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## Voters' Perception of Public Corruption and Low Voter Turnout: A Qualitative Case Study of Cook County

Dawn Merdelin Johnson  
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# Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Dawn Merdelin Johnson

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2023

Abstract

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by

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MPhil, Walden University, 2021

MS, Roosevelt University, 2002

BS, Roosevelt University, 1989

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

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February 2024

## Abstract

Public corruption has been a persistent issue in Cook County, Illinois, for over four decades. Research on major global democracies has demonstrated a connection between public corruption and low voter turnout. This qualitative study explored whether the same connection existed in the Cook County 2019 Municipal Election. This study used purposeful sampling to select and interview three registered voters in Cook County. This study also applied Rational Choice Theory to determine whether voters voted according to their self-interest. Data were collected through semistructured telephone interviews. A thematic analysis was used to reveal five broad themes: public corruption is self-serving, voting should be more convenient, a lack of information on the candidates, public corruption erodes trust in government, and public corruption is prevalent. The findings unveiled that public corruption erodes trust in municipal governance, reducing motivation to vote. Study participants suggested making voting more convenient and making comprehensive information about each candidate available to the public. The county might benefit from an anticorruption agency, a bipartisan voter initiative, improved voter registration and maintenance, and enhanced voting accessibility. The study offers recommendations to combat corruption and boost voter engagement. The study's findings contribute to positive social change by raising awareness about the detrimental consequences of corruption on voting decisions.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother (Lerlene Ramsay), godmother (Millicent Frazier), grandparents (the late Erniel and Dora Ramsay), sister (Angela Forrester), brother (Mervin Blackwood), niece (Gabrielle Johnson), nephews (Kevin Blackwood, Dexter Blackwood, Derone Blackwood, and Mervin Blackwood, jr.), Grandniece (Katelyn Blackwood), aunts (especially the late Merlene (Ettie) Ramsay), uncles (especially Oswald Ramsay and Byron Ramsay), and to all my friends. I love you all.

I also dedicate this dissertation to all those individuals who have yet to recognize or achieve their God-given gifts, skills, and talents. It is never too late to fulfill your dreams, set goals, and embark on the journey to achieve your life's purpose.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Over the past four decades, various public corruption cases and trials have garnered significant attention in the State of Illinois. Corruption cases are frequently reported in the news. According to a 2014 survey of 1,000 news and investigative reporters conducted by Harvard University, when asked to provide their perspective on corruption within state governments, Illinois was ranked fifth as the most corrupt state, trailing behind Arizona, California, Kentucky, and Alabama (Dincer & Johnston, 2014). Furthermore, in a 2015 national telephone poll of 1,005 adult respondents conducted by Monmouth University, the respondents ranked Illinois third for having the highest corruption cases (Monmouth University, 2015). Based on federal conviction data between 1975 and 2010, Illinois ranked as the third most corrupt state (Simpson, et al., 2012). The data from 1976 onwards, Illinois has seen 1,828 convictions related to public corruption, primarily involving elected officials, public appointees, and government workers. These data translate to an annual average of 51 convictions.

*Public corruption* in the United States is commonly defined as "the misuse of public office for private gain" (Treisman, 2000, p. 399). Another definition characterizes public corruption as "the illegal use of public office for private (or personal) gain" (Bowler & Donovan, 2016, p. 273). Essentially, public corruption affects the electoral process. The ethical conduct of public officials after being elected to office remains an inherent issue in achieving effective governance (McDermott et al., 2015).

Using a Quinnipiac University survey experiment, McDermott et al. (2015) scrutinized and compared the behavior patterns of candidates during and after a

campaign. They employed a quantitative approach to analyze the conduct patterns related to political candidates' hypocrisy and its impact on the willingness of voters to vote. The authors concluded that unethical conduct not only shapes voters' opinions of the candidates but also influences their voting behavior and attitudes (McDermott et al., 2015). Currently, there is no scholarly research dedicated to a comprehensive exploration of public corruption, voting behaviors, and attitudes of Cook County's voters.

This qualitative study aimed to uncover the factors contributing to low voter turnout and investigate the potential impact of public corruption on voting behaviors. I delved into this phenomenon by investigating the opinions and perspectives of eligible voters in Cook County who had resided in the area for at least three years and possessed knowledge of public corruption, explicitly focusing on their lack of participation in the 2019 Municipal Election.

### **The Evolution of Voting in Illinois**

Over time, the expansion of voter rights has been a notable progression in both Illinois and the United States as a whole. From the inception of American democracy, citizens have displayed a keen interest in shaping their democratic government, primarily through active participation in the electoral process, i.e., voting. Empowered by the privileges of unalienable rights and the gifts of liberty, citizens have embraced the essential responsibility of casting their votes to elect government officials entrusted with governing on their behalf and in their best interests. Consequently, voting has become a foundational tenet of the emerging American democracy.

The United States is globally recognized as a superpower due to its formidable military strength and robust economy. The cornerstone of our present democracy hinges on eligible voters participating in the selection of their presidents, senators, state and local legislative representatives, as well as municipal elected officials. Individuals qualify to vote if they fulfill specific criteria: (a) US citizenship, (b) adherence to their state's residency prerequisites, (c) attaining the age of 18 on or before Election Day, and (d) registration within the deadline set by their state's voter registration regulations (USA.gov, 2018). Although voting is considered one of the fundamental rights and privileges granted to American citizens, it is important to note that federal laws restrict certain groups, including individuals with mental health disabilities and some with felony convictions, from participating in this civic engagement (Sabatino, 2020).

Voting stands as a cornerstone of a robust and genuine democracy, with the vitality of democracy directly linked to the willingness of citizens to engage in the electoral process. In the current representative democracy, all Americans can participate in general and municipal elections, contingent on meeting specific age and residency criteria. Nevertheless, the historical landscape of the United States did not always provide free and open elections. In the early 1800s, citizens could vote to select their preferred presidential candidates, yet the franchise was limited exclusively to White male landowners (History.com, 2018a). Despite the establishment of a new representative government and the Constitution in 1787, the distribution of rights and privileges was initially limited. For several decades, women, Black Americans, and Indigenous peoples were excluded from the voting process.



However, in 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson took a significant step by advocating for the implementation of a comprehensive federal law to safeguard voting rights, which ultimately led to the enactment of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (History.com, 2018b). The same year witnessed the removal of restrictions previously denying voting rights to all Black Americans. Illinois, like other states, had its own different historical trajectory in granting voting rights to its citizens. In a historical context similar to federal laws, upon joining the Union in 1818, Illinois initially granted voting rights exclusively to White males aged 21 years and older (Schmedding, 2010). The right to vote for women in Illinois was not granted until 1920. An interesting tidbit of history is that Illinois became the first state to adopt the Susan B. Anthony Amendment on June 10, 1919, which stated, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex" (Schmedding, 2010, p. 1). Currently, both men and women are eligible to vote if they are US citizens, have been residing in their county and voting precinct for at least 30 days, and are at least 18 years old (Voter.org, 2018).

### **An Analysis of Voter Turnout in Cook County**

Voter turnout can significantly differ based on the type of election, whether it is a federal, state, or local one. Cook County Municipal Elections, for instance, encompass various phases. During the odd years, residents voted to select their mayor and council members. An examination of the data in Table 1, (Board of Election Commissioners for the City of Chicago, 2019) reveals that low voter turnout remained relatively consistent from 2003 to 2019, except for 2011, which saw a turnout of 42.30%. The voter turnout

statistics from these local elections highlight that low voter turnout has a detrimental impact on democracy, as a robust democratic system thrives when it enjoys the highest possible participation from its citizenry.

**Table 1**

*Voter Turnout in Cook County Municipal Elections 2003-2019*

Election	Number of registered	Number of ballots	
year	voters	cast	Percentage voted
2003	1,436,286	483,943	33.70%
2007	1,407,979	465,766	33.08%
2011	1,406,037	594,734	42.30%
2015	1,421,430	483,700	34.03%
2019	1,581,755	560,701	35.45%

*Note.* Data were taken from Board of Election Commissioners for the City of Chicago, 2019.

In contrast, during presidential elections held every four years, the voter turnout is more than twice that of municipal elections. As depicted in Table 2, the data illustrates that in 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016, the voter turnout stood at 74.63%, 73.87%, 75.41%, and 71.04%, respectively.

**Table 2***Cook County Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections 2004-2016*

Election	Number of registered	Number of ballots	
year	voters	cast	Percentage voted
2004	1,416,101	1,056,830	74.63%
2008	1,497,292	1,105,998	73.87%
2012	1,364,371	1,028,870	75.41%
2016	1,570,529	1,115,664	71.04%

*Note.* Data were taken from Chicago Elections.

As demonstrated in Table 3, Cook County's voter turnout during Congressional elections surpassed that of municipal elections but remained below the turnout rates observed during presidential elections. The only exception was in 2010, when the turnout rate was nearly 74%.

**Table 3***Cook County Voter Turnout in Congressional Elections 2006-2018*

	Number of voters	Number of ballots	
Election year	registered	cast	Percentage voted
2006	1,360,747	670,222	49.25%
2010	1,334,807	705,869	73.87%
2014	1,368,708	668,033	48.81%
2018	1,503,353	912,061	60.67%

*Note.* Data were taken from Chicago Board of Elections

## **Analysis of the 2019 General Municipal Election**

In the 2019 Chicago Municipal Election, 34.05% of the 1,581,755 registered voters, amounting to 560,701 individuals, participated (Chicago Board of Elections, 2019). Astonishingly, in the same election, nearly 66% of eligible citizens chose not to cast their votes. The issue of low voter turnout is common in Cook County; neighboring counties have also witnessed a similar trend. For instance, in the 2019 local elections, DeKalb County, DuPage County, and Kane County reported turnout rates of only 10%, 14.84%, and 9.90%, respectively (DeKalb County, 2019; DuPage County, 2019; Kane County Clerk, 2019).

Chicago's political landscape has its complexity and intrigue. In Chicago, as in many other municipalities, the electoral process involves primaries, and in cases where no single candidate secures more than 50% of the votes, an automatic runoff election is triggered. A recent illustration was the municipal election held on February 26, 2019, for mayor, treasurer, and 15 alderpersons races. These races were fiercely contested. The mayoral race saw a crowded field with 12 candidates vying for the position. However, none of the candidates managed to secure the required 50% threshold of votes, leading to a subsequent runoff election scheduled for April 2, 2019. In the runoff election, only the two candidates with the highest vote counts from the primary advanced to compete. Lori Lightfoot, a newcomer to the political scene, and Toni Preckwinkle, an establishment figure, emerged as the top contenders but still fell short of avoiding a runoff. The mayoral runoff race attracted national attention as it presented the possibility of Chicago electing its first African-American woman as mayor.

As the excitement of the election season grew, so did the campaign spending. The 12 mayoral candidates collectively spent \$38.5 million on their campaigns (Chicagoreporter.com, 2019). Ultimately, Lori Lightfoot emerged victorious in the runoff election, securing nearly 74% of the votes and assuming the role of Chicago's mayor. In line with the tradition of her predecessors, Mayor Lightfoot ran on a platform focused on eradicating corruption in Chicago and reinstating transparency in government.

The gubernatorial race also captured the national spotlight, not due to the candidates' qualifications but the staggering amount of money poured into their campaigns. Both gubernatorial contenders collectively spent nearly \$250 million (Bradley, 2018; Burnett & O'Connor, 2018). J. B. Pritzker, a newcomer to the political arena, expended nearly \$171 million, equating to approximately \$72 per vote. Meanwhile, the incumbent, Bruce Rauner, spent about \$79 million, averaging \$46 per vote (Bradley, 2018; Burnett & O'Connor, 2018). In the end, Pritzker emerged victorious, securing the position of the state's governor.

There is a belief among some political proponents that the highest campaign spenders are likely to secure victory because of the influential role money plays in election outcomes. Johnson (2012) suggested, substantial campaign donations can assist candidates in winning votes. However, this perception only holds true for some electoral contests. A case in point is the Chicago mayoral election on February 26, 2019. Toni Preckwinkle outspent Lori Lightfoot in the three candidates race but could not garner enough votes to secure the nomination. Preckwinkle expended \$5.8 million, amounting to \$45.85 per vote, whereas Lightfoot spent \$4.4 million, equating to a lower cost of \$13.56

per vote (Chicagoreporter.com, 2019). A third candidate, Bill Daley emerged as the top spender, allocating nearly \$7 million, or approximately \$132 per vote, yet he finished last (Chicagoreporter.com, 2019). Consequently, further research is required to delve into the extent of the influence, if any, that money wields on election outcomes in Cook County.

In state elections, the primary serves as the process for selecting candidates appearing on the ballots in the general election. In each political party, the candidate with the highest number of votes in the primary earns a spot on the general election ballot. Table 4 contains data of voter turnout during general elections from 2010 to 2018 (Illinois State Board of Elections, 2019). Like the trend observed in Cook County Municipal Elections, state primary elections often experience lower turnout than general elections.

**Table 4**

*Illinois State Board of Elections Turnout in Primary Elections 2010-2018*

Election	Number of registered	Number of ballots	
year	voters	cast	Percentage voted
2018	7,945,074	2,103,634	26.48%
2016	7,666,763	3,569,960	46.56%
2014	7,505,002	1,357,807	18.09%
2012	7,304,333	1,694,317	23.20%
2010	7,600,962	1,758,489	23.14%

*Note.* Data taken from the Illinois State Board of Elections

The alarming surge in the number of arrests and convictions of elected officials in Cook County indicates that some individuals in positions of trust have exploited their roles for personal gain. Criminal convictions represent merely the visible portion of the problem in Cook County (Gradel et al., 2010). Further, the authors argued for every corrupt official who faces conviction, there could be numerous others engaged in similar schemes who manage to evade prosecution. A pertinent example is the case of former congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr., and his wife, Sandra Jackson. In 2013, they faced federal charges and served prison sentences for misappropriating campaign funds, using them for personal luxuries like Rolex watches and fur coats (Fuller, 2013; Peralta, 2013; Schouten, 2013). During their sentencing, the judge likened their use of campaign funds to a "personal piggy bank" (Fuller, 2013, par. 1), admonishing them for failing to uphold "a higher standard of ethics and integrity" expected of elected public officials (Schouten, 2013, par. 3). These incidents underscore the pressing need for political reforms aimed at combating corruption.

Public corruption stands in stark contrast to the fundamental ethical principles upon which genuine democracy thrived. As public corruption undermines citizens' engagement in the electoral process, it is imperative to combat its corrupting influence and power. Corruption is not only constraining but also destructive, making it crucial for the leadership to mitigate its detrimental impact on democracy in Cook County. Mayor Lightfoot appears to be staunchly committed to curbing corruption (Burnett & McCann, 2019). In the interim, Lightfoot's message resounded loudly and clearly, signaling the end

of an era where elected officials viewed their positions as opportunities for personal enrichment rather than as platforms for public service.

### **Problem Statement**

The limited engagement of citizens in the electoral process hinders the advancement of democratic principles. As Miles (2015) pointed out, voting is a fundamental means by which the public consents to be governed in a democratic society. Citizen participation in the electoral process in Cook County is fundamental for effective governance. However, it is also paramount for driving social transformation and addressing issues affecting a substantial portion of the population.

In the 2019 Chicago Municipal General Elections, only 35% of eligible voters took part in the election of public officials (Board of Elections, 2019). The outcome of local elections indicates that approximately 65% of the 1.6 million registered voters opted not to exercise their voting rights. These figures illustrated that most registered voters did not actively participate in the electoral voting process, underscoring the adverse consequences of low voter turnout.

Over the last four decades, Illinois has garnered national attention due to the imprisonment of four former governors who abused their public positions for personal gain (Daily Journal, 2013). Despite the implementation of various measures aimed at preventing elected officials from engaging in corruption, these efforts have limited impact. The state of Illinois continues to witness a significant number of public officials incarcerated for corrupt practices (Maciag, 2012). For instance, in 2015, the state recorded 27 convictions, 28 indictments, 11 new corruption investigations, and the



sentencing of 30 elected or appointed officials for offenses that occurred before 2015 (Simpson et al., 2016).

There is no unanimous agreement on the factors contributing to low voter turnout. Despite various initiatives like get-out-the-vote campaigns, vote-by-mail, and early voting options designed to boost participation in the electoral process, actual voter turnout still needs to improve in local elections. Some scholars have posited that the public's perception of corruption and a lack of trust in the government might account for the low voter turnout (Dahlberg & Solevid, 2016). Additional factors related to traveling on election day, health issues, and the intricacies of the registration process may also explain why voters do not make it to the polls (Lorenzetti, 2016). However, the potential connection between public corruption and low voter turnout in Cook County has yet to be thoroughly explored. During the literature review, I discovered there were limited studies that explored the connection between public corruption and low voter turnout from the perspective of eligible voters. In this study, I address this gap in the research.

