Abstract: Despite an increasing commitment in promoting the full inclusion of people with intellectual disability in their communities, it appears that few adults with intellectual disability participate in elections as registered voters. We surveyed a variety of stakeholders about voting by people with intellectual disability using quantitative and qualitative methods. The majority of respondents indicated that people with intellectual disability knew what voting is, expressed an interest in voting, and were registered to vote. However, few respondents indicated that individuals with intellectual disability were provided with voting instruction or had voting included in their service plans. Barriers to greater participation are discussed and future areas of research are suggested.

Voting represents, arguably, the most important civic responsibility citizens can exercise. It allows them to select politicians and support social policies that represent their personal opinions, preferences, and political and social values. Voting provides citizens with an opportunity to make public decisions about policies that can impact their quality of life. In effect, it allows them to become contributing members of their communities and, in doing so, achieve full citizenship. As Schriner and Ochs (2008) indicated: “Voting is the ultimate act of American citizenship. Voting makes one a member of the political community. The act of voting gives voice to the needs and concerns of the voter. . . .” (p. 5)

Although there has been a strong commitment in the United States for the last three decades to promote the full inclusion of people with intellectual disability (ID) in their communities—specifically employment, residential living, and purchase of goods and services—limited attention has been given to voting (Jordan & Dunlap, 2001). Available data suggest that few adults with ID are registered to vote (Agran & Hughes, 2013), but there are no data available on actual voting participation among people with ID in the United States. International studies reveal that people with ID do vote but at a reduced rate compared with the general population. For example, two studies conducted after the 2001 and 2005 general elections in Great Britain revealed a 40% difference in voting between individuals with ID and the general population (Emerson, Malam, Davis, & Spencer, 2005; Keeley, Redley, Holland, & Clare, 2008). In highly contested elections where a few votes can sway an election one way or another, every vote counts. The millions of votes that could be procured if individuals with ID voted at the same rate as the general population could have a dramatic effect on election outcomes. Lanning (2008) noted that voting is what distinguishes a “participatory democracy.” In such a government all citizens, as represented in their votes, are equally valued. As Lanning further indicated, a democratic ideal is achieved when all citizens exercise their right to vote. When significant numbers do not engage in voting (or are denied the right to vote), the government becomes less demo-
The fact that relatively few individuals with ID vote calls into question whether adults with ID are being recognized as full citizens, or, instead, are being relegated to a second class status and denied the opportunity to exercise this fundamental right (Pavey, 2003).

Various reasons have been suggested to explain why individuals with ID participate in voting at low rates. These include inadequate knowledge of voting-related issues, limited literacy skills, failure of service providers or school programs to teach voting skills, living in a setting in which people do not regularly participate in voting, inaccessibility of polling places, lack of accessible voting materials or voting apparatus, and on-site denial by election officers (Bell, McKay, & Phillips, 2001; King & Ebraham, 2007; Keeley et al., 2008; Weiss, 1988). These factors, singularly or in combination, prevent or dissuade many individuals from either registering to vote in the first place or actually visiting a polling place to vote.

It is easily understood why a government would seek an educated electorate. As such, the government would have confidence that voters were indeed informed about relevant issues and would make thoughtful and rational decisions when voting (Holland, Clare, Redley, & Keeling, 2011). To determine if potential voters have such capacity, it is incumbent upon election officials to follow a certain standard. Ironically, there is no standard for typical voters, save for having a valid birth certificate and a legal address. No doubt individuals with ID are not encouraged to vote because stakeholders (e.g., service providers, parents) may think they are incapable of making an informed political decision (Schriner et al., 2000). Ironically, many voters in the general population do not make informed decisions and cast their votes based on emotional, gender, racial, cultural, or other factors (Bell et al., 2001), yet they are not subject to the same standard as people with ID. Last, stakeholders may believe that people with ID can be easily influenced and manipulated (King & Ebraham, 2007), but research suggests that, with systematic instruction, people with ID could make informed decisions at the polls (Agran & Hughes, 2013; Schriner et al., 2000).

