goals and ideals about how a social and political system should work,” in Jung and Mittal’s study exploring political identity through personality traits. (Jung & Mittal, 2020, 55). The researchers found cognitive differences between liberal and conservative mindsets stating that: “conservatives engage in more heuristic, automatic, and stereotypical thinking due to their higher need for cognitive closure. In contrast, liberals engage in more deliberate, systematic, and effortful thinking due to their higher need for cognition and their higher tolerance for uncertainty,” (Jung & Mittal, 2020, 55). The claims of differences in personality, thought processes, and behaviors between more liberal or conservative-leaning people provide a basis to view political identity as dwelling and developing within an individual’s inner self-identification as well as their external identifications. Additionally, after conducting a selective review of literature dealing with women’s political participation, authors Stewart and McDermott concluded that adolescence and personal agency play an important role in forming politicized identity (Stewart & McDermott 2004). However, despite some literature referencing political identity, there have been few

definitions of political identity itself (Barker-Plummer, 2017; Zaeske, 2003; Stewart & McDermott 2004). Instead, most have sought to further their understanding of the concept through examination of specific factors that could characterize political identity. Thus, an investigation into the variety of personal identifications that build into political identification is not only justified but necessary to further understand what it means to have political identification, particularly as a developing adult.

Most political research investigating women and politics has centered around those in leadership roles or statistical analysis of political participation rather than why people participate and their underlying identification. For instance, Cole and Stewart's work examined the correlation of political participation and race between middle-aged Black and White women, providing a reference for female political identity and participation within an older group, but failing to unpack first-time voting experience or individual identification or reasoning within their participation (Cole & Stewart 1996). Other researchers such as Sorrentino and Augustinos and David Hill sought to evidence the salience of gender in political leadership by examining factors that may cause a woman in leadership to examine her gender identity and the barriers in place for females in politics (Sorrentino & Augustinos, 2016; Hill 1991). Though articles such as these evidence exploration of political identity in a statistical analysis of specific female demographics or the experience of female political leadership within the United States, there is little available research on women's actual political experience and identification within current the literature.

Christianity is also a key factor in this study as there has been much confusion in political literature on what the role of Christianity is in political identification. Researchers Omelicheva and Ahmed found that religion influences political participation across cultures, but not always

in the expected ways, as evidenced in the finding that religiosity often serves as a deterrent for political engagement yet, membership in religious organizations makes individuals more likely to engage in political activity (Omelicheva & Ahmed, 2017). Findings such as these necessitate further investigation into the actual reasoning behind Christian constituent's decision-making rather than just a statistical overview. Furthermore, Volpe (2014) explored a population of Christian perspectives that diverge from traditional paths, demonstrating that Christian experience within any area is not easily explained by simple numbers, and therefore must be unpacked by examining individuals within a specified area of Christianity. Thus, further examination of Christian identification is not only relevant to political identification but is necessary due to the convoluted nature of religious participation in politics. Moreover, a southern, female, complementarian perspective will allow for a more in-depth analysis of how specific Christian values are perceived, processed, and utilized within the identification of a person who is entering adulthood.

The experience of first-time voters themselves has evolved over time, constituting much intrigue with changing political, social, and media interactions across generations. As social circumstances have changed and the breadth of available media has increased, it is vital to be aware of what is influencing political participation amongst first-time voters (Ohme et al., 2017). Ohme's statistical research suggested that first-time voters who are exposed to more social media feel more certain about their voting choice throughout the election process than more-experienced voters which can be translated to both media influences and other environmental factors that may sway first-time voters thought processes. (Ohme et al., 2017). In a different vein of study, researcher Plutzer (2002) has explored the voting habits of emerging adults and the transition of political participation into adulthood which has added to the literature

in terms of turnout theory. However, despite the research conducted on factors that influence turnout, research has fallen short in unpacking political participation as a means of overall personal identification moving into adulthood. First-time voters are experiencing agential decision-making while adapting to new environments, information, and viewpoints as they are participating in the communal practice of voting, discussion, and identification. Thus, first-time voters are an essential demographic to further examine in unpacking political identity amongst emerging adults.

In summary, the idiographic investigation of Christian women who are first-time voters allows for a unique perspective into a tangible decision-making and identification process that emerging adults experience. The lens allows not only for an investigation into the reasoning behind the tangible casting of a vote but for the unpacking of what the political experience means for an emerging adult taking agential control in their life to make what could be viewed as their first tangible decision based upon their own value systems. The female demographic coming from a complementarian Christian background allows for a perspective that is traditionally grouped into a clump of conservatism, but accounts for many individuals who are undergoing more nuanced processes of identity development choosing to vote in a variety of ways based upon their identifications and value systems. Though some research has covered these groups separately, little to no research has been done intersecting that of Christianity, female experience, and political participation amongst first-time voter identification. These identifications coalesce to form a unique group that must be studied to expand identity literature and better understand the process of emergence into adulthood within a more tangible arena of political identification.

Research Question and Methodology

As the research question centered around specific identity and experiences of individuals, I chose to utilize the methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach that aims to provide detailed examinations of personal lived experience in relation to certain phenomena (Smith & Osborne, 2009; Huff et al., 2020). IPA research takes an idiographic approach as it produces accounts of lived experience on the terms of that individual experience rather than nomothetic theory and is specifically helpful in examining “complex ambiguous, and emotionally laden” topics (Smith & Osborne, 2004, p. 1). I chose this method as identity, particularly in the context of emerging into adulthood, is layered, abstract, and complex. Additionally, in IPA, the researcher is focused on specific experiences rather than generalities, allowing individual lived experiences to truly be examined.

Existing literature has focused on a quantitative approach to political identity which fails to address individuals’ reasoning for their political decision-making, conversational experiences, religious experiences, and overall formation of identity. While statistics can certainly display a broad stroke of data with a wide perspective, a robust description of who the participants are, why they do what they do, and why they think what they think can be lost in numbers. IPA has been used to closely examine the phenomena of identity development in various contexts such as health psychology (e.g., Chapman & Smith, 2002; Hutton & Perkins, 2008), entrepreneurial learning (e.g., Cope, 2011), and education (e.g., Huff et al., 2018; Kirn & Benson, 2018). Utilizing IPA in this study allows for a robust exploration realm of gender, politics, and religion, which oftentimes are topics tiptoed by, even within psychological research.

