

# **Effects of Information Framing on College Students' Attitudes Towards the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**

## **Benefits**

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**Abstract:** This research examines student beliefs about the SNAP benefit program. More specifically, this work intends to determine if the framing of information about a divisive topic in political discourse can alter individual perceptions of emerging voters. In the survey used, respondents were exposed to either a positive, negative, or neutral frame. This study expects that negativity bias, the expectation that people will react more strongly to negative information frames than positive frames, might be present. The randomized survey was taken by students at a Midwestern university who were asked a variety of questions about the effectiveness of SNAP followed with simple demographic questions. If framing has substantive effects, it could inform the ways in which the public understands political news about policy reforms to SNAP as well as how elected officials or interest groups try to frame the costs and benefits of SNAP.

## Introduction

The U.S. federal government spends 66.5 billion dollars on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits per year, which equates to serving about 40 million people. This research aims to determine whether the SNAP benefits program is perceived positively by the public. Previous research suggests that a majority of people, from all socioeconomic classes, believe that SNAP benefits are a waste of government spending. In an election year, if a majority of people are unhappy with the program, then candidates should be addressing this issue and ways to make the program better. Information frames can gauge people's opinions on welfare and see how both positive influences and negative influences manipulate them. This paper specifically focuses on how students at Indiana University perceive the program. This topic is important because many students at Indiana University have just begun to vote and will be the future of voting for the country. Indiana University students are a representation of their generation, and their perceptions of SNAP benefits could be a signal of how the policy will develop in the future. If people do not want to help the poor, then the future of U.S. federal government assistance might be that the program will cease to exist. However, if people support SNAP benefits, then it will continue to be around in its current form or a moderated form.

The specific research question is, "How are college students' attitudes towards people on government assistance, specifically SNAP benefits, shaped by whether a positive, negative, or neutral information frame is used to describe a person's circumstance?" Frames are being implemented in this study in an attempt to avoid social desirability bias. This question has not been asked before, and there is not much research on strictly student opinion on the issue. SNAP benefits were selected over other programs because it is widely known to students and is a vast program helping millions of people every month. However, there has been a multitude of studies

done about the public's attitudes towards the program. The SNAP benefits program was created in 1964 by Lyndon B Johnson. Since 1964, welfare has remained a hot-button topic in politics. The consensus is that the proponents of the program are clearly on the liberal side versus the conservative side who are clearly against it.

## **Literature Review**

### **Information Framing**

There are many different types of framing categories that can be used for a study. The main frame used in this study is frames in communication (Scheufele 1999, Druckman 2001). Frames in communication are how a speaker "uses words, images, elements of an event, etc. to relay information" in a way that may or may not shape the reader's minds (Busby, Flynn, Druckman n.d.) While there are other frames that are effective, this thesis focuses more on the framing of communication because the SNAP benefits are being portrayed through two different frames explicitly created for this survey.

One type of information framing, not necessarily separate from information framing, is equivalence framing. An equivalence framing effect occurs when "two logically equivalent (but not transparently equivalent) statements of a problem lead decision-makers to choose different options" (Olsen 2015). This is better within the general category of frames of thought because it attempts to change a person's thoughts or at least to push them to a particular decision based on wording or statistics given to a person.

Communication frames help to show if people can be swayed or not based on some given information. It helps show if negative information is more powerful than positive information. Olsen (2015) conducted a study on the Danish population administering two surveys; one had a

negative connotation (10% dissatisfaction), while the other had a positive connotation (90% satisfaction) in order to see how the Danish public feels about their healthcare system, specifically the emergency room. He hypothesized that a "positive description would lead to positive memories," and a negative description would lead to negative memories, which is the same hypothesis of this study (Olsen 2015). For the citizens that were administered the survey with public services being a 90%, 65.9 percent agreed with the satisfaction rating while the people who were administered the 10% dissatisfaction rate were only 45.4 percent satisfied with the system (Olsen 2015). This research project has opted to include a control group in the study as Olsen lamented on the fact that he neglected to include a control group.