Because of the restrictions discussed above, it is not surprising that many people with ID do not vote. Further, and not surprisingly, research suggests that service providers infrequently think about or value teaching their consumers with ID how to vote (Agran & Hughes, 2013; Pavey, 2003). In a British survey, Pavey asked educators involved in transition services to rate 20 curriculum areas for secondary and post-secondary level students. Voting (i.e., “political awareness”) was rated second last, ahead of “religious/philosophical awareness” and “other.” This evidence suggests that respondents did not think voting was important for this population.

Agran and Hughes (2013) surveyed a sample of direct service providers and support personnel to examine their beliefs about whether people with ID should vote as well as beliefs about practices associated with the provision of voting instruction. The majority of respondents indicated that they rarely provided voting instruction and that few consumers with ID voted, were registered to vote, or expressed an interest in voting (or had their parents or guardians express interest). There was mixed opinion regarding the value of voting for individuals with ID, although most respondents said they would provide such instruction if they were asked to do so by consumers. Although the findings added to the limited knowledge base on voting among individuals with ID, providing evidence that few individuals with ID were registered to vote and that few service providers delivered voting instruction, the study only involved a limited sample from one community service agency. Also, the study did not examine actual voting practices among people with ID. Further research on this issue is clearly warranted.

The present study is an extension of the Agran and Hughes investigation. A broader stakeholder group served as respondents and several new questions were added to the survey questionnaire. Also, the qualitative survey responses were analyzed to identify relevant themes, including stakeholder’s perceptions of why few adults with ID actually vote, values concerning voting-related instruction, and ideas about how to increase voting participation. Given the longstanding personal relationship between the stakeholders and adults with ID in the sample, we believe that they are in an optimal position to report on the inter-
est in voting among adults with ID as well as any voting-related education these adults may have received.

Method

Participants

Participants were direct support personnel in programs that provide services for adults with ID, Medicaid waiver case managers, parents/guardians of adults with ID, and members of statewide disability organizations knowledgeable about the voting practices of persons with ID. Individuals were invited to participate if they met the following criteria: (1) stakeholder (as defined above) living in the state in which the study was conducted, (2) 18 years of age or older, and (3) provided voluntary informed consent.

Procedure

Study participants were recruited through multiple methods, including distribution of flyers and delivery of the online survey link through email. Researchers also set up a vendor table at the statewide 2014 Special Olympics Summer Games where interested stakeholders could complete surveys. Stakeholders were asked to complete an anonymous, electronic or paper-based consent form by checking a box indicating agreement to participate. The study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board as one involving no more than minimal risk to participants.

Survey

A 21-item questionnaire was created for the purpose of this study, including Likert-scale, multiple choice, and open-ended items. Basic socio-demographic information was collected, including gender, age, level of education, role as a stakeholder and years of experience in working with or caring for people with ID. Stakeholders then responded to questions regarding the voting experiences of adults with ID with whom they were familiar. These questions dealt with the adults' knowledge of voting, their interest in voting, and whether they were registered to vote, their familiarity with polling places, and the degree to which voting was represented in their service plan or was a focus of instruction. Open-ended questions addressed the stakeholders' perceptions of why few adults with ID actually vote, their beliefs regarding the importance of teaching individuals with ID to vote, and how to increase the turnout of voters with ID.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS statistics, version 21 to calculate frequencies, means, and standard deviations as appropriate. The open-ended questions were thematically analyzed using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and constant comparison methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to systematically reduce data into codes and subsequently formulate codes into themes. Data analysis software (i.e., NVivo 10 [2012]) was used for the qualitative analysis.

Results

Although 66 surveys were completed, the response rate for the open-ended questions ranged from 54 to 59 percent. Respondents had considerable experience working with or caring for individuals with ID (M = 13.32 years; SD = 11.18; range 0–54 years) in a variety of roles, including direct support personnel (47%), parents/guardians (29%), Medicaid waiver case managers (9%), members of disability organizations (4%), and other (11%). Respondents ranged from 21 to 81 years of age (M = 41.73, SD = 15.16). The majority was female (83%), and just over half of the sample had a bachelor’s or other postgraduate degree (55%). The majority of respondents indicated that the persons with ID they supported knew what voting is (80%) and had expressed an interest in voting (62%). Fifty-six percent of the respondents worked with or cared for an individual with ID who was registered to vote.