Sampling

In order to develop contextual findings of political identification in first-time voting Christian women, my mentor and I conducted four interviews with four college-age individuals who identified as women between the ages of 18 and 22. The four participants were selected from a larger set of respondents to a Web-based questionnaire. The questionnaire solicited information regarding religious affiliation both within the respondent's family growing up and the respondent's current affiliation, gender, race, anticipated undergraduate graduation date, if this was the first presidential election the respondent voted in, who the respondent intended to vote for as well as an open-ended response about a factor the respondent considered important in voting in the current presidential election. The respondents were asked to enter their email address if they wanted to be interviewed about their experience of the political world and informed that if selected, they would be compensated with a \$10 Amazon gift card.

I intentionally differentiated the participants by selecting two individuals who voted for Donald Trump and two who voted for Joseph Biden in the presidential election. As many have stereotyped Christians as having a heavy leaning to one side or the other, it was integral to the study to represent both conservative and liberal voters in the examination of Christian voting experiences. The sample size was kept small to truly examine the participants' lived experience in depth. All these women were from the South within the United States, currently attending college in Arkansas, and identified as White.

Additionally, the participants came from complementarian backgrounds, which was of particular interest as these women who had grown up in traditions with male leadership within the church may have had experiences that shaped them in the viewing of leadership that translates into their overall identity, becoming evidenced in the exploration of political identity. While the religious background is similar for all participants, everyone had an individual

perspective and identity of which I sought to explore in-depth by utilizing IPA methodology to provide a contextually robust and sensitive description of the participants' experience of political identity (Huff et al., 2020).

Data Collection

I designed this investigation to answer the following research questions: *How do women experience their political identity in relation to their gender identity? How do women experience their political identity in relation to their religious or faith identity? How do women experience their political identity in relation to voting for the first time?* The questions aimed to answer the overall aim of unpacking political identity in first-time voting Christian women as examined in relation to their gender identity, religious identity, and their identity as a first-time voter.

To answer these questions, my mentor and I conducted in-depth interviews via videoconferencing software during the 2020 United States Presidential election, after the participants had cast their ballots, but before the election results had come to a conclusive result. The timing of these interviews allowed for a unique period where the participants were reflecting on their participation without the results of the election tinting their experiential lenses. All participants were interviewed in a personal space of comfort of their own choosing.

The participants were asked questions designed to elicit responses about their overall values, first time-voting identification, Christian identification, gender identification, and lived experience within the context of voting for the first time as Christian women through probing questions such as a form of the following:

- (1) *When you think of who you are as an individual, what is really important to being you?*

- (2) *How do you view the political world? What feelings come to mind when you think of the political world?*
- (3) *How did you view the political world growing up? How do you view your role in the political world now?*
- (4) *In the past few months, can you walk us through a political conversation you had? What feelings did this conversation bring up?*

Though some questions were planned, my mentor and I acted primarily as listeners, allowing the participants to guide the conversation toward topics that best resonated with their lived experience of being Christian women voting for the first time.

Data Analysis

Following the interviews, the transcripts were transcribed with a pass through the transcript done to deidentify the participants and correct grammatical errors. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. The two participants who voted for Donald Trump, Tracy and Tessa, were given a pseudonym with the first letter of “T” to indicate that they cast their ballot for “Trump”. The two participants who voted for Joseph Biden, Brittany and Bailey, were given a pseudonym beginning with the letter “B” indicating they cast their ballot for “Biden”. Following the deidentification, I analyzed the cases with passes through each transcript for annotations of linguistic, descriptive, and conceptual comments as represented by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). I then analyzed each transcript for “emergent themes” which aim to identify representations of psychological nature from specific excerpts within a transcript and compiled the emergent themes to unpack each participant’s psychological experiences (Smith et al., 2009; Huff et al., 2015). After I analyzed each transcript and investigated the emergent themes separately, I formed overarching themes based upon cross-case analysis to find repetitive or

significant themes across participants' experiences while still providing for the unique experience that each participant has as an individual (Smith et al., 2009; Huff et al., 2015). My overarching findings examine complexities within the inner workings of gender, religious background, and self in the phenomena of participants' voting experience.

Limitations

To conduct this analysis in full validity, I received approval of the IRB and adhered to IPA methodology. My mentor and I conducted all interviews during the coronavirus pandemic; thus, the interviews were subject to the limitations of Zoom which can reduce the authenticity of the moment through participant comfort levels, the ability to read emotion, and technical navigations. However, my mentor and I aimed to maintain a comfortable interview environment and all participants seemed to be authentic in their responses. Though one participant revealed deep into her interview that there was a friend present in the area she was being interviewed, after extensive analysis, I have no reason to believe the friend's presence altered the authenticity of the participant. Further points of investigation could examine the development of political identity throughout emerging adulthood to middle age through periodic interviews. Regardless, the vitality of examining the holistic nature of political identity amongst emerging adults allows for improved means of communication, discourse navigation, and holistic support during an exploratory period of emerging adulthood.

Findings

The findings are organized to construct a holistic perspective of how the participants experienced political identity. Theme 1 illustrates how participants established their political

identity through their social identifications. As they experienced first-time voter identification from their core Christian identities with a perspective of their innate womanhood, they sought to maintain autonomy through rejecting political identification. Theme 2 unpacks how participants political identity interacted with both the agential and communal aspects of their familial relationships. Theme 3 identifies the participants desired connection with their friends conflicting with their desire for agency within political identification.

Theme 1: Establishing political identity through social identifications.

As participants experienced their identities in the context of political participation, it became evident that they did not separate the experience of Christianity and woman-ness, or even voting in their first presidential election from their identity. They simply viewed their political identification as *being* a Christian, *being* a woman, and *being* a first-time voter. However, as the participants viewed these identifications as key, unchangeable facets of their identity, they maintained autonomy through their perceptions of those identifications as well as through the ambiguity and flexibility of political identification.