Public corruption has a detrimental impact on governance, and multiple researchers concur that it erodes public trust (Ozmy, 2013; Weinschenk & Helpap, 2015). It is not uncommon for elected officials to espouse specific values during a campaign only to act contrary to those values once in office (McDermott et al., 2015). Active citizen participation in the electoral process is crucial for upholding democratic principles. The prevalent occurrence of self-serving behavior among officials in Cook County could discourage citizens from participating in the political process, particularly in voting. For example, Lauer et al. (2018) employed a social justice theoretical

framework to assess the perspectives of residents concerning public involvement procedures and their contentment with the results of a restoration project in Western Montana. His findings indicated that process control had a substantial and favorable impact on satisfaction. However, it was entirely mediated by decision control, underscoring that effective engagement necessitates providing stakeholders with not only the chance to participate but also to actively shape decisions and their subsequent outcomes. Active citizen engagement is, therefore, indispensable for ensuring good governance and attaining the envisioned outcomes in the realm of governance.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This case study investigated how voters' perceptions of public corruption influenced voter turnout in Cook County. Voter turnout, in this context, refers to the count or proportion of registered voters who participate in local elections. This qualitative study centered on citizens' views of public corruption and its role in shaping their voting choices. The study's participants were eligible voters residing in Cook County.

Public corruption not only undermines effective leadership but also underscores the ethical and responsible shortcomings of elected officials (Johnston, 2012). The escalating incidence of public corruption highlights the need for new leadership strategies to enhance the performance of public sector leaders (Orazi et al., 2013). This study explored the connection between public corruption and diminished voter turnout in Cook County's Municipal Elections, offers insights into how public corruption affects citizens' motivation to vote. Increased citizen engagement in the electoral process can result in more significant influence on the political landscape.

## **Research Questions**

Drawing from nationwide public opinion data, Weinschenk and Helpap (2015) probed the impact of corruption and various factors on trust in state government. Their research disclosed that public corruption tends to erode the trust that citizens place in municipal government. In a quantitative study, two researchers validated their hypothesis by amalgamating data from 26 countries to scrutinize the nexus between corruption and voter turnout. Their findings underscored that citizens' perception of corruption adversely affects voter turnout, particularly in countries with medium levels of corruption (Dahlberg & Solevid, 2016). Given the observed connection between corruption and reduced citizen engagement in the electoral process, there is an urgent need to combat corruption while boosting voter turnout.

An international research endeavor exploring the influence of corruption on voter turnout within democratic nations has unveiled a clear trend: heightened corruption levels are linked to a decrease in the willingness of citizens to cast their votes (Stockemer et al., 2013). Consequently, the present study delves into the relationship between voter attitudes toward public corruption and the low voter turnout evident in Cook County. The study addressed one central research question: Does voter perception of public corruption diminish citizens' willingness to vote?

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was the rational choice theory. A pivotal tenet of the rational choice theory framework is its capacity to distinguish between

individual and collective decision-making (McGann, 2016). This theory places its core emphasis on scrutinizing individual decision-making within the context of economic principles. Consequently, rational voting behavior serves as a metric to gauge both individual and collective choices (McGann, 2016).

The rational choice theory is a valuable approach social researchers employed to understand the complexities of human behavior. Its origins can be traced back to economics, but it has since extended its reach into various research disciplines, encompassing Sociology and Political Science. Becker (1993) broadened the scope of the rational choice theory by incorporating a broader spectrum, including "attitudes, preferences, and calculations," thereby enhancing the analytical depth (p. 385). Contemporary research endeavors have harnessed this expanded theory, as expounded by Becker, to assess decision-making processes (Bruch & Feinberg, 2017) and respondents' perceptions (Natoli et al., 2017).

The rational choice theory is an approach social researchers employ to delve into the intricate complexities of human behavior. Initially confined to economics, this approach has gradually expanded its purview to encompass other research disciplines, including Sociology and Political Science. Becker (1993) notably extended the rational choice theory beyond its economic roots, incorporating a broader "class of attitudes, preferences, and calculations" to enable a more comprehensive analysis (p. 385).

By fusing insights from sociology and the study of decision-making strategies, researchers are better equipped to comprehend how environmental factors shape and influence human behavior (Bruch & Feinberg, 2017). Furthermore, the rational choice

theory has been employed to assess the perceptions of international accounting students and to evaluate the effectiveness of the accounting program in facilitating their employment prospects (Natoli et al., 2017).

Within the framework of the rational choice theory, the analysis commenced by deciphering individual behavior and subsequently delved into the intricate web of interactions that lead to specific outcomes. Given the complexity of human behavior, the decision-making process remained a challenging puzzle. Understanding voting behavior necessitates a foundational examination of the elements that molded and shaped individual choices. As Simon (1956) expounded, "To predict how economic man will behave, we need not only to know that he is rational but also how he perceives the world—what alternatives he perceives and what consequences he attaches to them" (p. 271).

In the context of Cook County, this study aimed to delve into the voter's perceptions of public corruption and its impact on their decision to participate in local elections. When citizens believe their elected officials are corrupt, their inclination to vote diminishes (Stockemer et al., 2013). The research employed the rational choice theory, emphasizing individual choices and preferences, as elaborated by Becker (1993). This theory provided insights into the mechanisms behind individual and collective decision-making, the influencing factors on these processes, and the enduring influence of corruption on voting behavior. A more detailed exploration of the rational choice theory is presented in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

The methodology employed in this study is a qualitative case study approach. Qualitative research design is pivotal in empirical research as it primarily seeks to elucidate how a central phenomenon operates (Creswell, 2013). It is particularly valuable in cases where a relevant conceptual framework is already established (Thomas, 2014). The case study approach, frequently utilized in qualitative research, allows for an “in-depth understanding of a single or small number of “cases,” set in their real-world contexts” (Bromley, 1986, p. 1). While case study research does not aim for generalizability, it requires the researcher to capture the phenomenon's essence from the collected data accurately. This approach was chosen to explore citizens' voting behaviors. In this study, I sought to examine their opinions and perspectives on public corruption and to determine the elements impacting their voting choices during the 2019 Municipal Election. By gaining insights into their opinions and perspectives, the research aimed to foster a profound comprehension of the factors influencing citizens' decisions to vote and their interactions with this particular phenomenon.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The following are definitions for key terms used in this study:

*Likely voters:* Any individual who has registered to vote and plans to vote in the next election.

*Nonregistered voters:* Any individual who is at least 18 years old and has met the eligibility requirements to register to vote.

*Population:* A clearly defined group of people or objects. Samples are drawn from the population and statistical results that are derived from random samples can be generalized to the whole population (Research Connections, 2016).

*Public corruption:* “The misuse of public office for private gain” (Treisman, 2000, p. 399). “The illegal use of public office for private (or personal) gain” (Bowler & Donovan, 2016, p. 273). “The private gains in the form of cash or gifts by a government official, in exchange for providing specific benefits to private individuals or groups” (Dincer & Johnston, 2014, p. 3).

*Public official:* Any individual who is elected or appointed to serve a constituency.

*Registered voters:* Any individual who is at least 18 years old and has registered to vote.

*Voter turnout:* The number or percentage of registered voters who cast a ballot in local elections.

### **Assumptions**

This study encompassed registered voters in Precinct 41. Two fundamental assumptions were made. Firstly, I assumed all participants had reached the legal voting age of 18 or older and registered to vote. Secondly, I assumed that participants responded truthfully, offering candid insights that authentically represented their historical and current voting behaviors, attitudes, and viewpoints. Given the diverse interpretations of public corruption, participants were asked to provide their definition of public corruption. This step was necessary to mitigate potential misconceptions or ambiguities.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This research's limitations focused on gathering citizens' opinions and perspectives regarding public corruption and its influence on voting decisions. While it explored how public corruption impacts voters' participation in the electoral process, this study did not delve into the underlying reasons political candidates may engage in public corruption or the various forms of corruption. Additionally, the potential influence of campaign contributions on the culture of corruption was outside the scope of this study.

The primary emphasis of this study was to review existing peer-reviewed research on public corruption and its effects on citizens' perceptions of corruption and voting behaviors and attitudes. It provided context and structure by discussing the rational choice theoretical framework employed by various researchers and writers to understand the perception of corruption and its impact on the electoral process.

This study was structured to assess the perspectives of eligible voting-age citizens, with a sample population consisting of 3 individuals who represented eligible voters. It is worth noting that this research did not aim to correlate citizens' views or findings with any specific party affiliation except for demographic analysis. Participants were approached with an invitation and willingly provided their consent. The interview forum was thoughtfully selected to ensure a suitable environment for open discussion and confidentiality.

Narrowing the scope of the study is essential. Two specific delimitations were related to this study. While the city of Chicago comprises 50 wards with a total of 2,069 precincts, this study focused on a particular precinct. The selection was based on the



voter turnout percentage compared to the number of registered voters during the 2019 municipal election. The study's population was registered voters in Cook County. The sample size was determined through a purposeful sampling approach, selecting participants from eligible voters.

I employed personal interviews as the data collection method for this study. In a qualitative approach, interview questions are usually "open-ended, broad, and centered on comprehending the central phenomenon under study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 163). In the context of this qualitative case study, the central phenomenon under exploration was the relationship between public corruption and voters' behaviors. In any research study, adhering to good interview practices is vital for ensuring the reliability of the data obtained from participants (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The interview questions effectively gathered pertinent data to address the research question.

The collected data were derived from registered voters from Ward 48, Precinct 41 in Chicago, Cook County, Illinois, and as such, do not represent all municipal districts or precincts. In research, the determination of an adequate sample size is as crucial as the selection of the sampling strategy (Creswell, 2013). Consequently, choosing the right sample size constitutes a critical aspect of the research process.

### **Limitations**

This research study had three notable limitations. Firstly, the generalizability of the findings to the entire population was restricted. It is essential to recognize that the study included only some registered voters in Cook County. Although the selected sample was designed to be sufficiently comprehensive, it is essential to acknowledge that

not all potential voters were accounted for in this research design. Furthermore, the study's reliance on a case study approach, explicitly focusing on Precinct 41, considerably constrained the generalizability of the results. It is well-recognized that case studies make it challenging to extrapolate the findings from the studied group to other groups.

Another limitation of this qualitative study pertains to the reliability and validity of the research instrument. In qualitative research, it is of paramount importance to ensure the reliability and validity of the data collection tool. While the instrument was designed to capture the intended paradigm effectively, there may still be instances where the desired results were not achieved. Additionally, given the current polarization along political affiliations in our electoral process, there is a possibility that factors beyond corruption influence the participants' perceptions, potentially introducing issues related to reliability and validity.

Lastly, a noteworthy limitation of this qualitative study is the potential for the researcher's personal biases to influence the research findings. Managing and mitigating such biases is crucial in qualitative research. As emphasized by Creswell (2009), there exists a tangible risk that the researcher's personal biases can inadvertently color the study's outcomes. To guard against these biases, it is incumbent upon the researcher to be aware of and comprehend their own biases and how these predispositions might affect their approach to the study (Knight-Lynn, 2010f). As a researcher and a resident of Cook County, I may have had preconceived suppositions, beliefs, and opinions about the

phenomenon under investigation. However, I have practiced bracketing and epoche during the study to ensure the integrity of the research.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research study provides valuable insights into the influence of corruption on citizens' voting behavior and their trust in government. First, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding public corruption and its connection to low voter turnout. This research initiative may represent the first scholarly endeavor to explore the relationship between public corruption and decreased voter participation in Cook County. Indeed, the pervasive presence of corruption among elected officials poses a substantial threat to the fundamental underpinnings of democracy and exerts far-reaching effects on individuals and society, spanning economic, social, and political dimensions. Moreover, the competing interests in public policy significantly shape the implementation of policies in our democratic governance.

In terms of ethics and promoting social change, this research offers a dual contribution. Firstly, citizens, by actively participating in civic and political activities and advocating for reform (Yob et al., 2014), can effectively pressure for changes that foster ethical behavior and transformative leadership. Secondly, the study's findings offer an opportunity for elected officials to evaluate the influence of public corruption on voters' choices in the electoral process, providing a basis for developing strategic initiatives to enhance voter turnout. Lastly, the results can serve as a reference point for legislators and community organizations to champion political reforms to reduce public corruption within county government.

## Summary

In this chapter, we have introduced and elucidated the present study, which explores the relationship between public corruption and diminished voter turnout in Cook County. Public corruption exerts an adverse influence on public governance and acts as a deterrent to voter engagement in the electoral process. In a genuine democracy, active voter participation is indispensable for effective governance. Previous research has consistently demonstrated that regions with high occurrences of public corruption tend to experience a detrimental impact on voter turnout.

Over the last five years, substantial measures have been taken to enhance voter turnout within Cook County; however, many precincts continue to experience low voter participation. Illinois has witnessed numerous cases of indicted and incarcerated public officials involved in public corruption. The tangible consequence of these circumstances becomes evident when voters opt to abstain from voting rather than casting their ballots. Extensive research has consistently unveiled that when voters perceive their public officials as corrupt, trust erodes, resulting in their disengagement from the electoral voting process.

The rising instances of public corruption in Cook County underscore the need for a fresh leadership paradigm aimed at enhancing the overall performance and conduct of public sector leaders. Elected officials must grasp the ramifications of public corruption on voters' choices to participate in the political process. Citizen engagement is vital in reforming government. As Van Ryzin (2007) indicated, government performance metrics can be driven by citizen input. The objective of this study was to delve into and gain an

understanding of how voters perceive public corruption and the subsequent impact on their voting interest and decision-making

. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of pertinent research literature concerning how voters' perceptions of public corruption shape their voting decisions, behavior, and attitudes.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Citizens of the United States display a lower level of engagement in the democratic process, particularly in voting, compared to many other democracies worldwide (Teixeira, 1992). Cook County is no exception to this phenomenon. This literature analysis investigated the factors contributing to this lack of participation, examining various perspectives and explanations. The empirical study undertaken aimed to explore the underlying causes of low voter turnout among eligible voters in Cook County, shedding light on the apathy toward voting. Notably, this research did not reveal any prior studies that specifically investigated the relationship between citizens' perceptions of corruption and its impact on voter turnout in Illinois. This chapter contains an exhaustive review of the literature on this phenomenon in other countries, regions, and democracies. Through this analysis, I strived to explore and comprehend how public corruption affects the electoral process as perceived by Cook County voters.

A recent comparative study encompassing 26 countries, primarily within Europe, each exhibiting various levels of corruption, as conducted by Dahlberg and Solevid (2016), has definitively established that citizens' perceptions of public corruption adversely affect voter turnout. These findings gained added significance when considering the prevalent issue of public corruption in Illinois. The lack of citizen engagement in the electoral process, especially concerning voting, has become an increasingly pressing concern in Cook County. Meanwhile, voters in Illinois have seen numerous high-profile cases of public corruption within municipal and state government realms. It is noteworthy that the literature review did not find any prior research on the connection between public

corruption and its influence on voting behaviors and attitudes in Cook County.

Consequently, this study investigates whether public corruption does impact voters' attitudes and behaviors in Cook County.

The literature review explored the issue of public corruption within Cook County and its repercussions on voters' engagement in the electoral voting process. In choosing the appropriate theoretical framework for this study, I extensively examined a wide array of sources, including literature articles, books detailing the history of public corruption in Illinois and other states, examinations of the impact of public corruption on the democratic process, voters' perspectives on corruption and its influence on their willingness to vote. Furthermore, the review encompassed studies of corruption in various other nations, exploring how voters perceive the corruption of public officials and their responses to it. I also provided a succinct overview of both practical and ineffective anticorruption policies. Finally, I addressed the challenges democracy faces when voters disengage from the electoral process within Cook County.

This chapter also contains a succinct exploration of the ramifications of public corruption on diminished voter turnout. Subsequently, I elucidate the research strategies employed for the literature review. Following this, I expound upon the theoretical framework, delving into the historical foundations of the rational choice theory, which served as the analytical lens for examining the interplay between corruption perception and low voter turnout. In the ensuing sections, I offer a comprehensive overview of the fundamental concepts associated with corruption, voter turnout, and democracy,

providing clear definitions and probing the intricate relationship between corruption and voter turnout.