Barriers to Voting

Fifty-nine stakeholders provided responses to the question, “Relatively few adults with intellectual disability in the United States vote. What do you think is the reason for this?” Four
factors emerged among the responses: ability, education, interest, and support.

Ability. The belief that people with ID do not have the ability or capacity to vote was cited by 19 respondents (32%). According to these respondents, many people believe that individuals with ID would have difficulty grasping abstract and complex concepts needed to vote. Also, some respondents noted that people with ID would be unable to vote without being unduly influenced by their parents/guardians, caregivers, or service providers. For example, a direct support staff member who has worked with individuals with ID for 14 years and presently works with people with significant disability stated:

“The issues are complex, and it requires a lot of time to fully study and investigate not only the issues but the politicians who are running for office. I don’t believe that many individuals with intellectual disabilities can fully understand the complex issues.” (Respondent 7)

Although some respondents personally believe that people with ID would not be able to meaningfully engage in the voting process, others referred to this notion in general, not necessarily representative of their personal opinions.

“I think people tend to believe what I believe—that there is little capacity for those with intellectual disabilities to understand the process or politics.” (Respondent 18)

“The wide assumption is that ‘intellectual disability’ implies the person is not capable of making an informed, deliberate decision when it comes to voting.” (Respondent 43)

Education. Whereas some participants cited innate ability as a factor, slightly more respondents (n = 23; 39%) mentioned educational and informational deficits preventing individuals with ID from voting. For instance, respondents indicated that individuals with ID are not adequately informed about the voting process or their right to vote. As one direct support personnel stated, “I believe that most adults here in [this state] with intellectual disabilities haven’t been talked to or taught what about what voting is or how it works.” (Respondent 19)

Others indicated that people with ID are simply not “given the opportunity to hear about the process.” (Respondent 45) In addition to insufficient education, some respondents voiced concern about the nature of education for people with ID. For instance, one direct support personnel was worried about influencing participants if she were to provide them with education, “I’m also unsure of how to educate clients on political issues without influencing them with my own views.” (Respondent 56)

Support. Lack of support from family members or direct support personnel was cited by 10 respondents (17%). Whereas some respondents indicated that those providing care/support for individuals with ID simply “never considered the idea” (Respondent 82) of teaching or assisting them to vote, others stressed that teaching and providing assistance to vote is often a low priority among stakeholders. One parent, who strongly supports her daughter’s right to vote and has taken her daughter to vote in every election except when she was living in a group home, stated, “Our experience was that the adult provider where my daughter lived/worked for a while did not make it important, nor did they take the time to educate the residents about the issues and candidates.” (Respondent 22) One reason why voting may be a lower priority among service providers and support personnel is the extensive time commitment, as one respondent reported, “I also think that people don’t want to put in the time and energy required to help adults with intellectual disabilities learn about voting and the political system.” (Respondent 11) Concern about unduly biasing people with ID about specific issues or candidates was also mentioned as a reason for lack of support. One direct support personnel relayed this concern, “Staff. Many are not willing to teach or take to polling offices, or afraid of affecting voters’ opinion.” (Respondent 69)

Interest. Finally, nine respondents (15%) cited a lack of interest in voting among people with ID as a factor because they are unable to fully understand the implications of voting, feel that voting does not affect them, or that their voice does not make a difference.

“Of those who are capable, some have said they were uninterested and some are probably just not educated enough on the subject to find it important.” (Respondent 5)
“They may feel it is unimportant or that their vote would not count. They may not feel that it affects them.” (Respondent 54)

Beliefs About Voting-related Instruction

The stakeholders then responded to survey questions regarding voting-related instruction. These items related to the importance of providing voting-related instruction, whether instructional materials can be prepared that allow individuals with ID to understand different political platforms or positions, and whether teaching individuals with ID is a worthwhile objective.