Subtheme 1.a: Incorporating Christian identity in political decision-making

Each participant was raised in a complementarian Christian family and identified themselves as a Christian in terms of their upbringing, current value system, and decision-making processes. As Christianity was truly ingrained in their identification throughout their lives, the participants spoke of “being Christian” rather than practicing Christianity. To the participants, all decisions resulted from their core being, which was intertwined with their own Christian values. Though some values differed amongst participants, the core of morality and the

consequential basis of decision-making from that morality remained consistent. Thus, the participants made their political decisions in a way that resulted from their core Christian values as they were perceived to be ingrained within their identity. Tessa stated:

I'm a Christian, so I have certain values and certain morals . . . I have to either be a Christian wholly, like wholeheartedly or, or not. And so, when I look at like politicians, I do my research and I see what they value. I see what they've done. I see what they support. And it's usually pretty clear for me whether or not I want to support them as a Christian person. (Tessa)

Thus, Tessa identified herself as a Christian “wholly”, and considered a politician’s values, morals, and actions as she made the decision to support them. She did not view her support as support from her individual self, but from her identity “as a Christian person,” which was something she did not simply identify with, but something that she *had* to be. Therefore, she attempted to uphold the Christian values she believed every Christian person has when making her vote choice. Similarly, in Brittany’s case, she viewed voting as a natural way to show her Christian values to others. She stated:

It's been disheartening to me to see so many people in the church or so many Christians in America, like kind of like marrying, um, nationalism and patriotism with their Christianity. Um, I feel like it kind of just like waters down what I feel like Christianity is... our goal, the way that I feel like we can disciple others best is to love them and to build relationships with them. And so I feel like I vote in a way that shows that love to people. (Brittany)

Her core interpretation of Christian values, and thus, her core values, were demonstrative of relationship and love. Yet, she saw those values corrupted by others who did not uphold the same values within Christianity as herself. However, she was not discouraged from casting her vote but viewed her ballot as a truer demonstration of the core values of Christianity where other Christians were failing to demonstrate those values. Both participants viewed their Christian identity as a core aspect of their being. Thus, it was natural for them to incorporate that identity

within their political decision-making. Though Tessa and Brittany cast ballots for different candidates, they approached their political decision-making from a perspective of moral evaluation to demonstrate what they ultimately saw as the most “Christian” decision.

Subtheme 1.b: Framing the world through the perspective of woman-ness.

As the participants identified heavily with Christianity, they also had the intrinsic perspective of woman-ness framing their worldview. In the complementarian Christian upbringing, women do not take the prototypical role of “leadership” in speaking, beginning singing, or instigating other aspects of worship. Tracy, translated this complementarian perspective into her perception of woman-ness as she framed her perspective of leadership, stating:

I’m not saying that I’m against a female in power by any means, but I typically do think talking about the logic and emotion differences between men and women, that I think a guy typically does probably do better in the business sense, in the logical sense of leading a nation. (Tracy)

Tracy clarified that she was not against a woman in power, but she believed there are differences in leadership strengths between genders. Thus, even though she viewed men as being “better” in a “logic” and “business” sense, she was open to the concept of women in leadership. Tracy herself pondered whether she should run for office. As she reasoned: “...when I look at politics, I almost go, ‘do, I need to go run for an office?’ Because I just think, [men] could do it so much better [than they have been leading].” Despite her declaration of the capabilities of male leadership, Tracy was willing to take a leadership role if she ever feels it is the best thing to do in a given situation. She has taken the perspective of gendered leadership roles to be the norm, but saw her capabilities as a woman, and did not want to only be defined as a woman. As she stated:

. . . I know I'm a woman I'm not blind in the mirror, but whenever I'm voting, yes, I may be a little more emotional in my preferences of candidates and policies in that sense. But I don't think it's something that should prohibit or inhibit the thinking of how I am in politics, even though it does in a sense, I just don't like thinking that way. (Tracy)

Tracy was aware of her woman-ness and perceived that her identification as a woman caused her to be more "emotional." However, she did not want to define herself by this perception and did not "like thinking that way." Thus, even though she inextricably tied woman-ness to her identity, she did not wish to be defined by the labels she had assigned or seen assigned to the concept of woman-ness. In contrast, Brittany fully embraced her woman-ness as a key component of how she chose to vote.

I have just grown in my feminism... just realizing that ...disparity in representation in government... how women are not there in the percentages that we are here in the population... [and] knowing so many women who have so many good ideas and are geniuses in their field and all of these things, but [still] men are representing them and men who don't know them [and] don't have the perspective that a woman does have. And not that women are perfect, but we have different perspectives on things... [I]t helps solidify like as a woman, why am I voting certain ways? And why am I voting for certain people? (Brittany)

Brittany also chose to define herself "as a woman", but when she spoke of this woman-ness, it was with positivity. She viewed women as "geniuses" with "different perspectives", using such language of praise, that she had to clarify that she did not believe women are "perfect," whereas Tracy had to clarify that she was not against female power. Both women desired the best leadership available to them and shared frustration at the current state of leadership, framing their worldview from their identification as women. Yet, for Tracy, there was frustration at the lack of capability she saw in the men that she expected to lead and with Brittany, it was frustration at the lack of representation of the women believed should be represented.

Theme 1.c: Experiencing responsibility and emotion within first-time voter identification.