Biases are systematic errors in thinking that leads people to make different judgments or decisions. Biases and framing are interlinked. There are multiple types of biases that could happen in a study based on surveying students—but the most prevalent that scholars using equivalent framing techniques typically have to deal with is negativity bias. (Olsen 2015). Negativity bias is where "negative events are more salient, potent, dominant in combinations, and generally more efficacious than positive events" (Rozin and Royzman 2001, 297). In other words, people are often more affected by adverse events in their life than positive events. This is because negative events threaten people's livelihood, while positive events usually do not have the same immediacy (Hibbing, Smith, and Alford 2014). This suggests that negative events stick in a person's mind as awful and significant while a positive event feels good at the moment, but it is difficult to remember the good feelings as opposed to negative ones.

One-way Olsen's study attempts to combat negativity bias is to introduce alternative sources of information to provide more information to the respondent. The results of the study show that people who were introduced to more alternative sources on the subject responded

positively to whether they were provided with positive or negative statistics (Olsen 2015).

However, the study also found that this did not work both ways. People that were introduced to a positive study and then the negative one responded positively to only the positive one, but the people that were provided with the negative statistic first responded negatively to both statistics (Olsen 2015). Druckman (2004) suggests that exposing people to more information makes them aware of the framing effects and dilutes the survey. He also suggests that people with strong beliefs dilute the effect of framing because no matter what statistics they are presented with, they will not change their mind (Druckman 2004). This could be a potential bias for a study about social welfare because it is a hot button topic people might already have their opinions formed. This is backed by Olsen's results that healthcare professionals rated the system positively, whether they got the negative statistic or not (Olsen 2015). Also, people who had recently been in the hospital for an extended amount of time were more likely to give a positive rating (Olsen 2015). In light of this information, for this particular study there was no alternative information available to respondents in an attempt to not dilute the frames.

### Attitudes Towards Government Assistance

People's attitudes toward government assistance have remained similar over time. Even when welfare was first created, people had a mentality that they should not have to support other "able-bodied" people (Kallen & Miller). Americans do not like the idea of paying for someone to survive since many Americans can support themselves. This follows the mentality of thinking that homeless people should just "get a job," not considering other factors as to why the person is homeless in the first place.

There is a lot of negative sentiments surrounding the program, especially with the frenzy of media coverage and bias that reports on the program (Bohon). The people that receive the most hostility for using the program are minorities, including immigrants who are not U.S. citizens. According to Cybelle Fox, white people in states with a large number of Latinos tend to support Latinos on welfare more than they support blacks on welfare, although the support for Latinos being granted welfare was still relatively slim (Fox 2004). Fox's findings correlate with the negative stigma that surrounds SNAP benefits that many people believe U.S. federal government social welfare supports the lazy and punishes the hard workers.

In the article *Cleavage in American Attitudes Towards Social Welfare*, author Epstein describes that measuring social attitudes in America is a difficult task because one must look at many factors including race, ethnicity, gender, and even the union status of the household. These are important distinctions to make because there could be underlying factors, such as, the idea that women are more sympathetic to people who need food stamps, or that a specific ethnic group is more likely to support welfare over another ethnic group (Epstein). Epstein used 30 years' worth of data collected by the General Social Survey (GSS) to analyze people's opinions by their income, gender, and ethnicity. Surprisingly, he found that most people were hostile towards welfare, no matter their class, race, or gender. The low-income class was slightly less hostile, but the margin was so minuscule he chose not to include the difference in his analysis. He simply acknowledged it at the beginning of his study. The consensus of propaganda surrounding this issue is that low-income people are proponents of the SNAP benefits program, but this study reveals that no income class supports this program.

The "forgotten Americans" are some prime candidates to receive government welfare. "Forgotten Americans" are the people who have been left behind by the economy, many of

whom fought to keep their blue-collar jobs in the 2016 election (Sawhill). The "forgotten American" make up 38% of the workforce in the United States. (Sawhill). In her study, Sawhill interviewed a multitude of "forgotten Americans" who believed President Trump when he said he was going to bring back manufacturing jobs. She found that a majority of them want to be "self-supporting" and do not want the U.S. federal government to have to pick up their slack (Sawhill). This goes against the negative stigma that surrounds the SNAP benefits program that its recipients are lazy (Bohon). However, the "forgotten Americans" inflate the negativity by being hostile towards SNAP benefits, saying things like, "women 'pop out' another baby to get more money" or that everyone was "milking the system" (Sawhill). Sawhill's interviews revealed that most people want to be able to support themselves, but she concludes that they will not be able to until taxes are raised.