Importance. Fifty-nine respondents identified several factors that influence their beliefs about the relative importance of providing voting-related instruction. Two key themes emerged including (1) equality and impact and (2) individual differences.

Thirty-five respondents (59%) voiced the belief that teaching individuals with ID to vote is important because all people should be treated equally and granted their rights as citizens of the United States. Respondents emphasized that people with ID have the right to make decisions that impact them. As one direct support personnel articulated, “Clients should be able to vote for someone who won’t go in and slash the waiver program. Their needs often end up on the chopping block because they have no representation in state or national congress.” (Respondent 4) Many others echoed the notion that people with ID have a right to vote, just like those without disability.

“They are a part of this community and should have a voice in what happens as well.” (Respondent 3)

“They live in our country, I fought for this country, he should be able to vote.” (Respondent 70)

“Political issues affect all individuals, regardless of disability. Everyone has a right to vote for the platform that makes decisions for them.” (Respondent 46)

“My daughter has voted in every election since she was old enough . . . we go together to vote. We also discuss political advertisements and read a supplement that our local newspaper puts out . . . There was never any question that she would vote—it is her right and privilege.” (Respondent 22)

“My clients are passionate about some topics and would likely be interested in learning about more political topics. Many of them have strong opinions on some issues and they should participate in the voting process just like anyone else.” (Respondent 56)

The second major theme, discussed by 18 respondents (30%), emphasized that the importance of teaching individuals with ID to vote depends on individual characteristics of those with ID, such as level of functioning and interest in voting. For example, one direct support personnel contrasted differing abilities among people with ID, “It really depends on the severity of the disability. Some individuals are capable of discussing political issues with understanding and strong opinions, but others are just not at that level and never will be.” (Respondent 43) Likewise, one Medicaid waiver case manager who has worked with individuals with ID for six years reported that he considers the interest level of individuals before providing them with education and assistance to vote.

“I take regard to the people I work with and what interest they have in politics and voting issues that will affect them. While I have about half of my caseload that are aware of issues, I have only a few on my caseload that do care about the issues and want their voices heard. I base this on their interests and when they are interested, I assist them in looking at issues and making sure they can get to the polling places on Election Day.” (Respondent 8)

Whereas the majority of respondents believed that some people with ID are better-suited to vote than others, four respondents believed that voting-related instruction is too complex for individuals with ID. For instance, one parent/guardian of an individual with ID stated, “No matter who is teaching there will be a bias. There is no way to ‘teach’ all the basics required to understand voting to those who struggle with abstract ideas.” (Respondent 34) Despite the strong belief among most respondents that voting is an important educational goal for people with ID, instruction provision is lacking. Regarding the extent to which instruction on how to vote is provided to individuals with ID, only a quarter of the sample provides instruction “always” (8%), “frequently” (5%), or “sometimes” (11%). The majority of respon-
udents have provided voting-related instruction to people with ID “not very often—a few times” (28%), or “never” (48%). Likewise, the vast majority of respondents (79%) reported that voting is not included in the service plans for any individuals whom they serve or provide care. Half of the respondents (50%) reported that none of the individuals with ID they served or supported have been shown polling places.

Instructional materials. About one third of respondents (32%) indicated that “appropriate, user-friendly materials can be developed for most political issues.” Twenty one percent of the sample agreed that appropriate instructional materials can be developed for “several political issues,” and another 24% indicated that “materials for an important issue (e.g., healthcare)” could be developed. In contrast, 15% of respondents indicated that it is “highly unlikely, except in a rare case” that voting-related instructional materials could be developed for people with ID, and 8% reported that it is not at all possible for materials to be prepared because “concepts are too abstract.”