Chapter 2 also encompasses various sections that delve into the historical context of voting in the United States and its pivotal role in shaping democracy, as well as its interplay with corruption and good governance. It scrutinizes the far-reaching impact of corruption on the democratic process. In the concluding sections, I explore the myriad factors that impede or enhance voter turnout, encompassing aspects like mail-in ballots, early voting, the pivotal role of trust, the influence of corruption, and the significance of voting locations. An overview of the repercussions of corruption on the act of voting is also included. I emphasize the profound significance of voting as a fundamental democratic tenet that bolsters the legitimacy of effective governance, delineates the multifaceted effects of corruption on the voting process, and briefly proffer potential factors that may ameliorate or eradicate corruption while boosting voter turnout. The chapter culminates with a concise summary of the literature review.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To identify relevant peer-review articles, I used various databases, including ProQuest, EBSCO, SAGE, and Google Scholar, as well as various books, newspaper articles, and other websites. The databases were key to narrowing the resources from an overly broad network of information to focus on relevant literature on public corruption, voters' perception, democracy and governance, and voter turnout. The terms of series of words used to obtain related literature included *public corruption*, *voters' perception of corruption*, *democratic governance*, *voter turnout*, *low voter turnout*, *democracy*, *rational*



*choice theory, anticorruption efforts, the effect of corruption, voting behavior, and voting attitude.* To obtain a comprehensive search of scholarly articles in the databases, single and multiple words were used separately and, at times, combined. The database search provided books, peer-reviewed journals, data on election results, history of voting behavior and attitude in democracies, analysis of corruption and its impact on the democratic processes in various countries, and the Illinois history of state government.

I found Google Scholar particularly helpful for finding current peer-reviewed articles and cross-referencing related articles with relative ease. Google Scholar provided me with most of the articles contained in this literature review.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **Rational Choice Theory**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the influence of public corruption on the voting behavior of eligible citizens residing in Ward 48, Precinct 41 in Cook County. The study sought to establish whether these citizens' perceptions of corruption had a discernible impact on their voting choices during the 2019 municipal election, with the theoretical underpinning derived from the rational choice theory. The rational choice theory, also called the choice theory, hinges on the foundational premise that individuals predominantly make decisions that closely align with their "personal preferences" (Amadae, 2017, par. 1). I opted for the rational choice theory as the theoretical framework to enhance our comprehension of the potential correlation between voters' perceptions of public corruption and their interactions with their voting experiences.

In this study, interviews with eligible voters in Precinct 41 served as the primary method for understanding this phenomenon. Over the past several years, multiple studies have harnessed the rational choice theory to investigate attitudes, choices, behaviors, and decision-making. For instance, Bërdufi (2017) and Bërdufi & Ismaili (2016) employed the rational choice theory to scrutinize whether a relationship existed between absentee voting during the 2000–2013 Albanian elections and key economic indicators. Cook (2015) took a similar approach, combining the rational choice theory with the social learning theory to explore the potential correlation between the perceived deterrence effect and the use of polygraphs among participants who had or had not undergone a polygraph examination. Lee et al. (2016) delved into the choices made by voters in the 2014 mayoral election in Taipei, Taiwan, through the lens of rationality. McGann (2016) argued that the rational choice theory plays a pivotal role in comprehending voting choices and decisions within democratic contexts.

### **Origin and Relevance of the Rational Choice Theory**

Voter participation in elections has undergone thorough investigation using various methods and theoretical frameworks. Nonetheless, the rational choice theory is the most extensively employed framework to explore numerous phenomena. The origins of this theory can be traced back to the 1950s when Anthony Downs first developed it to assess voter behavior from an economic perspective. Downs postulated that in situations where voting entails costs, citizens would weigh the potential benefits of voting against the perceived influence their votes could have on the outcome (Farber, 2009). However, Downs' conceptualization of the rational choice theory remained limited, and he later

proposed a new approach. This revised version was built on the idea that individuals would be motivated to vote if some personal incentives or benefits outweighed the value, they would gain from not voting (Farber, 2009).

The evolution of the rational choice theory continued with Downs' theoretical developments. Subsequently, two prominent theorists, Riker and Ordeshook (1968), introduced what they believed to be a more suitable model for explaining individuals' decisions to cast their ballots in political elections. According to Riker and Ordeshook, individuals would choose to vote if the expected benefits of voting exceeded the value they would derive from abstaining.

Subsequent research delved further into the cost-benefit approach. For instance, during the 1990s, Teixeira (1987) extended the concept of the cost-benefit theory and characterized it as a transaction. He posited that the high cost associated with voting compared to the relatively low benefits that voters receive contributed significantly to the low voter turnout in the United States. Teixeira (1987) argued that voting incurred tangible costs on the part of voters, encompassing aspects like registration and travel, which collectively rendered voting a non-zero-cost activity (p. 5).

In 1993, Becker (1993), another researcher expanded the rational choice theory, moving it beyond the boundaries of economics to encompass a "class of attitudes, preferences, and calculations" (p. 385). It is this extended theoretical framework, namely, rational choice theory, that underpins and supports the approach taken in this study. Through the lens of this framework, I have examined the decision-making and voting behavior of eligible voters.

Writer (2015) applied the rational choice theory in a study involving comparative analysis. The study aimed to examine the economic concerns of voters, their attitudes towards congressional approval or disapproval, and their overall attitude during the 2012 election. A quantitative approach was employed, using data from the American National Electoral Studies (ANES). The study adopted a descriptive, comparative design to explore whether Americans' voting behavior in 2012 was influenced by their concern about the United States economy (Writer, 2015). The study's findings revealed that economic concerns were indeed present and varied across different demographics, particularly regarding age, political party affiliation, and educational background. However, gender did not emerge as a significant factor influencing these concerns (Writer, 2015).

Green and Shapiro (1994) conducted a critical assessment of rational-choice methods and expressed reservations about the rational-choice theory. They contended that while rational citizens may indeed have a significant interest in the election's outcome, they may simultaneously reject the idea that their individual vote holds the power to influence the collective outcome. This perspective arises from the belief that the impact of a single vote on an election result is relatively minimal.

Considering the electoral process and voting outcomes in Cook County, public corruption is one potential influence among various factors. While it may contribute to the low voter turnout, there could be other social factors at play that need to be considered to understand the dynamics of voter participation in the county comprehensively.

The rational choice theory serves as an invaluable approach to understanding the decision-making processes that underlie voters' behaviors when they participate in the electoral process. Over time, it has been extensively used in analyzing voting decisions and choices. In the 1950s, researchers predominantly employed the rational choice theory within quantitative studies (Teixeira, 1987). However, since the 1980s, the rational choice theory has significantly expanded its scope and applicability. It has evolved into a versatile theoretical model encompassing various research disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and political science (Loughran et al., 2016). Furthermore, the rational choice theory has proven valuable in criminology due to its efficacy in analyzing criminal behavior (Gül, 2009; Walter, 2015).

Researchers who have traditionally delved into the rational choice theory often assessed voting participation by considering the provisional cost theory, which considers the influence of social networks (Rolfe, 2012). In Rolfe's (2012) research, this theory was employed to examine the social construct of individual voting decisions. Although Rolfe's study primarily followed a quantitative approach, its insights are instructive for this study since it examined voters' behaviors and attitudes.

The rational choice theory applies to the current case study as it provides the framework through which the study explores citizens' perceptions of corruption and their voting attitudes in Cook County Municipal Elections. Within this theoretical framework, I investigated whether the perception of corruption alters the perceived cost-benefit calculus of voting. Utilizing the rational choice theory, I aimed to uncover the primary

factors contributing to low voter turnout and understand the considerations made by citizens when casting their votes.

The rational choice theory posits that voters engage in thoughtful and rational decision-making when assessing their benefits and requirements (Downs, 1957). Therefore, the perception of corruption, which can significantly influence voters, should be a concern during a municipal election—utilizing a qualitative approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of their voting choices. Existing empirical research, mainly in quantitative investigations, has not adequately addressed the gaps in the exploration of voter mobilization (Morrow, 2015). Quantitative studies alone cannot elucidate the reasons behind the low participation of Cook County voters in the electoral process.

### **Conceptualizing Democracy**

Researchers have offered various perspectives on the concept of democracy, but the democracy can vary from one country to another. The two most prevalent types are direct and representative democracy. In a direct democracy, citizens directly participate in the formulation of laws and decision-making processes. Conversely, in a representative democracy, citizens vote to elect leaders entrusted with legislating and shaping policies. This study primarily centers on representative democracy.

*Democracy*, as defined by Dahl (2018), is a system of government by the people. The renowned civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois also articulated that democracy encompasses providing “the broadest measure of justice to all human beings” (Krupitsky, 2015, p. 3). In essence, democracy ensures that every person has the right to choose their

federal, state, and local governments. Nevertheless, this democratization process can only be realized through open, equitable, and unrestricted elections.

One of the fundamental tenets of democracy is the citizens' ability to choose their leaders. Voting in an election is, therefore, integral to the fundamental principle of representative democracy. For instance, Dr. Martin Luther King emphasized the significance of voting as the cornerstone of political action. King's call to action encourages active participation in elections. As Gobewole (2015) noted, elections facilitate a systematic change in public leadership, introduce new governance approaches, and ensure accountability among elected officials. Solijonov (2016) linked high voter turnout to the vitality of democracy, while low voter turnout indicated voter apathy and a lack of trust in the political framework. Additionally, Lee (2017) indicated the choices made by voters in a democratic society have profound consequences for the functioning of that society and the rationality of the choices is crucial in ensuring that the democratic system operates effectively.

Moreover, voter turnout is a substantial gauge for assessing citizens' involvement in the governance of their country (Solijonov, 2016). Since citizen participation is a cornerstone of a vibrant and vigorous government, every citizen must have the right to vote. In this regard, Krupitsky (2015) expressed the view that "Every American citizen must possess an equal voting right. No justification can excuse the denial of this right" (par. 1). However, Teixeira evaluated existing registration reform legislation and elucidated the reasons for the imperative need to integrate registration reform with

political reform to effectively counter the trend of nonvoting and achieve significantly increased voter turnout.

In a well-functioning democracy, voters make informed decisions based on their values, beliefs, and an understanding of the issues. Voting is a way for individuals to have a say in their country's direction and hold their elected leaders accountable. It is a powerful tool for civic engagement and a key feature of self-governing societies. When individuals cast their votes, they consent to the government that emerges from the electoral process. It is the mechanism through which citizens participate in selecting their legislatures, leaders and representatives, as well as in shaping public policies and decisions.

In a democracy, the legitimacy of government authority derives from the people's consent, typically expressed through free and fair elections. This principle is a cornerstone of every vibrant democratic governance, emphasizing that political power should ultimately rest with the citizens who are governed. When voters are rational and informed, the resulting policies and leaders are more likely to reflect the people's will and serve the public interest. However, it is essential to recognize that various factors, such as access to accurate and unbiased information, education, media coverage, and the political environment, can influence voter rationality. Ensuring voters have access to reliable and truthful information and promoting civic education are essential components of a healthy and vibrant democratic society. Moreover, factors like gerrymandering, voter suppression, and the influence of money in politics can also impact the functioning of a



democratic system. Addressing these issues is vital for maintaining the integrity of the democratic processes.

### **Political Corruption and Governance**

Corruption is undoubtedly a challenging concept to quantify because it varies from one country to another, influenced by different government systems and political structures. Despite efforts to curb corruption after the Cold War, corruption remains a global issue today (Heywood & Rose, 2014). Corruption, therefore, is a global phenomenon that can be interpreted differently, sometimes being accepted as the norm in certain regions or persisting systematically.

According to Triesman (2000), corruption involves the improper use of public office for personal gain. Transparency International (2018a) offered a definition of corruption as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (par. 1). Another commonly cited definition characterizes corruption as the "abuse (or misuse) of public power for private (personal) benefit" (Doh et al., 2003, p. 115).

Corruption is a destabilizing force in any country, eroding the foundations of good governance and posing a threat to democracy. As Rodriguez (2018) pointed out, corruption can be found across various types of governmental structures worldwide and leads to dysfunctionality. This sentiment is echoed by influential watchdog groups, such as Transparency International, which recognized the pervasive nature and detrimental effects of political corruption. They asserted that "corruption corrodes the fabric of society [and] it undermines people's trust in political and economic systems, institutions,

and leaders" (Transparency International, 2018b, par. 4). Corruption, if allowed to flourish, can undermine legitimate governance and hinder the principles of democracy.

In the context of Cook County, Illinois, public corruption is alarmingly prevalent. To gauge the extent of corruption within Cook County, I analyzed federal convictions involving public officials over four decades, from 1976 to 2016. Among the 11,674 federal convictions documented across the ten judicial districts (as depicted in Table 5), a notable 1,706 cases occurred in the Northern District of Illinois, (Simpson, et al., 2016) accounting for nearly 15% of the total. This substantial figure establishes the Northern District of Illinois as the leading federal judicial district in the United States regarding public corruption convictions during the 1976-2016. To underscore the severity of the issue, the data in Table 5 further emphasizes that the Northern District of Illinois stands out as the most corrupt among the ten federal judicial districts. It is crucial to note that this district encompasses the Chicago metropolitan area and its surrounding regions.

**Table 5**

*Federal Public Corruption Convictions in the US by the Top Ten Judicial Districts 1976-2016*

Rank	Judicial district (city/state)	1976–	1990–	2000–	2010–	Totals
		1989	1999	2009	2016	
1	Illinois-Northern (Chicago, IL)	508	610	367	221	1,706
2	California-Central (Los Angeles, CA)	268	595	383	265	1,511
3	New York-Southern (Manhattan, NY)	550	398	242	122	1,312
4	District of Columbia	239	393	342	175	1,149
5	Florida-Southern (Miami, FL)	108	437	404	190	1,139
6	New Jersey (Newark, NJ)	202	264	410	216	1,092
7	Ohio-Northern (Cleveland, OH)	173	314	333	159	979
8	Pennsylvania-Eastern (Philadelphia, PA)	291	246	252	194	983
9	Virginia-Eastern (Richmond, VA)	189	213	303	264	969
10	New York-Eastern (Brooklyn, NY)	308	237	204	85	834
Total		2,836	3,707	3,240	1,891	11,674

*Note.* Data are based on the University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Political Science. <http://pols.uic.edu/chicago-politics/> (2018) Statistics

The perception of corruption among voters holds a vital position with voter engagement. It serves as an indicator of the willingness or reluctance of eligible citizens to partake in the democratic practice of voting, particularly when they perceive their elected officials as corrupt. Notably, "Corruption is nonpartisan" (Simpson et al., 2018, p. 8). Illinois has exceptionally high levels of public corruption, which transcend party lines, affecting both Democratic and Republican entities. This is evidenced by several prominent leaders facing legal repercussions. Consequently, it becomes imperative to grasp the intricate relationship between public corruption and decreased voter turnout, as this issue could pose a substantial hurdle to comprehensive electoral involvement and reforms. Despite the potential linkage between these two phenomena, it is noteworthy that no prior empirical studies have ventured into examining whether citizens' perception of corruption can be predictive of low voter turnout in Cook County.

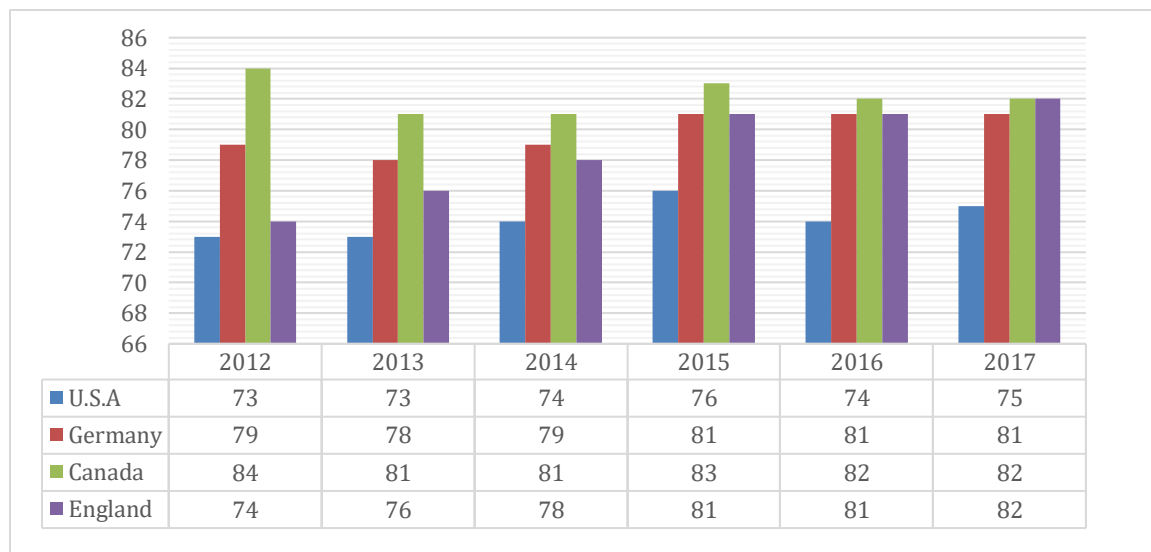
Elected public officials wield the power to shape the public policy agenda and hold significant sway in the adoption and enactment of these policies into law. Consequently, comprehending the ramifications of corruption on the electoral process and effective governance is of utmost importance to curb the corrupt behaviors of public officials. Although no empirical studies have explored the potential link between public corruption and the waning interest of voters in Illinois, other democracies across the world have explored this phenomenon. For instance, research conducted in various countries has illuminated that when public officials partake in corrupt activities, it leads to an erosion of citizens' trust in the political system (Caillier, 2010; Pillay, 2017; Stockemer et al., 2013).