Though each participant identified as a first-time voter in a presidential election and began explaining this fact in simplistic terms, as they unpacked the identification, the experience was evidenced to be much more involved and emotion-driven than they seemed to initially realize. While some people may view voting as the simple casting of a ballot, the participants had been grappling with the after-effects of the experience ever since their ballot was cast. The casting of the ballot was only an aspect of a journey they had begun when they first began thinking of political participation. Tessa said of her experience:

“. . . once I clicked that button and I submitted it, I felt, um, I felt almost like a sense of relief. Like it's done, whatever happens next, it's, um, not in my control. I can't control it. It's in God's hands, you know? Um, and I, I felt excited that I did it, but I also felt just kinda relieved, like, okay, you know, now it's done with, you know, I don't have to think about it as much, but I still, you know, am going to pray about it. But, um, yeah, I just felt a kind of sense of relief and joy. Like I was a part of something in my community. It felt good.” (Tessa)

In her preparation to vote, Tessa had built up pressure that turned into relief when the ballot was finally cast. She indicated that the pressure had built from a sense of responsibility that she felt within her voter identification. After the vote was no longer in her control, she shifted that responsibility away from herself. As she said, “I don't have to think about it as much.” However, she said that she will continue to pray and think about the election. Voting was not a process that Tessa or any of the participants seemed to be able to simply move on from, despite the effort spent to move on as demonstrated in the case of Tracy who stated:

“I saw the R, and I clicked it, went through and was like it almost made me feel bad because I felt like a, like a failed voter, but not completely. But it was almost just like a failure for being mis- uh- uninformed of, I was like, people died for this and I'm just standing in here going, yes, that one, I was like, that's so horrible on my part I kind of felt a little guilty. And then I was like, the moment passed and the day moved on and I didn't

really think about it... I felt bad then, because I was like, there's people that could do this so much better than I could, that are killing to get the chance to even express themselves to government that are, they have no free voice. They have no opinion that they can share. And then I was just like, eh click it. I guess. I, I felt very, I felt very American and I did not like it at all." (Tracy)

Here, Tracy reflected on her experience with voter identification and discussed how she voted without doing what she viewed as an adequate amount of research or preparation. She voted based upon party and despite her saying that "the moment passed and the day moved on and I didn't really think about it," she brought back up her guilt, still dwelling on her voter identification. The guilt she referenced appeared to stem from a place of responsibility to those who came before her and sacrificed for her right to vote. Due to this sacrifice, she viewed voting as an obligation, even going so far as to say that she "felt like a failed voter," indicating that voting was something that one could "fail" at. She continued, saying that she felt very "American" and did not like the feeling, showing that she was dwelling on her experience and the feelings it caused. Though voting was something that occurred for her in the past, and she attempted to move on from that moment when it occurred, she was still unpacking what it meant to vote, feeling responsibility for that vote, and coming to terms with her experience after the fact. Though the participants felt differing emotions, they both felt responsible for their vote and their subsequent emotions resulted from their perception of how they handled the responsibility of that political participation. All the participants shared sentiments of thinking about their vote, the voting process, and their overall political identification far after the moment that their ballot was cast.

Theme 1.d: Refraining from political identification to maintain autonomy.

The participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 years old, navigating the precipice of adulthood. Thus, they were truly experiencing a wide range of emotions, decision-making, and noise as they constructed their perception of their political identification. As previously noted, the participants felt that their Christian identity and female identity were core aspects of their self of which they did not choose, but simply were. In regard to political identification, the participants regained some autonomy over their own identity in choosing to reject a label of “Republican” or “Democrat”, given by others or themselves. As Bailey explained:

For a long time, I considered myself a Republican because it’s what my parents were.... I joined the social work program, and it is very hard to go through the social work program and not be, um, more liberal. [I] do not think that I would consider myself affiliated with a party. I wouldn’t even consider myself an independent maybe. I don’t, I don’t think I would identify myself with a political party. (Bailey)

Bailey originally identified with the party that her parents identified with, but when she made the choice to vote, she rejected this categorization and maintained her autonomy, not by choosing to be labeled *differently* than her parents, but by *rejecting* any label. She asserted her autonomy over her political identification by choosing not to be identified at all. The rejection of political identification to maintain autonomy was seen from all participants, even those who aligned themselves more closely with one party or another. As Tracy explained of her Republican support: “I don’t want to associate with political affiliation though I am going to side with a Republican mindset of a more conservative.” Though she identified with a conservative way of thinking, Tracy felt that she was not necessarily a part of the Republican party but simply siding with their current mindset. Similarly, Brittany explained her Democratic support:

I don’t feel like I necessarily identify with a certain political party at this point in my life, but it was kind of becoming a thing of like, I didn’t see anyone on the Republican side that I could like support just personally, but like that wasn’t like being anti-Republican. I was just like, well, I guess for this one, I’m a voting Democrat. (Brittany)

Here, Brittany maintained autonomy by examining individuals on the Republican side and keeping what she perceived as a more open mind. When explaining her political identification, she clarified that she was not against Republicans, but in this specific election, she was “a voting-Democrat.” Identifying herself in this manner, she did not claim to *be* a Democrat but to take the role of a Democrat in voting for this election. Her language indicated that she was not solidified in a democratic identification, but wished to maintain her autonomy by rejecting current political identification and keeping the door open for future change. All of the participants chose a democratic or republican candidate to cast their ballot for, but none of them wanted to be identified as a member of that party. The participants wanted to maintain the autonomy that this ambiguity within political identification allowed them for flexibility in future decision-making and freedom in the development of self.

Theme 2: Maintaining both agency and communion in political identity in relation to family.

Participants faced difficulties as they sought to establish their autonomy while maintaining the stability, support, and relationship that they found within their familial communion. For each participant, their relationship with their parents was a valuable and cherished asset of both their upbringing and their current state of being. They saw their core values as the same as their parents regardless of the different decision-making that those values may have resulted in based upon their interpretation. The participants truly shared core values with their families and found structure and support within that value system. They sought to establish that their viewpoints were their own, particularly in their decision-making. However, they still felt that the decisions they made aligned with their parents’ values and that even if their

decision was not the decision that their parents would have made, their parents would understand or even support that decision due to the core values.