Brown-Iannuzzi et al. (2017), focused on the racial mental stigma around welfare recipients. The authors took a picture of a white male and blurred the image slightly, making it difficult but not impossible to tell the gender and race. Then, they added features that would be stereotypical to an African American and a Latino and gave the pictures to individuals. The picture with African American qualities did not get as much welfare and was denied welfare more than the white male version. The Latino picture had inconclusive results. This study was done in 2017 and is very recent, meaning the social stigmas are still surrounding welfare recipients.

Likewise, DeSante's study (2013) was also done very recently and concurred with the conclusions drawn in the Brown-Iannuzzi study. DeSante's study was conducted on university students, where he asked them to sit down and take a questionnaire without giving them any details on what the survey was measuring. They were asked to allocate money to a list of names

of people who were not real. The list of names consisted off stereotypical black names and stereotypical names. The results showed that students gave significantly more welfare money to people with white-sounding names, sometimes not giving any money to black-sounding names. When the students learned of the true nature of the study and what it was measuring, they became enraged, worrying about their less-than-socially-desirable answers.

### Why College Students?

The views of college students are essential for this study because they are the first waves of voters in the new generation. The millennial generation is cutoff is 1995, making the youngest person 25 years old, and Generation Z is just beginning to get political and have a voice in the polls since they are beginning to turn 18. With this in mind, significant changes could happen to the existing SNAP benefits program. All generations have a "unique identity and culture," which makes it difficult to predict how the results of elections are going to turn out (Troksa). However, the Millennial generation views things similarly to Generation Z and is averse to the Boomer generation, which is especially crucial since the three youngest generations outvoted the baby boomers by 2.1 million votes (Troksa, Cillfullo). The tides may begin to shift in the direction of voting as Boomer's votes begin to lose value because there are fewer members and are being replaced with Generation Z and Millennials, making Generation Z and Millennial viewpoints on welfare very important. Millennials cast 26.1 million votes along with Generation X who casted 31.6 million votes (Cillfullo). This means the tides are turning, and political leaders might begin to shift towards the views of Generation X, the Millennials, and Generation Z.

The question is important because there is little existing research on the views that college students have on welfare, specifically SNAP benefits. As mentioned above, college



students are the future, and it is essential to know what the future holds for this specific program. Also, if a majority of people are against the program, then maybe it is time to propose a fix instead of letting the program slide through the bureaucratic cracks.

## **Data and Methods**

The independent variable is the frames used, and the dependent variable is the views that people have based on that specific frame. The independent variable is the frame because it is what changes from survey to survey, but the content stays the same. The part of the survey that changes is whether the positive, negative, or neutral frame is used. The dependent variable is people's views because they depend on which frame is used during the survey. There are also a few concepts like SNAP benefits (food stamps), students, and beliefs. Respondents are going to bring preconceived notions into the mix because food stamps are a well-known program, but the frame may shift their views a certain way. When the word frame is used, it is referring to the way that SNAP benefits will be discussed in a short excerpt followed immediately by seven questions that attempt to extract how the survey taker feels about SNAP benefit via the excerpt. The specific language for the excerpts, frames, and survey questions can be found in Appendix A.

The hypothesis is that responses to the negative frame are going to be more negative than the responses for the positive frame. However, the survey will use a control frame that might skew the data in a more positive light because the survey was conducted on a liberal campus. The control frame is being added, so there is a point of comparison for the rest of the data. The control frame will likely give people's own opinions, which can be compared against the positive and negative frames. The initial hypothesis is that the results will align with the positive frame of SNAP, but after reading the research presented in the literature review, the results will probably

align more with the negative views. However, the researcher chose to keep the original hypothesis. The last thing that needs to be kept in mind is that Indiana University is on a liberal campus, which also might skew the data—especially if many of the respondents are from O'Neill students. On average, O'Neill students are well versed in the political world because the students study public affairs. However, in the end, some respondents were from a variety of different schools.