Worthwhile objective. The majority of respondents either “strongly agreed” (42%) or “agreed” (35%) that teaching individuals with ID to vote is a worthwhile objective, whereas the remaining respondents were “neutral” (12%), “disagreed” (3%), or “strongly disagreed” (8%). Although somewhat less optimistic, most respondents still “strongly agreed” (38%) or “agreed” (28%) that political platforms or campaigning information could be presented (or explained) to individuals with ID. Other respondents were “neutral” (20%), “disagreed” (6%), or “strongly disagreed” (8%) with the possibility of presenting campaigning information to individuals with ID. Over half of respondents (58%) had never requested or had parents/guardians of adults whom they serve/support request that individuals with ID learn to vote. Others reported that they have made this request “not very often—a few times” (25%) or “sometimes” (9%). Only 2% of respondents “frequently” request that individuals with ID learn how to vote, and 6% do so “always.” Most respondents (86%) had never contacted the statewide Protection and Advocacy organization to inquire whether they could provide voting instruction to individuals with ID.

Increasing Voter Participation

The final survey question, which was answered by 54 respondents, was an open-ended inquiry about what might be done to increase the number of adults with ID that vote. The most frequently discussed suggestion, mentioned by 31 respondents (57%), was to inform and educate people with ID. Although some respondents suggested that education be provided in a general sense, others specifically stated that individuals with ID need to be informed about the rights and responsibilities associated with voting and that they can make a difference by voting. As one direct support personnel suggested, “Teach them at an early age that they have a voice which needs to be heard.” (Respondent 4) Other respondents also elaborated as to why providing education on voting is important in order to increase the turnout of voters with ID.

“Continue offering educational information regarding voting, discuss political issues and how they affect us, empower people so that they feel their opinion matters.” (Respondent 5)

“I think that overall more understanding that individuals with intellectual disabilities are completely capable of making their own decisions when it comes to voting is the place to start.” (Respondent 11)

Other suggested educational topics were: government, the political system, and political issues, especially taxation, health care, Medicaid, and Social Security. Furthermore, some respondents indicated that individuals with ID should be informed about biographical information of candidates running for office.

“There should be information about each candidate and issue that is black and white and not prettied up with campaign junk. The campaign junk is hard to sort out and folks need basic information about the candidates’ views and opinions—not the brass bands and fireworks!” (Respondent 22)

Finally, other respondents described specific ways in which people with ID could be educated about voting, such as setting up a mock voting station and including them in civics classes.

Another theme identified by 10 out of the 54 respondents (19%) was to increase the in-
Involvement of parents/guardians and service/care providers in assisting those with ID to vote. According to participants, training or educating these stakeholders on how they might assist with and support the voting practices of people with ID could be a focus. In contrast, four respondents (7%) asserted that third-party organizations should be involved in educating people with ID about voting to avoid undue influence or fraud.

“I believe that the LWV [League of Women Voters] or P&V [Protection and Advocacy] should provide assistance to people with disabilities. I do not believe that providers should participate other than physically assisting people in the process. The risk of fraud or intimidation is too great.” (Respondent 60)

“Unbiased info on issues must be created and presented in each county or place that serves individuals multiple times prior to voting and be assured that caregivers and others do not unduly influence the vote while discussing the issues to insure comprehension.” (Respondent 77)

Eight respondents (15%) described the ways in which assistance could be provided to help individuals with ID participate in the actual voting process, such as arranging groups to go to polling places together during elections, providing transportation to polling places, and offering accommodations when voting (e.g., having a reader present). Others voiced the need for care providers or direct support personnel to provide voter registration paperwork and paper ballots for individuals with ID.

**Discussion**

The participants in this study provided new insights regarding the issue of voting and intellectual disability. By virtue of their reported experience working with or caring for people with ID and other related demographic characteristics, they approached the survey from an informed vantage point. Although the study was not designed to assess actual participation in local, state, or national elections, the majority of stakeholders reported that they were familiar with adults with ID who knew about voting, expressed an interest in voting, and were registered to vote. At the same time, they confirmed initial impressions reported by Agran and Hughes (2013) that adults with ID rarely receive instruction or other supports to encourage their participation in voting.