Theme 2.a: Communing with familial values

All the participants grew up in homes with parents who taught them Christian values that they held on to. Though many assume that with age comes separation from parents, the participants all still strongly connected with their familial values. In discussing important aspects of her identification Tessa stated:

I would say what's most important to me, like in my identification is, um, my family. Um, they're a pretty strong, um, part of my life. Um, I go home every weekend to see them. Um, they support me a lot throughout all my decision. . . My family is really small. It's just me and my dad, my mom and my sister. . . And my parents have always just wanted to keep us close since we're such a small family and that's always been kind of a habit that we've tried to keep up along the years is that family is important and, you know, and when you don't have anything else, my family is always there to support you. (Tessa)

Though Tessa went to college and no longer lived at home, she still viewed her family as a primary aspect of her identification and attempted to see them frequently. She viewed her family as a solid, constant support system that was there to help her make decisions and provide a primary aspect of her identification. As Tessa switched between individual and communal language, it was evident that she viewed herself as part of the whole and desired to connect with that part of herself that was her role within her family. Communing with her family's perspectives and values translated into her perception of political identification as she discussed her family's relationship with politics:

. . . my dad mainly, and I guess my mom, my, both my parents, uh, they, they follow the [Republican] party, um, on all social media sites and they see how they treat other people... they also listen, um, to different radios from both sides. And so, they hear both sides of the story, which helps them make like a final decision on who they want to be

voting for. And, um, we also review, um, different like, uh, genuine fact-checking websites because we don't really trust, um, a lot of the media because a lot of the media to me in my opinion is very biased towards one side of the story. (Tessa)

Here, Tessa discussed how her parents took in the news. She trusted them to examine both sides of an issue and make a "final decision." She then inserted herself into the narrative, using "we" language about what sources the family did or did not trust. Following this, she switched to personal identification about her own opinion. Tessa saw her parents make decisions and share them with the family, then she made the decisions her own as she communed with their value system. In a different vein, Brittany explained:

[My] parents were pretty moderate. I wouldn't say they're like really on either side of the spectrum. And so that has been refreshing because in some circles they're radically liberal, even though now I don't think they are at all. I think they're very like in the middle, um, that was encouraging. (Brittany)

Thus, Brittany indicated an upbringing of open thought. She felt that her parents provided a refreshing middle ground amid the heavily conservative community that she was raised within. Due to her parents' middle-ground approach to politics, Brittany was able to commune with their general core values rather than specific viewpoints she felt she had to align with. Both participants respected and valued their parent's opinions and communed with those values in their own way. Neither wanted to break away from their parents' perspectives, but instead, found their upbringing and parental values as stable points within their identification to then develop into their own selves. In Tessa's case, she relied on the values of her family associated with structure and consistency to stand by their political values. In Brittany's case, she felt flexibility within her middle-ground family to explore her own viewpoints while still communing with familial values.

Theme 2.b: Establishing agency within decisions.

Though all participants valued their families' opinions and wished to commune with them through those values, they also still wanted to establish that they were autonomous adults who were making their own decisions. Brittany discussed this phenomenon by saying:

I would feel like one because I was younger, then I just listened to just what I was told and that I took it as truth. Um, but I feel like now I was digging and actually caring about if what I was hearing was right and digging into things regarding that... [G]rowing up in this fairly conservative around just across the map, fairly conservative town, um, and region that I was trying to decide if I believe those things, uh, politically, religiously all around. Um, and kind of like breaking out of that shell a little bit as I was getting older... I feel like I was researching and trying to like find truth in the midst of like everything that was being said by people... And I also think just as I was getting older, I wanted to care more. (Brittany)

In the process of entering adulthood, Brittany sought to find the "truth" without only listening to what others were saying. With age, she began to care more about life, truth, and decision-making. In her pursuit of truth, she established that she had agency over her thoughts, ideas, and decisions. Though she did not separate from her core values, she did distinguish that those values were her values and she was going to care in her own way. She likened this process to breaking out of a shell, indicating the almost oppressive nature she felt of others' viewpoints surrounding her. Exploring her own beliefs and establishing her own agency allowed her to become free. Bailey sought to separate herself from the decision-making of her parents for different reasons. She explained:

I felt a little betrayed by my parents at the time. I don't feel that way anymore. Um, but at the time I felt like my parents stood for more things that weren't very Christian, I guess, than I had believed. Um, not that the Republic[an], there is no party that is more Christian and there's not a party. I don't think that at all, but, um, I guess specific policies that my parents, um, had not voted for, I felt I wasn't angry about it necessarily, but I was like, why, why didn't you, um, like, what is what's wrong with that? I guess that was, that was

definitely the first time that I had felt that way, or it was the eye-opening moment.
(Bailey)

Here, Bailey was not separating herself from the values that she grew up with but acknowledging that her parents had not upheld those values themselves. She coped with feelings of betrayal and opened her eyes to the reality that even those within her family did not always uphold the communal values that had been represented to her growing up. Additionally, Tessa spoke of her agency in an almost defensive manner stating: “And I’ve of course asked everyone too, I didn’t just like watch a commercial and then vote. I talked about it with my family and kind of made my own decision.”

Tessa continued to seek advice and discussion from her family, upholding that communion, but wanting to be clear that her decision was made autonomously. Tessa’s case alluded to a bit of falsehood among the presumed autonomy as it appeared that her parents were the ones who did the research and made the decisions within her household, especially considering how frequently she visited the household and sought advice from her family. However, while her family certainly did influence her perspective, Tessa must be taken at her word that she made decisions autonomously. Ultimately, she was the one casting the ballot and making the decision about where her ballot would be cast. An aspect of establishing autonomy within the process of entering adulthood is choosing what to do with that agency. Here, Tessa indicated that as an autonomous person, she chose to seek her parents’ advice, take in all the information, and then vote. She was exercising her agency on her own terms. While participants Brittany and Bailey chose to cast their ballot and display their agency in a way that displayed core values but separated from their conservative surroundings, Tessa chose to affirm her upbringing and familial perspective with her agential decision-making. All participants made

their decisions based upon the values of their family, but with a perspective of full autonomy within that decision.

Theme 2.c: Connecting agency to familial values.