### **Adverse Effects of Corruption**

The ramifications of corruption are far-reaching and have been documented in various studies (Hope, 2016; Obala & Mattingly, 2014; Simelane, 2012). Transparency International's (2018c) assessment revealed that many nations committed to tackling corruption still need to implement substantial changes to mitigate this issue.

Transparency International employs a scale ranging from zero to 100, where zero signifies very high levels of corruption, and 100 represents minimal to no perceived public corruption (Transparency International, 2017a). In their Corruption Perceptions Index for 2017, two-thirds, or 120 out of 180 countries worldwide, received an index score below 50, while only 60 countries achieved scores above 50. The top 5 countries with the lowest levels of perceived corruption were New Zealand, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Switzerland. In contrast, the top 5 countries with the highest perceived corruption in 2017 were Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen (Transparency International, 2017a).

Notably, as depicted in Figure 1, the United States exhibits the highest perception of corruption index score among the four developed countries: the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany. In 2017, the United States achieved a perception of corruption index score of 75, ranking 16th among the other 52 countries with an index above 50, signifying a lower perception of corruption (Transparency International, 2017a). Over the five years from 2012 to 2017, the Corruption Perception Index score for the United States has displayed a consistent pattern, with only minor fluctuations of 1-3 percentage points, as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1***Top Five Developed Countries Corruption Levels 2012-2017*

*Note.* Transparency International Statistics

Corruption presents a formidable challenge to good governance, active citizenship, and ethical conduct (Ajzenman, 2018). In a quantitative study, Ajzenman (2018) delved into the detrimental impacts of corruption within municipal governments in Mexico. His research centered on how public corruption at the local government level influences academic dishonesty in school tests. To investigate this phenomenon, Ajzenman employed individual survey data concerning corruption in municipal government and incidents of cheating in school assessments. The study revealed a significant increase in cheating in cognitive assessments among secondary school students following the exposure of corruption by local elected officials. Among other findings, Ajzenman's research indicated that public corruption fosters an environment of

dishonesty, erodes trustworthiness, and leads many students to perceive cheating as a necessary means to success.

**Table 6**

*Perception of Corruption By Country 2013-2017*

Rank	Country	2017 Score	2016 Score	2015 Score	2014 Score	2013 Score
1	New Zealand	89	90	91	91	91
2	Denmark	88	90	91	92	91
3	Finland	85	89	90	89	89
4	Norway	85	85	88	86	86
5	Switzerland	85	86	86	86	85
6	Singapore	84	84	85	84	86
7	Sweden	84	88	89	87	89
8	Canada	82	82	83	81	81
9	Luxembourg	82	81	85	82	80
10	Netherlands	82	83	84	83	83
11	United Kingdom	82	81	81	78	76
12	Germany	81	81	81	79	78
13	Australia	77	79	79	80	81
14	Hong Kong	77	77	75	74	75
15	Iceland	77	78	79	79	78
16	Austria	75	75	76	72	69
17	Belgium	75	77	77	76	75
18	United States	75	74	76	74	73
19	Ireland	73	74	76	74	72
20	Japan	73	72	75	76	74

*Note.* Transparency Internationals statistics.

Corruption exerts significant and detrimental effects on a country's economic and social progress and development (Dimant & Tosato, 2018). Achieving and maintaining success in anti-corruption efforts is challenging due to the pervasive influence of corruption on governance, institutions, nations, communities, and the lives of individuals (Rotberg, 2018). The global cost of corruption is around \$1 trillion annually (Rotberg, 2018). Corruption can manifest in various forms, involve a range of actors, and have profound implications for policy outcomes. It affects federal leaders, state officials, municipal officials, jurists, and other elected and appointed officials, including presidents, prime ministers, senators, governors, mayors, council members, judges, and magistrates.

Public corruption has detrimental consequences for both the government and the well-being of its citizens. Empirical research has explored the link between corruption and trust, substantiating the negative impact of corruption (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Bauhr & Grimes 2014; Catterberg & Moreno; 2006; Chang & Chu; 2006; Grönlund & Setälä, 2012; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Manzetti & Wilson, 2007; Moreno, 2002; Morris & Klesner, 2010; Seligson, 2002; Villoria et al., 2013; Zhang & Kim, 2018).

The impact of public corruption is extensive and well-documented. Corruption negatively affects significant societal institutions such as the judiciary and governing agencies (Doh et al., 2003). Furthermore, corruption tends to reduce public spending, which affects economic activity and results in decreased tax revenues (Barkemeyer et al., 2015). It also hampers economic growth, decreases investment, and undermines public



trust in government officials (Boudreaux et al., 2018). Corruption is prevalent in many developing countries and is considered the primary obstacle to economic growth and development (Avis et al., 2016).

### **An Analysis of Voter Turnout Globally**

Numerous studies have investigated voter turnout worldwide. In a representative democracy, the populace is responsible for electing representatives who governed in the interest of all citizens. The functioning of representative democracy is contingent on the participation of eligible voters in the electoral process. Therefore, a high voter turnout is indispensable for maintaining a stable democracy. Voter participation in the electoral process holds paramount importance for several reasons. First and foremost, the fundamental principles of representative democracy necessitate active participation in the election of leaders. Second, a low voter turnout can potentially undermine the legitimacy of election results. As illustrated in Table 7, certain democracies exhibit higher voter turnout rates than the United States.

Various factors can influence voter turnout, and these factors can differ from one country to another. Research has consistently shown that a significant contributor to low voter turnout is the lack of trust in elected officials. However, it is essential to note that the definition and measurement of political trust can vary (Citrin & Muste, 1999; Cook & Gronke, 2005). A researcher has defined political trust as " the degree to which people perceive that the government is producing outcomes consistent with their expectations" (Hetherington, 2005, p. 9). Zhang and Kim (2018) have characterized corruption as a

"sociopolitical disease" that citizens may become more accepting of and tolerant towards it over time (p. 687).

**Table 7**

*Voter Turnout in General Elections by Democratic Countries*

Rank	Country	Percent voted	Percent registered voters	Year
1	Belgium	87.21	89.37	2014
2	Sweden	82.61	85.81	2014
3	Denmark	80.34	85.89	2015
4	Australia	78.96	90.98	2016
5	South Korea	77.92	77.23	2017
6	Netherlands	77.31	81.93	2017
7	Israel	76.10	72.34	2015
8	New Zealand	75.65	79.01	2017
9	Finland	73.14	66.85	2015
10	Hungary	71.65	69.68	2018
11	Norway	70.59	78.22	2017
12	Germany	69.11	76.15	2017
13	Austria	68.79	80.00	2017
14	France	67.93	74.56	2017
15	Mexico	65.97	63.08	2012
16	Italy	65.28	73.05	2018
17	Czech Republic	63.44	66.57	2018
18	United Kingdom	63.25	69.31	2017
19	Greece	62.14	56.16	2015
20	Canada	62.12	68.28	2015
21	Portugal	61.75	55.84	2015
22	Spain	61.17	66.48	2016
23	Slovakia	59.43	59.82	2016
24	Ireland	58.04	65.09	2016
25	Estonia	56.82	64.23	2015
26	United States	55.70	86.80	2016

*Note.* Transparency International statistics

In a quantitative investigation, Babos (2014) delved into the realm of political trust in Europe, primarily focusing on the influence of corruption, the "electoral winner effect," and the historical context of post-communism. To gauge corruption, he utilized the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (TI CPI). He applied a multilevel model to analyze data obtained from Round 5 of the 2010 European Social Survey (ESS), involving data from 26 different countries (Babos, 2014). The findings of his research indicated a significant negative relationship between the perception of corruption and political trust (Babos, 2014). In simpler terms, a higher level of corruption was associated with lower political trust among citizens.

In contrast to the lowered trust in political institutions resulting from voters' perceived corruption in European countries, there were varying responses from voters. A quantitative study conducted by Babos (2014) explored these responses. The research tested a hypothesis using data from the 2011 Spanish municipal elections, which examined allegations of corruption during the Spanish housing boom, during which a significant portion of the electorate benefited financially. According to Babos (2014), voters tended to overlook corruption when they benefited financially. Similarly, (Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2016) in their 2011 study of the Spanish local elections held during the blooming housing market, found voters were more likely to penalize perceived corrupt behaviors when they did not receive any gains or benefits in return. This dual response illustrates the complexity of voter reactions to corruption within the context of elections.

In a separate study conducted in Spain, researchers conducted a survey experiment during a period marked by corruption scandals. They aimed to determine whether the electorate's acceptance of corruption was influenced by their political partisanship (Anduiza et al., 2013). The study revealed that corruption perception varied based on the respondents' political party affiliations. Moreover, in a quantitative research study conducted on American states, Weinschenk and Helpap (2015) discovered that, in general, public corruption has a detrimental impact on citizens' trust in municipal government.

In a different study focusing on voters' participation in China, three researchers utilized nationally representative data at the village level to investigate the factors that discouraged voting behavior (Zhang et al., 2015). Their research also explored the influence of election quality. The study outcomes indicated that vote buying, as well as factors like competitiveness and manipulation, played significant roles in affecting voter turnout in villages.

In line with Zhang's (2018) research findings wealthier states tend to exhibit a significantly higher level of trust in government than their less affluent counterparts. This correlation between citizens' economic well-being and trust in government aligns with previous empirical studies, which consistently show that individuals often link their economic prosperity to governmental performance (Bok, 1997; Dalton, 1988; Wroe, 2014).

Furthermore, Wroe conducted a quantitative study that used data from the European Social Survey (ESS) in 2004 and 2010, encompassing 18 European nations, to

investigate the relationship between political trust and job insecurity. His research revealed that citizens generally have low levels of trust in their government. Additionally, Wroe's study concluded that political distrust in government is a phenomenon observed across various forms of democracies, including both established and emerging democracies, as well as non-democratic systems worldwide.

Other research has consistently indicated that political distrust in government is a global phenomenon that transcends gender, race, religious affiliations, and various socioeconomic groups (BBC, 2005; Edelman et al., 2012; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001; Norris, 1999; Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Zelikow & King, 1997). Additionally, political factors, such as one's ideological orientation, whether conservative or liberal, also play a significant role in influencing public trust in government (Zhang & Kim, 2018).

Voter turnout in democratic societies can differ significantly from one country to another. Some democracies have implemented mandatory voter registration as a means to promote participation in the electoral process. Consequently, when a democratic society proactively engages in initiatives to mobilize voters at both local and national levels, the advantages and benefits of representative democracy are exemplified.

Citizen participation is not only a civic obligation but also an opportunity to actively engage in the political process, ensuring that the perspective of every eligible voter is taken into account. In essence, while voters may not all receive the same benefits in the distribution of goods and services, their participation significantly shapes how public policies are determined by elected officials. Voter involvement serves as the

platform for citizens to contribute their voices to matters that affect their daily lives (Dalton, 2008). Therefore, a low voter turnout can have a profound impact on the fundamental structure of democracy.

Numerous research studies have explored how voters perceive and are influenced by public corruption in the context of the political process. For instance, in a study conducted by Weschle (2016) in India, voter perceptions were examined through a survey. Participants were divided into two groups: one was informed that a politician had accepted money for personal gain, while the other group was informed that the politician had accepted money to buy votes. The researcher's findings indicated that voters evaluated corrupt public officials differently depending on the purpose for which the money was used (Weschle, 2016).

Over the past few decades, researchers have conducted global studies on voter turnout and explored various strategies to boost electoral participation. They have delved into the impact of initiatives like vote-by-mail on voter turnout, analyzing data from a substantial sample of California counties during two general elections (Kousser & Mullin, 2007). Their findings revealed that voting by mail did not significantly enhance voter participation in general elections but did lead to increased turnout in special municipal elections. Similarly, a study conducted in Washington that investigated voter engagement in all-mail elections found only a marginal increase in participation (Huber & Hill, 2013). Furthermore, this slight increase was more evident among infrequent voters than frequent ones.

In another study that examined the impact of voting by mail on voter participation, researchers reported varying results, with some indicating a substantial increase of up to 10 percent. In contrast, other studies showed a more modest uptick (Gronke et al., 2007). Nevertheless, Solijonov (2016) suggested that a decline in voter turnout may indicate that some citizens do not view elections as their primary means of engaging in the democratic process.

Advocates have called for increased government accountability to combat corruption. A recent study on municipal elections in Mexico, conducted by a group of scholars, concluded that corruption could negatively affect both the challenger and the incumbent, as the perception of corruption might discourage voters from participating (Chong et al., 2015).

In another study focusing on the behavioral effects of political corruption and its impact on citizen mobilization, researchers utilized a nationally representative Americas Barometer survey in Colombia to delve into these phenomena. Their analysis aimed to isolate the causal relationship between political corruption and electoral participation. The findings of this study indicated that when voters have reliable information about the corrupt conduct of politicians running for office, they are less likely to participate in the electoral process (Carreras & Vera, 2018). Interestingly, the results also revealed that corruption has a negative influence on voters, even when corrupt politicians can allocate public resources to their constituencies (Carreras & Vera, 2018). Additionally, the results challenge the notion that voters are willing to overlook a lack of integrity in favor of policy outcomes that benefit them. A similar analysis concluded that corrupt politicians

are not always held accountable at the polls, as some voters may be inclined to overlook corrupt behavior in favor of other, more favorable aspects they perceive in the candidate (Rundquist et al., 1977).

### **Anticorruption Initiatives**

On a global scale, implementing anticorruption policies has yielded many successes and challenges. While there is a significant body of literature focused on identifying and quantifying public corruption, there is a noteworthy gap in expert attention dedicated to evaluating the efficacy of anticorruption measures (Brown & Heinrich, 2017). For instance, Ikubaje (2010) asserted, the African nations consistently possess commendable ideas to enhance democracy, foster transparent governance, and promote sustainable development. However, he argued, the enduring challenge has been the political dedication to translate these exemplary concepts of good governance and policies into feasible and lasting development initiatives. Ikubaje also posited the ultimate remedy for addressing inadequate governance and ineffective anti-corruption measures in Africa hinges on a shared determination from both the political leadership and the citizenry.

Over the past two decades, the National Integrity System (NIS) approach has been pivotal in shaping the discourse around anticorruption governance assessment. This period has witnessed extensive examinations of both the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of anticorruption policies across numerous countries and diverse contexts (Adetula & Amupitan, 2018; Brown, 2018; Krambia-Kapardis, 2019; Kichwen, 2017; Ogungbamila, 2014; Persson et al., 2013; Taylor, 2018). For instance, Brown's research concentrated on



the establishment of an independent agency aimed at bolstering Jamaica's anticorruption policies. Meanwhile, Kichwen's (2017) study recommended reinforcing and granting more prosecutorial powers to the commissions responsible for combating corruption in Kenya.

Despite the collective efforts of more than 60 world leaders to combat public corruption, the progress in this endeavor has been sluggish (Transparency International, 2018d). In a recent G20 nations meeting in Argentina, significant emphasis was placed on bolstering anticorruption policies and their effective execution to ensure economic and financial stability (Transparency International, 2018d). The path to fighting corruption lies in the formulation of precise anticorruption action plans, their meticulous implementation, and the establishment of stringent accountability measures for those who transgress them.

In the United States, various initiatives have been introduced to fortify its anticorruption policies. For instance, some courts have imposed longer sentences for public officials found guilty of corrupt practices as a means of deterrence. Throughout the literature review, I observed research on the impact of public corruption on voter participation in the United States. Most prior research concerning the origins of corruption has been based on a public database of convictions of public officials (Cordis & Milyo, 2016). Consequently, obtaining direct and reliable measurements of corruption has proven to be an insurmountable challenge. There is a noticeable absence of scholarly research on the correlation between public corruption and voter participation in Illinois, even though Illinois has gained notoriety for incarcerating high-ranking public officials

involved in corrupt activities. Illinois stands among the states with a history of significant public corruption cases, which commenced probably in the late 1950s and has persisted to the present day.