The majority of respondents in this study believed that teaching individuals to vote was important and worthwhile and that instructional materials could be prepared that would allow people with ID to understand varying political platforms or positions on at least some political issues. These respondents believe that voting is a fundamental right of all citizens and that in a truly inclusive community, people with ID have the right to vote just like those in the general population. However, for an appreciable minority, this belief was tempered by a need to consider the individual characteristics of those with ID – suggesting that some people may not benefit from instruction efforts aimed at full participation in the voting process. While stakeholders were open to the idea of systematic preparation for voting, they were also mindful of the time requirements and the potential for personal bias to influence the instructional process.

Qualitative responses suggested that voter preparation might be focused on issues of greatest relevance for adults with ID, such as changes in health care access or waiver services. In these cases, people with ID may have strong opinions about these issues, and voting is one way they can participate in decision making as members of the larger community as citizens. Although not specifically addressed by the respondents, many of their comments regarding increasing awareness of the right to vote and to participate in the voting process are consistent with ongoing efforts aimed at increasing self-determination of people with ID. As Wappett (2002) noted, individuals with IDD have long been denied basic rights such as voting and have been given a secondary status. Further, their input on various issues has been summarily dismissed in favor of others’ (i.e., professional experts) opinions. Providing access to voting promotes clients’ self-advocacy and decision making and, ultimately, their self-determination.

Given that participants viewed voting instruction as important and worthwhile, it is not surprising that they viewed this activity as a way to increase the number of adults with ID.
that vote. Additionally, the respondents provided specific recommendations regarding the content of instructional efforts as well as methods that would increase familiarity with voting practices. Finally, some respondents recognized that assistance on the day of elections would also increase participation.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in the current study permitted further examination of questions first addressed by Agran and Hughes (2013). At the same time, the study shares some of the same limitations as its predecessor. For example, the sample was relatively small and limited to a single state. Future research with larger samples is needed. Also, while this study included a broader range of participants than in the Agran and Hughes study, two important stakeholder groups were not represented. Future studies should include adults with ID and educators, respectively. Thus far, there is limited research about the opinions of adults with ID regarding voting and their perspective would be highly informative. Interestingly, Kjellberg and Hemmingsson (2013) investigated a sample of adults with ID to share their experiences about voting and citizenship. Two thirds indicated that they voted at least one time in the last three years and the other third said they never voted. When members of the “non-voting” group were asked why they did not vote, some of the participants said they had no interest in voting, one said “it would make no difference,” and several said they needed more support from their group home. Of interest too was the influence that significant others (e.g., family members, friends) had on the extent to which the participants voted; that is, they were less likely to vote if family members did not vote and vice-versa. Kjellberg and Hemmingsson suggest that widening the social network for people with ID to discuss political issues and support their voting would potentially be of great value since such discussions may not occur in family conversations. The fact that there is little research in which individuals with ID were asked to provide their opinions about voting represents a major limitation and such research is critically needed.

Similarly, educators, particularly those involved with transition age youth, could provide important information regarding the presence or absence of voting-related instruction in the curriculum. Preparing youth with ID for productive roles as citizens represents one of the primary goals of transition and voting, arguably, is one of the most important responsibilities of citizens; nevertheless, little research has been reported on teachers’ perspectives about this issue. As Pavey (2003) noted, few transition plans appear to include voting (or political awareness) as an objective. It would be most helpful to better understand teachers’ reluctance to include voting in educational plans. An additional question that warrants further examination is the effectiveness of current efforts to provide voting-related support through self-advocate groups or programs such as Protection and Advocacy for Voting Accessibility (PAVA). That is, although states are required to provide such supports to promote voter participation, it remains uncertain as to what extent such services are consulted by service agencies (or teachers) for clients or students with ID, and, when consulted, what information is desired by either clients or agencies.

In summary, stakeholders’ comments regarding the relative importance of teaching individuals to vote echoed many of the calls for greater participation of people with ID in the electorate. Essentially, all people should be treated equally and granted their rights as citizens. Given that many decisions that impact the lives of people with ID are part of governmental decision making, it makes sense that their voices should be heard.

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