Regardless of political identification, the participants wanted a community and a place to belong. As these individuals entered the realm of adulthood and established their identification, both political and otherwise, they valued their familial relationships and the communion they were able to be a part of within those relationships. Here, Brittany discussed the support system she had in her family:

[E]ven when I don't know what's going on and I'm feeling discouraged, I can go to someone who is older than me and who has had more life experiences than me and can just like speak truth into me. Um, and whether they can even make sense of the world right now or not because everyone's learning about this as it goes on. They just can see things in me that sometimes I don't see myself. (Brittany)

Brittany did not view her pursuit for agency as warring or conflicting with her familial values, but as a connection to those familial values. Her family established a relationship of support and wisdom in her life. Through this communion, she found stability to be her own person and make her own decisions. Tessa connected agency to familial values in a more direct way, aligning herself with the viewpoints of her father as she stated:

[M]y dad and I have very similar way of thinking when it comes to politics. So, me and my dad are kinda on the same page a lot of the times, um, as to what we think is like right and moral, um, compared to what if the other is doing that we think is like pretty bad. Um, but yeah, I guess my dad has influenced me a lot in the way I think for sure. Um, I definitely think if I had a different dad, I'd probably might not think the same, uh, as conservative as I do. Um, but yeah, I think, I think my parents definitely have shaped the way I think politically for sure. Which I'm okay with because, um, I really do truly think it's, um, the right way to think. Like I wouldn't want to think any other way. Um, cause I know, I know what's right and wrong. I, you know, I, I know some people think there's like an in-between, but I want to be, I want to be on the right side. I don't want to be like kind of wishy-washy in between, you know, um, I kind of see it as, you know, it's either

good or it's bad, you know, and a lot of the media kind of tries to blur that together to make it seem like, oh, some of this bad is really good and oh, it's okay. You know, but I try to stay firm in what I believe. (Tessa)

Here, Tessa acknowledged that she believed what she believed and thought what she thought because of her parents, specifically her father. However, this shaping was not something she shied away from. She was okay with the ways she was shaped because she believed it was the "right way to think." Tessa was firm in her viewpoints, which aligned with the viewpoints of her parents. Tessa chose to exercise her agency by affirming the beliefs and values of her conservative upbringing regardless of what others may have thought of this decision. In her defense of voting in the way she did and from other conversational indicators, it was evident that she had faced judgment for her conservative ballot. Particularly on her college campus, her intentions and intelligence had been questioned. However, to her, she was simply taking in information, both from her family and outside sources, to make her informed and autonomous decision.

Ultimately, the participants truly did not feel that they had conflict with their familial values. They simply upheld those values by voting in a way that met their perspective of what those values looked like politically. For Biden voters Brittany and Bailey, voting differently from their parents was just following a different line of logic that held up the standards they had been taught from a young age. They felt safe within their households to explore their perception of the best and most moral options they could identify politically, regardless of if that option was the one that their parents chose. Both the participants and their parents were still attempting to uphold the same values, so there was no internal conflict between agency and familial values. For Trump voters Tessa and Tracy, they came to the same voting conclusions as their parents and upheld the same values but established that they had independent thought patterns to reach

that decision. Each participant treasured both their agency and familial values and sought to uphold both aspects of their identity.

Theme 3: Struggling between agency and communion in political identity amongst peers.

Despite the core identifications that participants felt of familial identification and values, they were not quite as established in certainty amongst relational interactions with their peers. The participants were morphing, changing, and establishing viewpoints within a society of others who often were very harsh to those who did not agree with them. As each individual valued relationships and community with their peers, the participants also wanted to maintain agency and independence in their decision-making. No one wanted to be shaken in their values or pressured into political identification that was not authentic to them. Thus, the participants had to navigate political identification within friendships by connecting with their friends, asserting their agency through separation, and either addressing or refraining from conflict to preserve both autonomy and the friendship.

Theme 3.a: Connecting with friends over shared values.

During the instability of attending college and experiencing their first presidential election as registered voters, the participants also had to navigate friendships. Though there was a variety of thought amongst their peers, the participants tended to gravitate towards those who shared similar viewpoints to themselves, specifically in political values. As Bailey explained:

I don't have really any friends that think differently than I do when it comes to political things. Um, we all think very like-mindedly. If we think any, if we think different, it's normally not, um, it's, it's definitely not, um, like who we voted for, um, or who we would prefer to be president or who we would want to be um, elected officials within Arkansas or [state]. We all pretty much would think the same thing, like way in that regard. I think anybody that is very outspokenly, um, against that, I would not consider

myself, um, I don't, they're not really in my circle or they're not really, they're not, they're not really in my classes either. Um, because like in the social work department, it is, it's strange to have people that are that way. (Bailey)

Here, Bailey discussed that not only did she choose to surround herself with like-minded people, but that her major of social work had a specific population of students that also thought similarly to herself. She stated that their difference in thought would "definitely" not be in who they voted for. She was certain that those in her department were like her and that connection was something she could rely upon. Of her specific group of friends, she said:

[W]e all agree that America could change for the better. And even though that's really scary for even those of like older generations, um, it's, it's something that we're not really scared of change because the change could be so much better for those who have been oppressed for centuries. Sometimes our conversations can be pretty dramatic, um, and like 'tearing down the system.' (Bailey)

Here, Bailey identified herself with her group of friends, using "we" language. She identified their shared values: rallying behind changing America, helping the oppressed, and "tearing down the system." Bailey fondly acknowledged that these conversations could enter dramatic territory, obviously comfortable with and proud of her friendships and the values that they upheld together. Tessa also chose friends who were similar to her in thought and political participation. As she said: "I think I have a few friends that think differently than I do, but the majority of my friends think pretty much the same as I do. So I don't think there'd be any like big differences in the way we voted." She then went on to explain:

[I]t's kind of funny. I just, I'm very, I'm very grounded in what I believe and sometimes when I share that opinion with others, they, they like, they totally disagree and it's just kind of hard to find others that are on the same page as me. Um, especially nowadays there's a lot of people that think kind of worldly and I don't know, but it's, I'm just so glad to be at [University]. Cause I feel like there's, there's a much more, um, people like that at [University] that think like me. (Tessa)

Tessa indicated that she struggled to find friends with similar values to her, which she had previously indicated were more conservative values. Extrapolating from additional conversation with Tessa, it was evident that she had been met with backlash for her conservative viewpoints, and she felt gratitude in connecting with like-minded people during her university experience. While Bailey and Tessa's friendships were forged over their shared values, Brittany connected with her friends over the shared experience of determining what their values and beliefs were. As she described:

I just spent a lot of time with [childhood friends] this summer and they, like, both of their families are very, very conservative and they are continually moving more towards the left, like kind of in college. They're pretty moderate. And then like, as the past few years have happened, they've been radicalized or whatever. And so just like having kind of that in common with them of just like being like, wait, we're figuring out what we're believing and it's not really what our parents or any of our family believes. And just like almost bonding over that it kind of has become like an outlet where like we've needed to use humor because like, yes, we have each other and even the three of us don't all believe exactly the same things, but we're more similar. (Brittany)

Thus, Brittany connected with her friends through the shared experience of having different beliefs from their families and growing together. Though they did not necessarily have the same beliefs, their values of self-discovery and growth bonded them together and created a stable place for exploration in their political identities. All the participants chose friendships with others that they could connect with on a level of experiences and values.