Addressing public corruption has proven to be a formidable challenge. Numerous measures have been put in place to combat the proliferation of corruption not only in the United States but also in democracies across the globe. Some scholars and experts have proposed that governments should adopt specific policies to combat corruption while recognizing that anticorruption measures alone may not suffice (Batabyal & Chowdhury, 2015; Graycar & Sidebottom, 2012; Omoteso & Mobolaji, 2014).

For example, in January 2019, Ed Burke, a prominent Chicago Alderman with a distinguished 35-year career in public service, faced indictment on public corruption charges (Joravsky, 2019). He allegedly sought to direct business to his law firm by offering favorable treatment to two business owners in exchange for a zoning change permit related to a driveway (Byrne, 2019). Former Mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel, pledged to implement ethical reforms but emphasized that his actions alone cannot "replace having a moral and ethical compass that informs your judgment of right from wrong, and what is appropriate" (Byrne, 2019, p. 1). Byrne indicated that the indictment of this revered leader, who had also served on the city's finance committee, sent shockwaves through the city's political landscape.

A recent investigation revealed a noteworthy decrease in corruption levels when systematic monitoring of corrupt activities was in place (Gustavo et al., 2016). The researchers analyzed longitudinal data on audits of municipal governments in Puerto

Rico. They scrutinized the electoral outcomes in municipalities where timely audits were conducted, focusing on corruption-related elements. Their findings indicated that corruption was significantly reduced in municipalities subjected to timely audits conducted before elections.

Anticorruption efforts play a vital role in nurturing good governance, serving as a clear indicator of its presence. Salminen (2013) delineated the various facets of corruption and the anticorruption framework in Finland. They examined the perceived corruption levels, anti-corruption regulations, mechanisms for combating corruption, and the principal oversight institutions and found the existing control system has been effective yet necessitates reform in the coming years. Therefore, supporting and endorsing anticorruption initiatives is essential for the promotion of good governance. These initiatives have the potential to gradually reduce instances of public corruption and, consequently, diminish citizens' perception of corruption, thus bolstering public trust in government (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Bauhr & Grimes, 2014; Gronlund & Setala, 2012; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Villoria et al., 2013).

Anticorruption efforts are vital to having a stable government and economic performance. Anticorruption efforts may help to reestablish public trust in government over time (Christensen & Lægreid, 2008; Guo, 2014; Manion, 2004; Welch et al., 2005). Recent research stated that government should collaborate with social groups or organizations to improve relational trust (Zhang & Kim, 2018).

## Summary

In this chapter, I explore the issue of public corruption in Cook County, investigating whether voters' perceptions of corruption influence their voting behavior and attitudes. Despite various existing studies, there is currently no recent qualitative or quantitative research that offers a comprehensive explanation for why Cook County voters appear disengaged from the democratic voting process. Therefore, this qualitative case study explores whether the voters' perception of corruption constitutes the primary underlying motivation behind this lack of civic engagement. While previous studies have employed the qualitative approach to examine corruption, evaluate the effectiveness of anticorruption policies, and assess trust in government institutions (Beblavý, 2009); Chandler, 2006; De Speville, 2010; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006; Ragaru, 2010), none have specifically addressed the issue at hand in Cook County.

Research examining the relationship between voters' behavior and their perception of corruption has consistently demonstrated a strong connection between these two factors. Despite the United States being a robust democracy that upholds democratic principles, a significant portion of its citizens remain disengaged from the electoral process. Similarly, while there are extensive anticorruption policies in place, corruption persists as a genuine concern, affecting both federal and local levels of government.

This analysis has unveiled a noticeable gap within the existing literature regarding understanding the potential impact of corruption on voting behavior in Illinois. The present study aims to fill this void, marking the first instance where the impact of public corruption on citizens' voting behavior in Cook County is examined through the

theoretical framework of rational choice theory. This research endeavor is significant in addressing this gap within the literature, potentially contributing to more informed decision-making by legislators seeking to implement anticorruption initiatives that prevent elected officials from capitalizing on their public office for personal gain.

Utilizing the qualitative methodology yields insightful information that may not be accessible through a quantitative approach. This qualitative investigation into voting behavior allows for a deeper understanding of the multifaceted components that underlie low voter turnout. Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that diverse factors, both of a social and sociocultural nature, have the potential to influence voter participation significantly. As Wilson (2015) noted, there is empirical evidence supporting the assertion that voting is a complex activity subject to the influence of numerous social norms and sociocultural variables.

Chapter 3 delves into the methodology employed in this study, offering an in-depth exploration of the qualitative research design that is pertinent to this research. It elucidates the role of the researcher, details the sampling frame and strategy utilized, outlines the data collection protocol, expounds upon the data analysis methods, and underscores the ethical considerations that guided this research.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

For the past four decades, Cook County has grappled with a significantly high level of public corruption. Several authors have indicated that the perception of public corruption can deter voter participation (Chong et al., 2015; Dahlberg & Solevid, 2016). However, it is worth noting that these studies were conducted with participants in Mexico and certain European countries, respectively. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and examine the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs concerning public corruption within a sample of eligible voters in Cook County and how these perceptions may influence their willingness to vote. Given that these voters may hold different beliefs and attitudes toward public corruption compared to voters in Mexico and European countries, this research is especially relevant for understanding the local dynamics of Cook County.

In Chapter 3, I described a comprehensive analysis of an appropriate research design for the study. The analysis included a discussion of various theoretical research inquiries, the rationale for the design, recruitment of participants, interview settings, data collection and analysis, the research design, rationale, the role of the researcher, and the confidentiality of participants. Finally, I considered any ethical issues that might have arisen before, during, or after the study.

#### **Qualitative Inquiry**

Qualitative methodology is increasingly used in social science research as a valuable tool for exploring and understanding the lived experiences of research subjects (Tufford & Newman, 2012). In qualitative research, the researcher is responsible to

analyze data from start to finish of the study (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, as cited in Tufford & Newman, 2012). In other words, the researcher acts as an instrument. Qualitative inquiry is inherently subjective, and the potential for researcher preconceptions to impact the research is unavoidable. The researcher's preconceived beliefs can impact data collection, interpretation, and presentation (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

According to Creswell (2013), a qualitative approach proves valuable in exploring and understanding how a group assigns meanings to their experiences. Consequently, qualitative research was the appropriate methodology for this study because it offered a valuable tool for exploring, gaining insights, and comprehending voters' perceptions of corruption in Cook County, as well as investigating any potential impact on their voting choices in the 2019 municipal election. Moreover, the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to develop common themes and identify different characteristics throughout the various stages of the study (Creswell, 2012).

The mixed method approach was considered for this study. The mixed methods approach employs data from both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011; Fetters et al., 2013; Onwuegbuzie & Combs, 2010; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2008). In a mixed method, the data collected are analyzed separately and then integrated synchronously or chronologically to address the research question (Berman, 2017). Moreover, the quantitative aspect required the researcher to have data from which to form and test a hypothesis. Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011) explained that in a mixed-method exploratory design research, qualitative data is first collected and analyzed, and common themes are used to develop a quantitative research instrument to

explore the phenomenon further. The literature review did not discover any previous empirical data on the phenomenon being studied in Cook County. For this reason, I did not choose the mixed method design because it would have provided insufficient data to assist the research. Similarly, for the same reason, the quantitative approach would have been deemed inappropriate for this study.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

A research design is a plan to provide answers to the research question (Wyk, 2015). It referred to the logical structure of an investigation. Research studies commonly used three best-known research designs: exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive. Generally, researchers employed the exploratory design when few or no existing studies are available (Sainsbury & Weston, 2010). The explanatory study is used to answer the "why" questions and attempt to determine causation (USCL, 2016). The descriptive design answers the questions of who, what, when, where, and how (USCL, 2016). For this study, I selected an exploratory design. Sainsbury and Weston (2010) used a qualitative research approach with an exploratory design to gain knowledge of claimants' experience with single-employee benefit programs in London. According to USCL (2016), exploratory research offered flexibility and could address all research questions using the what, why, and how. One research question framed this study: Does the perception of public corruption diminish citizens' willingness to vote?

#### **Exploratory Design**

An exploratory design proves helpful in investigating a research problem when there are few or no previous studies available to predict a conclusion (Sparks, 2013;



USCL, 2016). Unlike explanatory or descriptive designs, the primary focus of exploratory designs is to gain valuable insights and a deeper understanding of an issue (Sparks, 2013; USCL, 2016). Exploratory research aims to introduce new ideas, thoughts, descriptions, and theories and provide fresh perspectives on how a specific aspect of reality operates and is structured (Reiter, 2017).

Applying an exploratory design was the most suitable choice for this study because I aimed to explore Cook County voters' perception of public corruption and its impact on low voter turnout. I had examined the two other designs (descriptive and explanatory), but they proved unsuitable for this study. The descriptive design is appropriate when the researcher intends to provide a detailed description of a phenomenon, whereas explanatory designs aim to elucidate the nature of a specific relationship (Wyk, 2016). Using the exploratory design, I captured the essence of voters' perspectives on public corruption in Cook County and how it influenced their voting choices.

### **Appropriateness of the Design**

In the case study approach, the researcher concentrates on acquiring in-depth knowledge of one or multiple events (Creswell, 2013). According to Mukhopadhyay and Gupta (2014), in qualitative research methods, the case study approach was the most widely favored method among researchers in all three journals reviewed. I also deliberated on using the phenomenological approach to explore the phenomenon of low voter turnout in the 2019 Chicago Municipal Election. In the phenomenological approach, the researcher emphasizes understanding a common phenomenon experienced

by individuals (Banfield & Burgess, 2013; Creswell, 2013). While the phenomenological approach shares some theoretical structures with the case study, I opted for the case study due to the limited number of responses from potential participants.

### **Role of the Researcher**

When conducting a study, the researcher plays a vital part in shaping the overall outcome of the research. In a qualitative study, the researcher's role differs from that in a quantitative one. Greenbank (2003) emphasized that qualitative researchers must consider their own biases, preconceptions, and personal norms that could influence the quality of the research. To mitigate personal biases and assumptions, Knight-Lynn (2010f) emphasized "the importance of self-awareness as a part of the preparation process, gaining a deep understanding of the biases one might bring and the experiences that might shape their perspective on the study" (par. 2-3).

Eliminating all biases in research is unlikely. However, as Clark and Vealé (2018) explained, through reflection, researchers can better equip themselves to collect, code, and analyze qualitative data by reducing their own biases, assumptions, and preconceptions. One approach to reflexivity entails the researcher using a reflexive journal to record personal reflections on their beliefs, assumptions, and biases throughout the study (Hadi & José Closs, 2015; Ortlipp, 2008). As noted by Billups (2014), reflexivity equips qualitative researchers with a tool to bolster the trustworthiness of their study and reduce their personal bias. Additionally, in qualitative research, reflexivity is a crucial strategy to enhance quality control (Berger, 2015).

I have been a resident of Cook County for the past 35 years and participated in the most recent municipal election in the county. While I did vote, I was not actively engaged in political activities such as campaigning for political candidates or attending political rallies. I have informed knowledge of the numerous instances of public corruption in Cook County. Nevertheless, I took deliberate steps to separate my personal views, beliefs, and perspectives, with the primary focus being on the research question and the participants' perceptions. I achieved this by incorporating the concept of reflexivity.

As the researcher, I conducted the research using industry principles and ethical norms. Throughout the interview process, I intentionally put aside my personal beliefs, preconceived notions, and assumptions regarding the phenomenon under study to ensure the research remained unbiased. The primary focus was on eliciting the participants' perspectives regarding the phenomenon. I actively encouraged participants to provide in-depth information, and I carefully considered all the information they provided. Furthermore, I posed follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' personal experiences with the phenomenon.

### **Research Methodology**

When there is a high rate of public corruption, citizens' trust in their government decreases (Pillay, 2017; Weinschenk & Helpap, 2015). Pillay (2017) employed a qualitative approach with a case study to explore the connection between good governance, citizens' trust, and the impact of public corrupt behaviors in Brazil and South Africa. Similarly, Weinschenk and Helpap (2015) utilized public opinion data to investigate the relationship between corruption and several other variables to assess their

impact on trust levels in state government in the United States. However, these studies were limited to voters in Brazil and South America, while most of the research on voters' trust in state government in the United States concerning public corruption and other variables has relied on quantitative data from Gallup polls and public government websites. A gap existed in the literature review concerning the voting experience of eligible voters in Cook County and their perception of public corruption. This study marked the first attempt to investigate public corruption and its impact on voter turnout using qualitative data from a case study.

Qualitative research often employs a case study approach, wherein researchers focus on acquiring in-depth knowledge of one or multiple events (Creswell, 2013). I opted for a qualitative methodology using a case study approach for this study. A case study can facilitate the acquisition of in-depth knowledge to understand individuals, processes, or programs better (Merriam, 1998). The case study aims to capture "detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). As Creswell (2002) elaborated, a case study approach is suitable when researchers seek "an in-depth understanding of a 'case' or bounded system" (p. 496). Given that the primary purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate voters' behavior and their understanding of corruption, the case study design accommodated both exploratory and descriptive aspects, making it particularly well-suited for this research.

There is no single set of variables that can fully explain voting behavior. Human behavior and its interaction with the structural environment are complex. Nonetheless, there is empirical consensus regarding predicting voting patterns (Sexton, 2011).

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), humans construct society through interactions. The researchers termed this process *habitualization*, defined as repeated behavior that generates patterns likely to be repeated in the future in similar ways and with reasonable consistency (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). As discussed, and established in the literature review in Chapter 2, no empirical studies have explored voters' perceptions of public corruption in Cook County. Given this existing gap in this phenomenon, I examined the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of eligible voters in Cook County regarding public corruption and whether public corruption influenced their voting decisions.

### **Sampling Frame and Sampling Description**

Choosing an appropriate sampling frame is crucial for a qualitative research study. Determining case selection is one of the fundamental principles of qualitative analysis. However, it is imperative for the researcher to first identify the sampling frame (the unit of analysis) before proceeding with sample size determination or considering the case selection process (Patton, 2015). Ndibalema (2017) defined *sampling* as selecting a sample from the population to research a specific topic of interest. Researchers may employ more than one sampling method (Augustine, 2016).

### **Sampling Strategy**

When conducting qualitative inquiry, researchers often employ various sampling methods to recruit potential participants (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Each research inquiry requires an appropriate sample. In qualitative research, three primary types of sampling are purposeful, also known as purposive or, quota, and snowballing (DeCarlo, 2018). As

noted by Polit and Beck (2006), researchers frequently use a combination of sampling strategies to fulfill their sample objectives. For this study, I chose purposeful sampling.

### ***Purposeful Sampling***

Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research when researchers desire to identify and select in-depth information related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposeful sampling is defined as a strategic approach to acquiring the most suitable cases that will provide the relevant data that will elucidate the research question being investigated (Patton, 2002). This process entailed identifying and selecting individuals or groups with exceptional knowledge about or experience with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Patton (2002) explained further that the logic and power of purposeful sampling come from the emphasis on in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations by using relatively small samples purposefully selected.

Purposeful sampling is also best suited for this study because it is commonly used in qualitative inquiry to obtain relevant information about the subject of the study (Etikan et al., 2016). A purposeful sampling strategy is used when participants are selected because they could purposefully provide their understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study (Creswell, 2013). The two purposeful sampling strategies listed below were used to intentionally select prospective participants who had experienced the phenomenon of voting and public corruption and provided relevant data.

- Maximum variation or heterogenous. The group selection strategy comprises flexibility in the selection of potential participants from the major species

groups of a targeted population (Miles et al., 2014). I have selected the maximum variation sampling strategy also called heterogeneity sampling for this study. This sampling strategy allowed me to perform flexibility in the selection of potential participants concerning the following demographic factors including but not limited to: age, gender, education, and political affiliation. *The Participant Profile is provided in Appendix E.* I created this profile with common available material. The profile was included with the invitation letter sent to prospective participants. The goal of using the maximum variation sampling was to garner beliefs, ideas, and perspectives from individuals from different backgrounds and persuasions. Patton (2015) suggested that data developed from a heterogeneous sample increase the credibility of a study.

- Criterion sampling. In targeting specific groups in qualitative research, criterion-based sampling is essential. The criterion sampling strategy was used to select potential subjects who met certain criteria: (a) individuals who were eligible to vote in the 2019 municipal election, (b) individuals who know or have been exposed to public corruption, and (c) individuals who had continuously lived in Cook County, the last 3 years or more. Additional selection criteria are found in Appendix A.