Theme 3.b: Separating the self from friends.

Although the participants valued their friendships, they still distinguished their self and their personal identification from their friends. The participants were clear that they had friends with whom they disagreed and that as autonomous individuals, they still made their own decisions in terms of political identification. As Tessa described:

I've had a few conversations with, uh, some of my friends that think differently than I do, and I try to always respect them because they have a right to their opinion as well. And, um, but a lot of them say like, you know, a woman should have the choice to do that. And I agree you should, but I, what I'm, it goes back to my Christian morals and how I believe that there there's consequences for everything you can't just live life and not have a repercussion for something that you did. And so, whether it was an accident or not, I just, it's just something I can't seem to. I just can't be okay with that because no child is a mistake to me. So, I feel like you either give it up for adoption or not, but you don't, you don't just throw that child's life away because of your wrong actions. So that's just kind of where I stand, I guess. And we were talking about that as well, and we just kept like going in circles back and forth because she totally disagreed with me, but it's okay. You know, we don't always have to agree with each other. (Tessa)

Here, Tessa's train of thought was murky as she explained that she thought differently than her friends, then said that she agreed with their thoughts, then came back to disagreeing with those thoughts because of her Christian morals. She was able to identify with her friends and their thought processes and opinions but then separated herself from those thought processes and opinions as she came back to her core aspects of identity in Christian morality. Brittany also speaks of having different opinions and separating herself from her friendships, but in a different manner. As she said:

And [my friends] have all these things in common. We're realizing that we have very different political views or religious views and just like learning how to love each other through that and learning how to like, I guess, like discuss that without fighting. Um, when we both like, cannot see it from each other's points of views. Um, but on the other hand, finding friends who like we disagree with each other, but we both want to like continue to learn more. (Brittany)

Brittany spoke of differing viewpoints from her friends in a positive light. She recognized that she and her friends were separate from one another but could still learn from each other's points of view and have discussions. She did not deny that there had been fighting within their disagreement but indicated that the core identification of love that drew them together allowed them to be separate selves while maintaining their friendships. The phenomenon of maintaining a

separate self within the structure of friendships was essential in unpacking political identity in these women. As they were emerging into their adult lives and decisions, they chose to maintain the values with which they were raised. Regardless of whether they were choosing to act in the exact ways of their parents, they were viewing those values as key aspects of themselves and allowing those familial values to impact their identification in both moral and political areas. Yet, as their friendships morphed and changed, they had a warring desire both to belong to a group of people who affirm and support their values and to maintain agency and individual identification by separating from their friends. This separation did not negate the friendship but made it more genuine as the individuals were able to identify areas in which they differed from their friends and still maintained and grew from the friendship.

Theme 3.c: Refraining from conflict to maintain autonomy and relationship.

Despite the indication that the participants were comfortable separating themselves from their friends and often actively did so, they still indicated that they often chose to avoid conflict to maintain friendships as well as to avoid the complications or social pressures they could have been exposed to by participating in political conflict. Brittany spoke of this phenomenon saying:

[S]ome of my friends are more [on an opposing side of an issue], but I like kind of have come to a point where I don't talk to them about it as much because I like want to avoid conflict. Um, and so I'll just like, just talk about more hard-hitting topics with people that I know at least kind of agree with me... I still don't feel like I like start conversations with people about [alternate viewpoints]. Again, I avoid conflict like the plague.
(Brittany)

Brittany came to the point where she knew which of her friends would agree with her and which friends would create conflict. She exercised autonomy by choosing when and with whom to strike up a political conversation. Though she had previously spoken about learning to love

people with different viewpoints, she indicated here that she avoided conflict “like the plague.” It seemed that she did not believe these conversations would have been beneficial and were not worth having as she sought to maintain friendships and conflict could have threatened those friendships. Tessa also spoke of avoiding conflict, specifically in reference to maintaining relationships saying: “I’m kinda like shy with telling other people like, ‘Oh, well this is what I think.’ Cause I’m just kind of afraid that they’ll, um, like get mad or like, you know, like not want to be my friend, cause they’re like, Oh, she thinks this way, you know?” She specifically described an instance where she expressed her viewpoints to a friend saying:

[M]y friend looked at me really funny and was like, ‘okay.’ And walked out the room. So, I knew then like, oh, I probably shouldn’t [share my political opinion]. Um, which, I mean, it’s sad to me in a way, cause I should be able to, state my opinion, without someone getting all mad and worked up. We’re adults we should talk on the same level and if you don’t agree, just agree to disagree. So... [at] the end of that conversation, she just kinda like walked out, but um, we’re still friends though, so it’s okay. (Tessa)

Tessa’s attempt to share her viewpoint with her friend was met with a negative reaction. Though the friendship was preserved, it was still an experience she did not seem to expect as she had likely viewed the friendship as a safe place to discuss her views. Having someone she cared about react in anger to a perspective she valued caused her to be “shy” and hesitant moving forward in political conversations. Thus, she was hesitant not only to discuss politics with her friends but was concerned that other people would not want to be her friend at all because of her thought processes.

Negative peer reactions seemed especially prevalent for Trump-supporters as oftentimes, their peers tended to be more Biden-supporting. As demonstrated in Brittany’s descriptions, she, who identified as a Biden-supporter who was open to disagreement with friends, contradicted herself to say that she wanted to avoid conflict within political conversations. Thus, it was

evident that the participants and their peers both faced barriers and created barriers amongst themselves within political discussion, even amongst their friends. Additionally, all participants faced barriers in political discussion with those who did not agree with them. They exercised autonomy in choosing when and with whom to discuss politics and ultimately, mostly chose to avoid conflict to maintain their relationships.