### ***Participant Selection/Population***

The sample type and size should align with the research question (Patton, 2013). In this study, I aimed to identify individuals who have valuable insights into the

phenomenon of public corruption and its relationship with voting behavior. Patton (2013) noted that the researcher needs “excellent participants to obtain excellent data” (p. 264), and it is crucial to have a suitable sample size that adequately represents the research population.

The population under study consisted of the registered voters of Cook County, which included 2,069 precincts, 51 wards, and 1,421,430 registered voters (Chicago Board of Elections, 2019). Both the sample type and sample size must align with the research question (Patton, 2015). In a qualitative study, a small sample size is considered adequate and credible, as qualitative research is designed to obtain in-depth knowledge (Creswell, 2013).

Small sample sizes are well-suited for qualitative research because they facilitate in-depth analysis, enriching the research inquiry. In this study, I employed purposeful sampling to select individuals who met specific criteria: they were eligible voters in the 2019 municipal election, had knowledge of public corruption, and had resided in Cook County, Illinois, for the last three years or more. To identify participants meeting these criteria, I obtained voter registration profiles for Ward 48, Precinct 41, from the Chicago Board of Elections for the 2019 municipal election. Three eligible voters who met these criteria were interviewed and provided valuable data for this study.

To conduct the interviews, I coordinated with the participants to establish a mutually convenient date and time, considering their availability and preferences. Consent forms were distributed to participants a week before the scheduled interviews, and they provided their consent for participation. Being well-prepared for the interviews



was crucial, so I had notepads, two digital voice recorders with fresh batteries, and writing materials ready.

On the day of the interviews, I confirmed that the interviewees met the study criteria: they resided in Cook County, Illinois, were eligible to vote in the 2019 Municipal Election, and possessed knowledge about public corruption. I also obtained permission to record the interviews from the participants. In order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, they were assigned aliases (P1, P2, and P3).

Throughout the interviews, I diligently recorded the interviewees' responses in detailed notes, and audio recording served as an additional measure for ensuring accuracy and completeness in the data collection process.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative research offers several methods for gathering data, and according to (Creswell, 2013), two of the most commonly used techniques are interviewing and observation. Among these, the interview is valued as a method for collecting data within the qualitative approach (Creswell, 1999). One professor characterized interviewing as "an art that invites the participant to provide as much information as possible for the study" (Laureate Education, Inc, 2010c, par. 4). Conducting an effective interview depends on the skills, competency, and knowledge of the researcher responsible for the process. Researchers heavily relied on interviews as a primary method to collect pertinent information from the interviewees' perspectives (Patton, 2015).

The interviewing technique gives the researcher the advantage of being present on-site during the interview process, enabling the acquisition of pertinent information

through pre-determined questions. Additionally, interviews allow the researcher to probe the interviewees and ask follow-up questions. Conducting an effective interview to extract relevant information for a study is not a matter of guesswork; the researcher should prepare and plan diligently.

For this case study, I selected interviewing as the primary and most suitable data collection method because it allowed me to gather information about public corruption in an informal, telephone-based manner. Furthermore, the interview method provided an interactive platform for the participants to freely share their ideas, perspectives, and experiences regarding voting decisions and public corruption. In qualitative interviewing, the researcher assumes that individuals' perspectives are meaningful and knowable. Therefore, a sample size of three participants was deemed sufficient to acquire the relevant information for this study.

### ***Epoche***

The use of epoche enhances objectivity in the research study. Epoche, defined by Moustakas (1994), is a method that systematically classifies, recognizes and sets aside preconceived notions or feelings regarding the subject matter. I applied epoche by diligently recording the exact statements of the participants' opinions, perspectives, and ideas about the phenomenon under investigation. I assigned equal value and importance to each participant's statements, only making reductions if the statements fell outside the study's scope or if they were repetitive. Moustakas (1994) cautioned researchers to set aside preconceived ideas or concepts about the phenomenon before commencing the

study. Consequently, I excluded my personal beliefs and preconceived notions about public corruption and the voting phenomenon.

### ***Bracketing***

The primary goal of a case study in qualitative research is to attain in-depth knowledge of one or multiple events (Creswell, 2013). Ensuring the reliability of qualitative research necessitates researchers who remain non-judgmental (Tattersall et al., 2007). In a case study, researchers should set aside their own experiences concerning the subject being studied (Creswell, 2003). This concept is referred to as 'bracketing.' Bracketing establishes a non-judgmental environment, enabling the exploration of individuals' perceptions and experiences of subject matter (Giorgi, 2009).

Qualitative researchers employ bracketing to guard against any adverse consequences arising from their preconceptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Gearing (2004) defined *bracketing* as a "scientific process in which a researcher suspends or holds in abeyance his or her presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to see and describe the phenomenon" (p. 1430). Some authors have described bracketing as how researchers identify and mitigate potential biases and personal beliefs (Creswell, 2007; Tufford & Newman, 2012). To effectively implement bracketing, Chan et al. (2013) recommended that qualitative researchers assess their perceived biases and ascertain whether they can conduct the study impartially. This concept is crucial because preconceptions or biases can harm the study's outcomes. Bracketing is, therefore, indispensable in preserving the integrity of the

research study, mainly since I currently reside in Cook County, where the phenomenon is being studied.

### ***Reflexivity***

Creswell (2013) defined *reflexivity* as the researchers' awareness of their biases and the experiences they will bring to the study. The reflexivity strategy offers qualitative researchers' ample opportunities to scrutinize their thoughts and beliefs and to evaluate their capacity to conduct the study objectively, honestly, and ethically (Chan et al., 2013). Janak (2018) suggested researchers employ bracketing techniques and restrained to minimize personal biases. I maintained reflexivity throughout the study to uphold the research's integrity.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The role of the researcher in a qualitative study is more participatory compared to quantitative research, where the researcher's involvement tends to be less active (Forister & Blessing, 2016). Additionally, qualitative researchers need to carefully consider the scope and relevance of the related literature review (Chan et al., 2013). They should also conduct semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions and establish a well-thought-out plan for data collection. Furthermore, Chan et al. (2013) emphasized the significance of thorough preparation for bracketing before qualitative researchers engage in data collection and data analysis, as these steps are chronologically related. The following approach was taken:

1. I contacted by telephone the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Officer at the Chicago Board of Elections, which has 2,069 precincts. This officer is

responsible for providing the FOIA requests of eligible voters in Cook County, which represents the population of this study. During this conversation, I learned the procedure for submitting a FOIA request to obtain the 2019 Walk Sheet or Poll Sheet, which contains the list of registered or eligible voters.

2. I submitted a FOIA request via U.S. mail to acquire the 2019 Walk Sheet or Poll Sheet for Ward 48, Precinct 41.
3. I mailed invitation letters to potential respondents. Invitation letter is provided in Appendix D.
4. I scheduled semi-structured telephone interviews with 3 interviewees who had consented to take part in the study. I reached out to the interviewees by phone to establish a suitable schedule.
5. Before the scheduled telephone interviews, I obtained consent from all the individuals who had agreed to participate in the study. Each interview was 25-30 minutes in duration. I recorded the interviews, transcribed the audio tapes, and verified their accuracy. Emerging themes were identified and categorized.
6. I analyzed the data collection.

### **Interviewing Protocol**

Developing an interviewing protocol is crucial for conducting a successful interview in which relevant data is extracted for the study. As the researcher and interviewer, I comprehended the focus of the interview and the pertinent information I aimed to gather from the participants. As Jacob and Furgerson (2012) pointed out, "a

good interview protocol is essential to obtaining the best information from the participants in your study" (p. 6). Details concerning the interview's duration, location, participants, informed consent, and interview questions were established before the study's commencement. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix B.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative case study addresses one central research question: Does the perception of public corruption reduce citizens' willingness to vote? Interview questions are found in Appendix C.

### **Data Analysis**

This qualitative case study research aimed was to explore Cook County voters' perceptions of public corruption and their voting decisions, attitudes, behaviors. As outlined by Patton (2015), the research design aligns with the research purpose, and the research questions steer the data analysis. The central question of the study is as follows: Does the perception of public corruption reduce citizens' willingness to vote?

The definition of *public corruption* that I used for this qualitative study is “The misuse of public office for private gain” (Treisman, 2000, p. 399). “The illegal use of public office for private (or personal) gain” (Bowler & Donovan, 2016, p. 273). “The private gains in the form of cash or gifts by a government official, in exchange for providing specific benefits to private individuals or groups” (Dincer & Johnston, 2014, p. 3).

The subject of this study is the municipal government. With the concept of public corruption in municipal government, I actively listened for any words or phrases that

could reveal an eligible voter's positive or negative perception of public corruption. My objective was to ensure that the codes accurately reflected the data. Furthermore, I attentively listened for and documented any responses (words or phrases) that suggested the presence of public corruption as an explanatory factor for low voter turnout in Cook County. The interpretation of the collected data holds significant importance in the research study. As explained by Patton (2015), "interpretation elucidates what the description means and assesses what makes it significant" (p. 582).

### **Data Management**

In qualitative research, researchers have various methods for preparing data for analysis. Blair (2015) recommended that researchers frequently employ coding of qualitative data to discover meanings. Qualitative researchers should exercise caution when selecting data coding techniques, as pre-established software may not necessarily align with their specific coding needs.

Hand and computer coding are valuable tools for organizing, categorizing, and extracting overarching themes from the collected data. As defined by two authors, "coding [is] the process of combing the data for themes, ideas, and categories," enabling the researcher to analyze the data effectively by identifying patterns and emerging themes (Gibbs & Taylor, 2005, para. 1). The data analysis process does not follow a predetermined formula but offers strategies for navigating the process effectively. The data were organized based on demographics, emerging themes, and similar patterns.

Data analysis follows the same process, whether the researcher codes by hand or by computer (Creswell, 2013). The crucial factor is that the emerging themes are

interpreted within the context of the central research question (Patton, 2002). I utilized Microsoft Word's "insert comment" feature, in combination with hand coding, as part of the thematic analysis process. This software was beneficial in organizing and sorting the data.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is essential in a qualitative study (Billups, 2014). Patton (2015) stressed the importance of carefully considering the establishment of trustworthiness to enhance the credibility of the findings and interpretation of the study. Furthermore, trustworthiness offers readers a framework to assess the quality of a qualitative study (Billups, 2014). Trustworthiness can be achieved through various means. In qualitative research, four techniques are commonly employed to establish trustworthiness: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability (Guba and Lincoln, 1986, as cited by Billups, 2014). For this study, I employed these four techniques to ensure trustworthiness.

### **Credibility**

In a research study, various techniques are employed to establish credibility. *Credibility* is the extent to which the research results are reliable and the researcher's findings are validated (Guion et al., 2011). Billups (2014) associated credibility with aligning study findings with the truth. Given the high likelihood of misinterpretation in qualitative inquiry (Moustakas, 1994), I exercised significant caution during the interviewing process. I listened attentively for potential misconceptions during the interviews. This approach allowed for probing questions to be asked of the



interviewees and for cross-checking their responses for accuracy and clarification. The interviewees had the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of their responses based on the generated transcripts. They were asked to verify that the transcripts accurately reflected their ideas, opinion and perspectives concerning the perception of public corruption and voting decisions.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is established by providing evidence that the research study's findings can apply to similar contexts, circumstances, timeframes, and populations (Barnes et al., 2005). To further enhance transferability, it is recommended to provide a thick description of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While thick description is commonly used in ethnographic studies, it can also be applied in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick description entails recording comprehensive details of the participants, research settings, and data collection (Billups, 2014). In this study, I did not employ the thick description technique but utilized field notes during the interview process. Given that this is a case study to gather registered voters' perceptions of corruption and voting choices, the external criterion required in a thick description technique is not applicable.

### **Dependability**

In a qualitative study, dependability refers to the ability of other researchers to replicate the research study. Various techniques can be employed to achieve dependability. Loh (2013) recommended triangulation, while Anney (2014) suggested a code-recode strategy. Coding is described as "the process of combing the data for themes,

ideas, and categories and then marking similar passages of text with a code label so that they can easily be retrieved at a later stage for further comparison and analysis" (Gibbs, 2005, par.1). The coding process makes it easier for the researcher to analyze the data, enhancing its manageability.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is essential to ensure trustworthiness in a qualitative study. It is the process by which other researchers can confirm, duplicate, and authenticate the results of the research study (Baxter & Eyles, 1997, as cited in Anney, 2014). According to Creswell (2013), confirmability ensured that the research findings are grounded upon the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences and beliefs rather than the researcher's potentially biased ideas and beliefs. Confirmability provides objectivity and authenticity to the results. In this study, confirmability ensured that the research findings reflected only the opinions, ideas, and perspectives of the participants. I controlled my biases regarding the phenomenon under study to ensure that my role as the researcher did not influence the interviewees' perspectives or the results.

### **Ethical Procedures and Consideration**

Ethical considerations are a critical component of the research study. Therefore, the researchers should maintain high ethical standards during the study (Creswell, 2013; Miller & Brewer, 2003). As the researcher, I tried to adhere to these standards throughout the study. In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument, emphasizing the importance of maintaining ethical standards. I ensured that participants were fully informed about the nature of the study and provided assurance of protecting

their privacy during and after the interviews. Participants were also informed of their option to discontinue participation in the interviewing process at any time and for any reason. Consent forms, prepared by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards, were provided to the interviewees, and their signatures were obtained. Verbal consent was also obtained at the beginning of the interviews. Throughout all stages of the research, research participants were treated respectfully and ethically.

The confidentiality of the participants was rigorously maintained throughout the study, and any identifying information was either removed or appropriately modified. Aliases were employed during the analysis phase of the study to protect the participants' identities. Field notes generated during the study were securely stored in a designated, private location. Additionally, ethical issues and considerations regarding potential biases were thoughtfully addressed, especially as a new researcher. To ensure impartiality, I refrained from discussing my perspectives on public corruption and voter participation with the interviewees at all stages of the study.

### **Agreement to Gain Access to Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of registered voters in Cook County. Following IRB approval, I submitted a FOIA request to obtain voting records for Ward 48, Precinct 41. These records included names and contact information, which I used to identify and approach potential participants by mail. Registered voters were given the choice of whether to participate in the study.

At one point, I considered reaching out to the alderman representing this precinct to inform them about the proposed study and obtain a letter of cooperation to include

with the invitation letter. However, this approach was not pursued, and I would have needed IRB approval to proceed with such cooperation. It is worth noting that while a letter of cooperation may have facilitated the recruitment process, it would not have influenced the study's results in any way.

### **Other Ethical Issues**

This study recruited participants from Ward 48, Precinct 41 in Cook County. I want to clarify that I did not have any personal or business relationship with any participants in the study.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine voters' choices by exploring their ideas, opinions, and perspectives regarding public corruption and their voting choices during the 2019 Cook County Municipal Election. Corruption by elected officials has continued to take center stage in election campaigns and elected leadership. As the May 2019 newly elected mayor of Chicago, Lori Lightfoot pointed out in her acceptance speech, it was not business as usual and that a new day had come.

There are some public officials who conduct the duty of their office with sound ethical principles and sacred trust, while there are others who do not. When public officials engage in unethical behaviors, citizens can quickly become disengaged and show apathy toward participatory elections and governance. Corruption is a serious issue, and leadership has the primary responsibility to minimize or eradicate it from public governance.

Purposeful sampling was used with an amalgamation of criteria, and 3 registered voters consented to participate in the study. Data collection was obtained via semi-structured telephone interviews. The collected data were coded, and themes were developed for analysis. After completing the analysis, the central research question was addressed. Chapter 4 discusses the analysis process, findings from the telephone interview questions, and conclusions.

## Chapter 4: Results

Researchers have studied low voter turnout and public corruption in major democracies to understand how public corruption influences voter participation. Some studies focused on developing countries, whereas others focused on major democracies such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany where voter turnout is significantly higher than in the United States. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are limited studies specifically about the relationship between voter participation and public corruption in Cook County. This lack of empirical research suggested the need for a comprehensive study or analysis that explored the influence of public corruption on voter participation. In this qualitative case study, I investigated the impact of public corruption on voter turnout. It is essential to understand whether public corruption influences voting decisions because voter participation is vital for a functioning democracy.

Cook County voters were interviewed to investigate whether public corruption influences their participation. Data were coded and analyzed to reach the findings. As detailed later in this study, voter turnout is very low when public corruption is high. This chapter highlighted the study's results. I summarize the data collection process and the data analysis strategy and describe the results of this study. Data collection consisted of telephone interviews which were then subjected to thematic analysis to identify broad themes and develop findings using the research questions as a framework to align the purpose of the study. The chapter ends with a comprehensive discussion of these broad themes and findings.

### **Research Question**

This study applies Becker's (1993) rational choice theory to answer the following research question: Does the perception of public corruption reduce citizens' willingness to vote?

### **Setting**

The study was conducted over the telephone in Suburban Chicago. The COVID-19 pandemic presented substantial challenges that had an impact on data collection. Initially, face-to-face interviews were planned, but they became unfeasible due to state and county travel restrictions imposed in response to the pandemic. Consequently, telephone interviews were conducted in place of face-to-face interviews. Participants consented to be recorded.

### **Demographics**

As specified in Chapter 3, purposeful samplings were used to recruit participants and obtain a representative sample of the study's population. The study population comprised of registered voters who have lived continuously in Chicago for more than 3 years. I invited 300 participants to take part in the study. Of these, three individuals agreed to participate. Three male participants who registered to vote but did not vote in the 2019 municipal election participated in the study. Their ages range from 29 to 44, with the average age being approximately 32 years. Their years of living in Chicago ranged from 2 years to 10 years. Table 8 provides participant demographics. The participants were identified by the letter "P" combined numbers 1, 2, and 3, which indicate the order in which they participated in the study.

**Table 8***Participant Demographics*

Participants	Gender	Age group	Affiliated political party
P1	Male	18–29	Independent
P2	Male	30–44	Independent
P3	Male	30–44	Democrat

**Data Collection**

I received approval from the Walden IRB (Approval # 12-24-19-0465250) in December 2019 and commenced data collection in January 2020. However, the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic necessitated a pause in data collection due to state and city mandates restricting travel beyond one's residence. Subsequently, data collection resumed after obtaining IRB approval to transition from face-to-face interviews to telephone interviews.

Data collection for this study presented challenges, leading to limited participation. Prior to initiating data collection, I planned to interview between 12 and 17 registered voters who met the criteria of not having voted and having resided in Chicago for 10 or more years. Table 9 provides participant demographic information. Out of the 300 invitation letters sent, the response rate was less than 2%. Additionally, nearly 30% of the invitation letters were returned due to incorrect addresses.



**Table 9***Demographics of Registered Voters Invited to Participate*

Respondent gender	Age ranges			
	18–29	30–44	45–59	60+
Male	38	38	37	37
Female	36	37	39	38

The data collection lasted for several years, and 300 registered voters via the U.S. Postal Service were invited as participants. Google was used to verify addresses before sending out invitations for the study. However, nearly 30% of the invitation letters sent to prospective participants were returned due to incorrect addresses.

For the three respondents who participated in the study, I used a semistructured interview guide that allowed for probing questions. According to Clandinin (2013), semistructured interviews help the researcher gain a deeper understanding of the personal and societal experiences of each participant. To ensure transparency and develop trust, the purpose of the study and the interview process were explained to each participant. The participants were allowed to ask any questions about the study.

The telephone interviews were recorded with a phone recorder and a second recorder was used as a backup device. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes. Each participant expressed their thoughts and opinions for me to gain an in-depth understanding. Participants answered all the interview questions, and I responded to their questions when asked. The participants explained why they did not vote in the 2019 municipal election, expressed their views on public corruption, and explained whether public corruption influenced their decisions to vote. The audio-recorded interviews were

transcribed, and I checked them for accuracy at least three times before I started analyzing the data. Though the data collection was difficult, and the response rate was low, the audio-recorded interviews provided adequate relevant data, which enabled suitable data analysis for this case study.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was performed manually using Microsoft Word's insert comment feature, and hand coding in combination with thematic analysis. According to Chenail (2012), Microsoft Word's insert comment feature can be used to label codes or themes in qualitative data sets when developing a thematic analysis. Using this program, I derived five broad themes from the data analysis:

- Public corruption is self-serving.
- Voting should be more convenient.
- Lack of information on the candidates.
- Public corruption erodes trust in government.
- Public corruption is prevalent.

### **Major Themes Emerging From Telephone Interview Responses**

#### **Theme 1: Public Corruption Is Self-Serving**

Participants in this study indicated that public corruption is self-serving, meaning that public officials prioritize their benefits above the well-being, needs, and common good of the people they are elected to serve. This theme was notably present in responses to the first research question, which asked to define public corruption. All the participants indicated that public corruption has an element of self-serving because public officials benefit themselves instead of the public. For example, P1, an 18–29 age group White male college graduate who identified as an Independent registered voter, defined public

corruption as “When outside influences are more important to politicians than the interests of the people.” P2, a 34-year-old White male college graduate who identified as a Democrat registered voter, shared a similar sentiment, although they were in different age groups and had varied political views. He defined public corruption as

Any public serving individual, accepting any things of value to influence public policy for their benefit. So even if it’s not money but anything that a public official may take in value that would otherwise benefit the public or the public government.

This finding from the telephone interviews is consistent with the literature about corruption. For example, Triesman (2000) opined that corruption is improperly using public office for personal benefits. Transparency International (2018a) described corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” (par. 1). Another often-cited description of corruption is the “abuse (or misuse) of public power for private (personal) benefit” (Doh et al., 2003, p. 115).

## **Theme 2: Voting Should Be More Convenient**

The interview data revealed a second theme: voting should be more convenient. The participants’ perspectives are consistent with other literature on how the election day holiday affects voter turnout. A 2017 case study compared national elections in the United States and the French Republic, where the election is a holiday (Bradfield & Johnson, 2017). The study revealed that the French Republic had a higher voter turnout of nearly 30%. According to this study, ease of voting positively affects voter turnout. Further, Stein and Vonnahme (2008) compared the voting records of individual voters in

Larimer County, along with a control county, Weld, County, which employed precinct voting on Election Day from 1992 to 2004, and the analysis revealed compelling evidence that supports the hypothesis that Election Day vote centers positively impact overall voter turnout, especially among infrequent voters.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the United States has lower voter turnout in federal elections than all but three other developed countries, with a significant portion of eligible American voters abstaining from voting. The participants expressed the importance of making voting accessible and convenient to citizens. Although the participants indicated several reasons for lack of participation, two noted that time off from work was the most significant to them. A participant recommended two measures to make voting more convenient: (a) public officials should enact legislation making election day a holiday, and (b) allowing employees to get paid time off. Congress has debated these suggestions, and some states have passed laws to address these issues, but federally, comprehensive actions have yet to be taken.

Advocates for federal legislation designating election day as a holiday have argued that providing citizens with a day off to vote will enhance voter turnout, foster democratic engagement, and safeguard the fundamental right to vote (Gale & West, 2021). A participant shared the same sentiment based on his voting experience. He noted that not getting time off from work was the primary reason he did not vote in the 2019 municipal election. He believes that making election day a holiday would align with other countries and may provide for greater voter participation and change election outcomes.

### **Theme 3: Lack of Information on the Candidates**

A third theme derived from the interview questions was the importance of knowing the background of the candidates. Lack of information about candidates can be a significant barrier to voters making informed and rational voting decisions. Here, a study participant indicated that he did not vote in the 2019 municipal election because “I didn’t know enough information about the candidates.”

When voters do not have easy access to relevant and accurate information about the candidates, it becomes challenging for voters to assess their fitness for office and make rational choices that align with their preferences and interests. For example, in response to Question 2, what factors do you consider when voting, P2 detailed the candidate information that he needed to make an informed voting decision:

- the character of the candidate
- issues addressed in the debates
- their record of accomplishments
- public comments/statements
- public corruption track record

Another participant noted how difficult it was for him to have comprehensive information about the candidates. This participant explained, “It is difficult to obtain unbiased information that would help me to vote. I do not know about these people. It seems exhausting to try to research the people who could make the most change.”

### **Theme 4: Public Corruption Erodes Trust in Government**

The fourth theme was the importance of trust in government. Participants explained that effective governance requires trust in government. They elaborated further

that trust in government has diminished significantly because the city has had to deal with corruption for decades. For example, P2 noted,

It makes me sad, and it makes me angry that there are inefficiencies that cause lots of inequity. The problem with public corruption is the people who suffer the most are the people who need a well-functioning government the most. They tend to be people at a disadvantage or who have fewer opportunities. They tend to be the ones that have to deal with the dysfunction in local government the worst, because they rely on it more for their daily needs, whether it's long-term or short-term.

Participants also noted that public corruption makes them angry and sad, for corrupt behaviors seem to have no end. Most participants also indicated they have no trust and confidence in corrupt politicians who used their public office to enrich themselves above the common good of the citizens. P1 noted, "It seems like having to become a politician, you already must be corrupt on some level. So, what is the point of voting for any of them?" In addition to maintaining trust in government, reducing corruption was essential to increase voter participation, which was crucial to strengthening democratic principles.

### **Theme 5: Public Corruption is Prevalent**

Globally, public corruption remains a challenging issue in modern democracies (United Nations, n.d.; Kukutschka, 2023). Public corruption refers to the misuse of public office, funds, or power for personal benefits and gain. Public corruption can take various forms, including bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, fraud, and others, but the most

common ones in Cook County are bribery, embezzlement, nepotism fraud, extortion, and racketeering. In this study, the participants shared that corruption is the way of life in Cook County because corruption has been around for a long time. Corruption crosses the partisan line and invades the leadership structure in Cook County. For example, P2 expressed that “it doesn’t matter if it’s a Republican in office or a Democrat in office, there’s still corruption.” Public corruption has always seemed to be a factor in Cook County politics and brings about frustration and a lack of voter participation in elections. P1 shared the same sentiment and noted, “It seems like having to become a politician, you already have to be corrupt on some level.”

Combating corruption in Cook County has been challenging because implementing anticorruption laws and strengthening accountability through prosecutions have not minimized occurrences. For example, Michael Madigan, the former Speaker of the Illinois House and Alderman Ed Burke, the City Council Finance Committee, were recently indicted for public corruption in the past 2 years. These politicians have a combined 104 years of leadership in Chicago politics. The prevalence of public corruption has detrimental effects on the city and undermines the democratic principles of fairness, integrity, transparency, and accountability. Corruption makes voters unwilling to participate in their elections because they believe their votes will not make a difference. To make democracy work for the people, elected officials must prioritize the citizens’ benefits instead of their personal interests and financial gain. To do otherwise harms the electorate and creates substantial distrust amongst voters.

### **Case Study Findings Applicability to Rational Choice Theory**

I conducted this study to determine how public corruption influenced registered voters' decisions in the 2019 Chicago Municipal Election. I accomplished this by investigating the degree to which voters' self-interests were present during their voting decisions. The findings indicated that voters considered their cost of voting during the municipal election.

Rational choice theory is widely used in the social sciences to analyze and predict human behavior. It has become a valuable theory used in research disciplines such as Psychology, Sociology, and Political Science (Loughran et al., 2016). This theory has been used extensively in voting studies. For example, Sule (2019) used the rational choice theory to examine the 2019 Nigerian Presidential Election outcomes and the implications of the voting patterns. Blais et al. (2019), using the rational choice theory, collected survey data from Canada and project data from 23 elections in five different countries to perform a comprehensive analysis that examined the individual cost of voting and its impact on voter turnout. Another 2021 study utilized this theory to demonstrate the importance of voters' evaluations of political party leaders in their likelihood to vote in 13 Western European parliamentary elections between 1974 and 2016 (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2021).

Chapter 4 interprets the findings in the context of rational choice theory to determine whether the empirical results confirm or disconfirm the theoretical assumptions. According to rational choice theory, individuals make decisions based on a logical analysis of their costs and benefits. This study adapted this theory to develop the



following testable hypothesis: people make rational voting decisions based on what benefits they expect to receive if their candidate or issue wins the election. In other words, voters gauge their choices and choose the one that maximizes their self-interest or perceived benefits. Based on the responses to the telephone interview questions and an analysis of the data, the rational choice theory assumption of cost and benefit was applied to this study.

The interview responses provided an analysis to determine the theory's applicability to explain registered voters' decisions in the context of public corruption and low voter participation. The Participants explained the process they considered to arrive at their voting decision. For example, P1 indicated it was "difficult to obtain unbiased information that would help me to vote." Having unbiased information is essential and is a powerful motivator for voters to determine whether the candidates' stance on issues is aligned with their self-interest. As such, it is also important to critically evaluate the benefits they might have received in voting for a specific candidate. The participants' perspectives and experiences are consistent with my chosen theoretical framework. Therefore, rational choice theory is relevant and appropriate to understand the effect of corruption on voting behavior in Cook County.

Another participant shared the three qualities he desired in a political candidate in his voting decision:

- the character of the candidate
- issues addressed in debates
- and their stance on public corruption

In other words, this participant's response confirmed the theoretical framework that people only vote when it benefits them.

Moreover, participants emphasized the importance of making election day convenient and more accessible to them. They support legislation making election day a holiday. As such, they can have the day off from work to vote. The theme of voting decisions was regularly present in all elements of rationality and strengthened by interview data. My interpretation is that the participants considered the information or facts regarding public corruption and made what they perceived as rational thinking in their voting decisions.

The central principle of rational choice theory suggests that individuals weigh the costs and benefits of their preferences, values, and interests. In the 2019 Cook County Municipal Election context, registered voters considered their self-interest and the expected outcomes of voting for each candidate or political party. Based on the interviewed responses, Participants have rationally considered their benefits and decided based on the issues they deemed important to them. The rational choice theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals made voting choices in the 2019 municipal election.

Most participants mistrust the local government because public corruption is endemic in Cook County. This mistrust led to a lack of participation and lower voter turnout. For example, P3 indicated that the public official who "I feel is engaged in political corruption would not have my support." P2 described it further, "It seems like having to become a politician, you already must be corrupt on some level. So, what is the

point of voting for any of them?” While several factors influence low voter turnout in Cook County, public corruption is one such factor. The impact of public corruption is substantial. It impacts low voter turnout by creating a need for more viable choices in trustworthy candidates for public office. If voters perceive political candidates as corrupt or they do not prioritize the public’s benefits instead of theirs, voters may feel disenchanting and disinterested in participating in elections. This cynicism can lead to apathy and disengagement from the political process, resulting in lower voter participation.

It’s important to consider that while rational choice theory provides a theoretical framework that may explain voting behavior, actual voting choices and decisions are often more multifaceted, changing over time and influenced by factors beyond rational personal intentions, needs, benefits, and self-interest. Such complex factors as political loyalty, cultural norms, social identity, political norms, and other societal factors may collectively shape voting choices. With this consideration, another theoretical framework such as the altruism theory of voting may use with the rational choice theory or replace the rational choice theory to provide a more robust analysis of current voting trends.

#### **Summary of Chapter 4**

This chapter provided information regarding the perspectives and opinions of registered voters in Cook County, Illinois. I also described the participants’ demographics who provided data for this study. All the participants gave clear accounts and honest opinions on why they did not vote in the 2019 municipal election. This chapter contained the results of the findings to the research question: Does voter perception of public

corruption diminish citizen' willingness to vote? This study aimed to understand why registered voters refrain from voting and if public corruption influences their voting decisions. The study's findings suggest that registered voters experienced frustration with public corruption and perceived a lack of effective measures to prevent it. Participants emphasized the importance of having their public officials work towards benefiting the public rather than rewarding themselves.

One participant was inclined to vote to eliminate corrupt public officials rather than not voting. Combating corruption is vital in upholding the principles of effective governance and preserving the faith and trust of the public in their government. Participants also noted that time constraints and lack of information about the candidates limited their voting decisions and suggested election day should be a holiday to maximize voting participation. Chapter 5 will discuss implications for social change, the study's limitations, future research recommendations, and a conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This qualitative case study investigated how public corruption influenced registered voters' decision to vote in the 2019 Cook County Municipal Election. The results indicated that corruption negatively impacted voting decisions. Voters also considered time off from work and a lack of unbiased information about the candidates when deciding whether to participate in elections. Participants also indicated they did not trust the government.

This qualitative case study explores eligible voters' decisions in the 2019 municipal election and their perspectives on the impact of public corruption on their decision not to vote. The goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of voters' behavior and the role of corruption in shaping electoral participation. I completed three interviews with participants who met the study's criteria. I designed the interview questions to stimulate the voting experiences of registered voters in a climate of widespread public corruption. The study's data were collected using semistructured interviews with sixteen open-ended probing questions, then transcribed and coded. Chapter 5 further includes the interpretations of the findings, limitations, recommendations, implications, and a conclusion.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The literature review highlighted concepts of public corruption, factors that hinder voter turnout, principles of democracy, and the relationship between corruption and voter turnout. These concepts were applied to the study's findings to develop a nuanced discussion about voter participation. Additionally, the Literature Review addressed

voting in the United States, effective governance, and corruption's impact on democracy. There were five findings from the study.