Discussion

The findings of the investigation provide a robust depiction of identity formation for emerging adults. The context of a political framework allowed for emerging adults to explore how their values and viewpoints aligned with their families' and peers' viewpoints while navigating those relationships through maintaining, reassessing, or justifying their values. As the first-time voters made tangible decisions in their political participation, a tangible output for their identifications came to light as they actively chose who to cast a ballot for. They brought their value systems to the forefront and made decisions based on those values. Additionally, the participants were able to choose how to perceive their own political behavior as they committed to casting a ballot for either Donald Trump or Joseph Biden, they chose not to identify with a political party. The rejection of political identification allowed the participants to maintain agency within this continued exploration, choosing not to define themselves, but to allow for freedom of change and growth in the future.

Within the navigation of their freedom of choice and their desire for stability and belonging, the tension between agency and communion came to the forefront (Theme 3). Previous literature viewed agency and communion as “dual motivations that individuals attempt to fulfill while forming their identities” (McAdams et al., 1996, p. 11). The tension of fulfilling

both agential and communal desires was highlighted in the individuals' indication that their familial values and Christian values were intertwined. Thus, their core religious identification directly influenced their communal family perception and vice versa, creating what appeared to be an even deeper desire to make sense of their decisions by the familial values so as not to call into question what they view as their key identification of Christianity. As a result, I suggest that the participants' identities within political participation were not separate from their overall identification, but a product of that identification.

I also suggest that the participants formed an agential identity through the justification of their varying viewpoints by way of their communal values. The participants did not view any differing viewpoints they had as conflicting with the viewpoints of their families as they identified as having the same values as their family members. They reasoned that they had come to their conclusions in political participation based upon those shared values, thus, conflict was not present. The participants maintained their communion by voting in a way that they believed represented their families' Christian value system and they maintained their agency by making their own decision about who to vote for and following their own logic to reach those conclusions.

Sometimes the participants truly did share the same perspective as their family members, but sometimes their perceptions seemed to be a product of avoiding internal conflict at differing opinions. Cognitive dissonance theory represents this phenomenon as it centers around the concept that if an individual holds two or more elements of knowledge that are relevant to each other and contradict each other, the individual is in an uncomfortable state of dissonance. Thus, they will do psychological work to reduce inconsistencies between cognitions (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2012).

An example of this process can be seen in Tracy who speaks in the broader interview that she had the perspective that men were biologically better leaders, but later spoke of how being a woman should not “prohibit or inhibit the thinking of how I am in politics,” even going on to say she may run for office one day. She acknowledged and presented her viewpoint of male leadership, then followed a path of logic to justify her desire to possibly lead politically. Throughout the process, she did not seem to find conflict. She instead followed the logic that if a man was not doing the best job, then she could step in because she would be the best leader available. However, she did not address her statement of not wanting her woman-ness to be a factor in how she is in politics. Through this, she does not acknowledge the dissonance between the perspective of women’s capabilities she claims to have and appears to have gained from her communal relationships and the agential beliefs she has that as a woman, she wants to run for office and can think clearly in politics. Thus, she navigated her decision-making while avoiding the struggle that would be present to make sense of competing discourses within her own thought process.

Additionally, Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) deals with the “meaning-making between relationship parties that emerges from the interplay of competing discourses” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 1). The theory can be seen in the pattern of participants struggling to make sense of competing discourses within their own lives and relationships. The participants actively sought to avoid a label of political identification while still trying to explain their relationships and value systems as correlating with their familial values (Themes 1 & 2). Oftentimes, they contradicted their previously stated viewpoints to make sense of their identification within the relational context of familial and Christian values. They would provide the viewpoint of their families and then follow a path of logic to make sense of that value in relation to their own

decisions, reducing cognitive dissonance between differing viewpoints and making sense of the relational dialectics present in the situations. Understanding the need that emerging adults have, to both maintain their agency and their communal values, aids in the understanding of the participants' discourse management and their overall decision-making.

Additionally, the participants struggled to communicate their political viewpoints and navigate discourse within a societal context. Some participants indicated that relationships had been altered based upon their political viewpoints, so they were hesitant to share their perspectives with those who they did not know had similar viewpoints to themselves. Thus, I suggest that the participants are unwilling to navigate political discourse for fear of threatening their relationships and social standings. This finding connects with the spiral of science theory which assumes that people are “constantly aware of the opinions of the people around them and adjust their behaviors (and potentially their opinions) to the majority trend under the fear of being on the losing side of a public debate,” (Scheufele, 2008, p. 175).

All participants were comfortable discussing viewpoints with those who agreed with them in person, however, when faced with those who may disagree with them, participants aimed to avoid conflict, as Brittany put it, “like the plague.” These individuals were afraid to get into arguments or lose friendships over their unique values and viewpoints. However, Biden-supporting participants were comfortable sharing their opinions and having political discussions via Instagram. This could be due to the specific platform they use having a more liberal-leaning amongst younger users they would be interacting with, because they are “friends” with many people who agree with them, or because they can have a barrier between themselves and those they are communicating with. Yet, Trump-supporting participants were hesitant to share their political beliefs in all settings except those in which they knew their peers would agree with

them. As participants of all beliefs aimed to avoid discourse, they adjusted their vocalness and occasionally opinions to match those they were around. Thus, when no one will enter a discussion with those who disagree with them, there is little to no productive political conversation amongst emerging adults.

The findings coalesce to form a holistic view of political identity within first-time voting Christian women. As these emerging adults established their political identity through social identifications, they sought to maintain agency and communion amongst their family and struggled to maintain that agency and communion amongst peers. Examining the lived experience of these individuals allows for more empathy and understanding amidst a political world that often overlooks the reasoning, values, experience, and humanness of others. Overall, I aim for this investigation to advance future research and overall understanding of holistic identity so that identifications can be understood, values can be respected, and emerging adults can be supported in their identity exploration both in the political world and beyond.

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