The first finding was that participants believed that public corruption is self-serving. The literature research highlighted this definition as Treisman (2000) indicated that public corruption is "The misuse of public office for private gain" (p. 399). Another researcher defined public corruption as "Private gains in the form of cash or gifts by a government official, in exchange for providing specific benefits to private individuals or groups" (Dincer & Johnston, 2014, p. 3).

A second finding was that registered voters of Precinct 41 thought Cook County could make voting more convenient and accessible. For example, based on interview responses, participants were convinced that making election day a holiday would increase their participation in the electoral process. The literature review did not discuss this finding. However, it adds knowledge to public policy regarding voting laws, voting rights, and voter turnout.

A third finding was that eligible voters believed they lacked sufficient and unbiased information on the political candidates. P2 indicated he did not trust any political parties because they have their agenda and engage in negative campaigning rather than provide actual policies and positive outcomes. Negative campaigning in advertisements, where candidates focus on attacking their political opponents rather than presenting their policies, can contribute to bias and insufficient information disseminating to voters. P3 indicated that he did not know the alderman's name for his precinct. Ensuring that voters have access to sufficient and unbiased information is vital for voter

participation and the functioning of a vibrant democracy. The literature review did not highlight political candidates' background information. However, it adds knowledge to public policy regarding improving voter turnout and electoral reforms in democratic municipal governance.

The fourth finding was that the Cook County government should minimize public corruption to prevent voter disengagement. This point is consistent with the research literature on public corruption. For example, Chong et al. (2015) concluded that corruption in Mexican politics made some voters unwilling to vote. Corruption becomes entrenched when voters do not participate because corrupt officials remain in office, further declining voter participation. Corruption is a detrimental practice that can destroy a healthy democracy. Further, the cumulative effect of corruption creates a downward spiral that erodes citizen trust, diverting funds from essential services such as education and healthcare. This diversion of valuable resources weakens the overall economic fabric of democratic institutions. Moreover, citizens' trust diminished when they perceived public officials were corrupt. Other studies have also confirmed this point. The researchers opined that practical anticorruption initiatives such as transparency could decrease citizens' perception of public corruption, increasing citizens' trust in government (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Bauhr & Grimes, 2014; Gronlund & Setala, 2012; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Villoria et al., 2013).

The last finding was that participants indicated that Cook County had had high public corruption for decades. They expressed deep frustration that corruption existed without a viable solution for so long. The literature also supports this position that public

corruption is prevalent in other democracies without viable solutions, as Brown and Heinrich (2017) indicated, and little expert attention are devoted to solving corruption.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations to this qualitative case study. The first factor limiting the study was the relatively small sample size. Every attempt was made to have a larger sample size inclusive of all demographic groups, but a few respondents were willing to participate. I sent invitation letters to nearly 300 registered voters in Cook County, and only three male participants answered the telephone interview questions. Obtaining responses from all designated age groups was a significant challenge. The United States Postal Service returned nearly 30% of the invitation letters due to incorrect addresses, and no forwarding addresses were available. Although the sample size is sufficient for this study, I do not recommend generalization to the entire Cook County or other municipal districts. A larger sample size would have led to more robust findings with varying reasons and opinions contributing to a low voter turnout in Cook County, making it likely to generalize the results to voters in other counties.

The second factor limiting this study was the lack of female voters. I sent 150 invitation letters to registered female voters, but they did not agree to participate in the study. Women make up a significant voting bloc, and it is necessary to understand how female voters make their voting choices in response to public corruption. Given that this study's findings obtained the perspectives of male voters only, it may not genuinely reflect the voting choices or perspectives on whether public corruption influences their voting choices.



### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

My interest in examining the perspectives of Cook County's citizens' voting choices in response to public corruption was based on several reasons. First, Cook County is known as one of the most corrupt counties in the United States. As previously discussed in Chapter 1, Illinois has had four former governors imprisoned for using their public offices for personal benefits or gains (Daily Journal, 2013). Second, as a registered voter, I want our government to work best for the people. As I investigated the news, I desired to understand why corruption is rampant in my state. I discovered documents outlining the number of public officials arrested and subsequently imprisoned. However, based on my research, there has been no scientific investigation or research study to explore the topic further. This study is unique because it is the first empirical attempt to explore the subject from registered voters' perspective.

From this study, I arrived at two recommendations for future research. The first recommendation is a study with a larger sample size, where the findings may generalize to the entire municipal county and other municipals in the 50 geographical United States. A larger sample size may generate richer data that better explains the various factors influencing voting behaviors in Cook County. The second recommendation is to investigate whether money and major donors make elections more corrupt. It became apparent in this study that the role of money in municipal elections needed further research. As discussed in Chapter 1, in the 2018 governor's race, the candidates spent an unprecedented nearly \$250 million. Generally, candidates' spending involves campaign advertising outlining their policies and attacking their opponents' plans and credibility. A

future study could also explore whether these advertisements serve to inform voters about the candidates and policy-based agendas. Thus, future research examining the role of campaign contributions and including a larger sample size than just three could benefit the electoral process and encourage reluctant voters to cast their ballots to remove corrupt officials and limit the influence of political contributions.

### **Social Change Implications**

Voting plays a vital role in establishing stable and effective governance. Sustainable democracy relies on citizens' participation. When citizens participate in elections, it strengthens democratic principles. Likewise, when the government functions effectively, citizens benefit. Elected officials must work on behalf of the citizens. This study aimed to help positive social change in municipal government by bringing awareness to implement measures that work to minimize public corruption and maximize voter turnout. This study highlights how registered voters perceive corruption, local governance, and barriers to their voting choices. The perceptions of registered voters explored in this study revealed the need for electoral reforms and reduced public corruption that negatively impact voters' trust and lives. Elected leaders can use the findings and recommendations from this study to develop and implement strategies that minimize corruption and improve voter turnout.

The social change implications of this study are that the findings can help public officials recognize the negative impact of corruption and help them implement policy changes to combat corruption. This study also helps public officials better understand factors impacting voter turnout, trust in government, and citizen participation. It allows

elected officials to implement anticorruption initiatives. Anticorruption measures such as transparency and integrity training help leaders work for the benefit of citizens and not their gains. If implemented, anticorruption initiatives can reverse the adverse effects of being one of the most corrupt municipal counties in the United States.

### **Recommendations**

Drawing on participant responses and the scholarly literature, this study recommends the following: (a) the establishment of an anticorruption agency; (b) the formation of a bipartisan voter initiative; (c) the implementation of a new voter registration and maintenance system; and (d) the formation of an initiative to make voting more convenient and accessible.

#### **Anticorruption Agency**

The role of an anticorruption agency in Cook County comprised of community members and bipartisan elected officials to monitor corruption would be to:

- develop anticorruption initiatives and standards,
- investigate corruption, and
- provide ethics training to elected officials.

An anticorruption agency can help increase transparency, help monitor the County's business transactions, and reduce the risk of corrupt behaviors. Based on the literature, corruption involves bribery. According to Simpson et al. (2022), the number of politically elected officials and business leaders implicated, indicted, or convicted for corruption in 2020 is astounding. In Simpson's report, most of the significant political corruption cases of 2020 involved bribery. Britannica (2023) defined bribery as the act of promising,

giving, receiving, or agreeing to accept money or any item of value with the intent of influencing a public official in performing their official duties. For this reason, all vendor contracts should be approved by a committee instead of a single person. Elected leaders should disclose all business transactions involving personal benefits from individuals or companies wanting to do business with the County. Leaders with personal affiliations should refrain from voting to approve related contracts.

Given Illinois' history of long-term corruption, transparency is essential. As Krah and Mertens (2020) pointed out, transparency and tangible policy actions are factors in reducing corruption in local governments. An anticorruption agency that focuses on transparency as a variable to reduce corruption may be a viable option. However, Mungiu-Pippidi and Dadašov (2017) asserted the effectiveness of specific anti-corruption measures is contingent on the prevailing context, particularly the presence of the rule of law, while others remain inconsequential. Rothstein (2018) also expressed the sentiment that despite the significant surge in research and policy focus on corruption and anticorruption measures, the outcomes of numerous anticorruption and purported good-governance initiatives have, thus far, yielded unimpressive results. Future research should explore transparency with corruption in local government. If future research demonstrates a link between governmental work, business affiliations, and corruption, the findings could improve transparency and potentially reduce long-term corruption.

### **Bipartisan Voter Initiative**

A strong democracy depends on active citizenry participation. Voters should participate in elections throughout the year and not only during March and November

elections. Therefore, I recommend implementing a bipartisan voter initiative that seeks to inform, educate, and inspire voters about the importance of having full participation in a representative government. When thinking about political statements, interviewees mentioned they did not always have sufficient information about the candidate or were able to receive unbiased information. For example, a participant indicated that he did not know the alderman's name for his precinct.

### **Initiative to Maintain Accurate Vota Data**

This study also recommends implementing a new initiative to maintain accurate voter data. Accurate voter data is essential for effectively maintaining voters' records. Cook County should engage in some form of voter registration list maintenance to reduce problems caused by incorrect addresses. For example, data collection for this study was challenging in part because of inaccurate addresses. The U.S. Postal Services returned nearly 30% of invitations sent to prospective participants. Inaccuracies in address records can result in the voters not receiving mail ballots or participating in absentee voting. With technological advancements, voters can quickly change their addresses online or via telephone. A system that maintains accurate voter data can improve voter turnout.

Finally, this study also recommends that voting be more convenient and accessible. To make voting more convenient and easier for every citizen, Cook County can implement or enhance three measures listed below:

- more convenient polling places
- extended polling hours
- making Election Day a holiday

### ***More Convenient Polling Places***

The County should provide more convenient polling places to help ensure that individuals such as working-class people, single moms, individuals with a disability, and older adults can vote without difficulty. For example, when voters have to wait long lines to vote, it may discourage them from voting, impacting turnout. As a Pew Research 2018 Survey indicated, more than 25% of eligible voters included long wait times and large crowds at polling stations as a concern to their voting decision (Hartig, 2018).

Additionally, a study participant indicated he had no time off from work to vote. By providing more convenient polling locations, individuals could vote during their lunchtime because they have proximity to polling locations. When individuals find voting easy and convenient, it may improve public trust in the electoral process because they consider their benefit. This enhanced trust can drive voter turnout and reduce voter cynicism about municipal governance.

### ***Extended Polling Hours***

Extending voting hours may increase voter participation. Extending polling hours from 7:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. can make voting more convenient for working individuals. Longer voting hours help reduce overcrowding, wait times, and long lines. These measures may improve voters' overall experience and encourage their participation.

### ***Making Election Day a Holiday***

Cook County should make election day a holiday, enhancing voters' participation. For example, Puerto Rico gave an entire day off for voting and had an 82% turnout in the

2000 elections (Cheng, 2008). Moreover, P3 said he did not vote because he did not have the day off. If election day becomes a holiday, it may improve voter turnout.

Implementing these measures can help eliminate obstacles that prevent citizens from exercising their right to vote. Measures that allow more convenient polling places, extended polling hours, and making election day a holiday may likely encourage greater participation in the electoral process and strengthen democratic processes. Voting is a constitutional right and is essential to democracy. Therefore, citizens should have easy access to cast their ballots.

### **Conclusion**

Long-term corruption has been a challenge in Cook County, resulting in voter apathy, cynicism, lower election turnout, and lack of trust in government. Widespread corruption increases the need for an effective anticorruption initiative. Such initiative requires effective leadership and policy implementation to curb corrupt behaviors that may potentially improve voters' trust and increase participation in elections. Finally, understanding how corruption occurs and what can be done to reduce occurrences will improve the municipal government's ability to serve the people's economic and social interests.

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### Appendix A: Selection Criteria

1. All the participants are individuals who were eligible to vote in the 2019 municipal election.
2. Individuals who had continuously lived in Cook County, Illinois for 3 or more years.
3. The participants are at least 18 years of age.
4. They understand participation is voluntary – no payment.
5. They are willing to have telephone interview
6. They give consent to the interview being recorded.
7. They agreed to post-interview clarification and follow-up.
8. They agree to sign informed consent.



### Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. Greet the interviewee and establish a welcoming interview setting.
2. Obtain consent to record the interview.
3. Reiterate that all answers are confidential.
4. Discuss length of interview - 20 to 30 minutes.
5. Reiterate the purpose of the research and why they have been chosen for the interview.
6. Start the interview questions promptly.
7. Takes notes accordingly.
8. Before the interview end, ask the interviewee if he or she would like to provide any information not previously covered.
9. At the closing, express thank you to the interviewee.
10. Provide the interviewee with my contact information for post-interview follow-up in case there arises any concerns.

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. How would you define public corruption?
2. How important is the topic of public corruption to you?
3. How would you describe the way public corruption makes you feel?
4. How would you describe your experience of the knowledge of public corruption?
5. Did you vote in the 2019 municipal election?
6. Describe any major factor(s) that you consider when voting.
7. Describe your perception of the current county government.
8. Do reports of corruption affect your trust in public officials?
9. How would you describe your voting experience?
10. How would you describe any changes to your voting choices while having knowledge of public corruption?
11. Would you consider voting for a candidate who is being investigated for public corruption? (Why or why not?)
12. Do reports of public corruption in Cook County government influence the way you vote?
13. Describe how your perceptions of corruption help or hinder your decision to vote during the 2019 municipal elections.
14. What impact do you believe public corruption has on your decision to vote?
15. Explain how public corruption influences your voting decision.
16. Do you have any further information you would like to add?

## Appendix D: Invitation to Participant

### Study on Public Corruption and Low Voter Turnout in Cook County, 2019

*Please note:* This profile will be used to select 3 participants who have met certain criteria and can provide varying different points of view on the problem being studied. Not everyone who completes the profile will be selected for this study.

Date:

Respondent Name  
Respondent Address  
Respondent Address

Dear Respondent:

My name is Dawn Johnson. I am a doctoral student at Walden University's School of Public Policy and Administration. I am conducting research to explore how public corruption influence your willingness to vote in the 2019 Chicago Municipal Election. You are invited to take part in this research study.

#### **Eligibility Requirements**

- At least 18 years of age
- Eligible to vote in the 2019 Chicago Municipal Election
- Live in Chicago for 3 or more years
- Have knowledge of public corruption in Cook County

#### **Study Requirements**

One telephone interview will last approximately 30–45 minutes. The time will be scheduled at a convenient and appropriate time for both you and the interviewer.

#### **Benefits of Participation**

Through your willingness to participate in this study you may:

- Help broaden the knowledge on corruption of elected officials in Chicago.
- Help increase voter participation in the electoral process.
- Provide valuable information to policymakers and other stakeholders in better addressing the problems of low voter turnout and elected officials who use their public office for personal benefits (public corruption).

I know that your time is valuable to you and I appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. If you are selected to participate in this study, you will receive a \$10 Visa gift card in appreciation of your valuable time. The gift card will be given at the conclusion of the interview.

This interview is voluntary and will not require you to do anything you don't feel comfortable doing. The meeting is simply to get your opinion and your experiences as a registered voter in Chicago and having knowledge of public corruption. All information collected during the interview will be kept strictly confidential.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience to let me know your willingness to participate in the study. If you are interested, we will schedule a date and time for the interview. My telephone number is (xxx) xxx-xxxx. You can also email me at xxxxxxxxx@[waldenu.edu](mailto:xxxxxxx@waldenu.edu) or return this letter in the enclosed self-stamped envelope to xxxxxxxxxx. Please include your name and a phone number or email for me to contact you. To maintain your confidentiality, please do not include your name or address on the envelope.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Dawn Johnson

Doctoral Candidate

Walden University

All Enquiries Are Strictly Confidential

## Appendix E: Participant Demographic Profile

## Study on Public Corruption and Low Voter Turnout in Chicago, 2019

*Please note: this profile will be used to select 7-12 participants who have met certain criteria and can provide varying different points of view on the problem being studied. Not everyone who completes the profile will be selected for this study.*

1. To which of the following age groups do you belong?

18-29       30-44       45-59       60 and over

2. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

3. How many years have you lived in Chicago? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Please indicate your marital status:

Single       Married       Divorced       Widowed       Separated

5. What is your highest level of formal education?

High School     College graduate     Master's degree  
 Professional degrees (MD, JD, PhD., etc.)

6. Please indicate with which of the following political parties you identify?

Republican     Democratic     Independent     Others

7. What is your race? If the answer is not listed, please write it next to 'other':

White     Black or African American     American Indian and Alaska Native  
 Asian     Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander     Hispanic or Latino  
 Other race: \_\_\_\_\_

8. What is your approximate yearly household income? Include income from all individuals who contribute to the household budget.

Less than \$10,000     \$10,000 to \$30,000     \$30,001 to \$50,000  
 \$50,001 to \$70,000     Over \$70,000