## **Data Collection**

For this research question, a survey was created based on using the method that a famous surveyor, Asmus Olsen. The survey was administered through Qualtrics because it is the best software to administer a framing-type survey. There were three separate questions that Qualtrics randomly assigned to the people who took the survey.

Olsen laments on the fact that there was no control group in his study. In this study, there is no neutral frame or a control frame. It was vital that respondents only took the survey one time. Although Olsen believes that alternative sources would help shape views towards the statistics, the raw data of how people feel based solely on the excerpt they read is essential for this research question. However, Olsen contended that people react more negatively to topics when they do not know much about them, so the survey will have a background section to let the survey respondent know more about the subject in a more objective way and not just what they have heard through news outlets. A more detailed description of the survey can be found under Appendix A.

Like in Olsen's study, the excerpts are only to differ slightly in valence. The only difference between the two is whether it has the positive number (90%) the negative number

(10%) or both numbers. Olsen's statistics were the same just inverses (90% and 10%), and he measured about 20 points difference in satisfaction between the two statistics, which is a remarkable difference. In order to do this as an equivalent frame, the survey will also have data that is inversely related to each other. Using inverse statistics that state a claim eliminates a possible bias by assigning the SNAP benefits to a specific race or gender.

The first survey condition will have a vignette with a negative frame where a common situation is describes a single-mother who is on food stamps and looking for a job. Then, a statistic will appear about what percentage of people abuse the welfare system. Then there will be questions about how the person feels about government assistance after reading the short excerpt provided. There will also be some demographic questions about the person's gender, age, and what school they go to in order to see if there are specific trends amongst respondents. The second question will be a positive frame where it describes the inverse relationship of the situation described in the negative frame. The same questions will follow about how the person feels about government assistance and demographic questions. Finally, the third survey will be a neutral frame where both the positive and negative information is given. With both sides of the data available, people may be able to make a neutral decision on their views after seeing both the negative and positive versions of the data. However, they also may respond based on their preconceived notions of the SNAP benefits program. The survey is being constructed this way because it will measure how positive and negative frames affect how people and, in general, feel about a particular issue. In this particular case, how students feel about government assistance. Original data was collected for this research project via a survey.

Students do not like to take lengthy surveys, so the promise of a short survey made it possible to get enough respondents to draw a conclusion. The survey was opened for about a

week, concluding with 122 viable responses. The multitude of students at Indiana University allowed for the survey to be sent to a large number of students, with the hopes that some of them would take the survey. Indiana University was selected as the student population base because they are a large population. Also, it is the institution this research was conducted at, so there are already established connections to professors and students. Since many of the responses are from O'Neill students, professors from other schools within the University were asked to publish the survey as well in an attempt to get multiple student perspectives. An email was sent to 18 professors in various departments within the O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs, the Kelley School of Business, and the College of Arts and Sciences. Of those 18 professors, five responded, saying they would post the survey link on their canvas, and one refused. The other 12 professors never responded. The five professors who agreed to post it had around 430 students in their classes. The survey was also posted on the researcher's social media asking for any Indiana University student to take it, and posted it in a few classes that she was in. For these, about 300 students had access to take the survey. All in all, in order to get data collected in time to write a good thesis, the survey that was administered was a concise framing survey.

## **Analysis**

The survey was randomized through Qualtrics in order to create similar control and treatment groups. The survey was sent out and posted on Canvas for seven 100-level classes and one 400-level class. Participation was not required. The survey was also posted on the researcher's social media accounts, asking only Indiana University students to respond to the survey. There were 140 respondents to the survey, but only 122 responses were viable due to incomplete surveys or survey previews. There were 44 responses to the negative frame, 43

responses to the positive frame, and 35 responses to the neutral frame. As reported in the figure in Appendix B, a large majority of the survey participants came from the O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs. Emails were sent to a variety of different professors from a variety of different schools, but only professors from the O'Neill school responded. It is important to note that O'Neill students are likely to have interests different from students in other majors and may be more well-versed in politics and benefit programs such as SNAP benefits.

There were 60 males, 56 females, one person was non-binary, and one person preferred not to answer, making the gender spread even for males and females. Within the individual frames, there were 23 males, 19 females, and one preferred not to answer in the negative frame. There were 18 males, 21 females, and one non-binary person in the positive frame. For the neutral frame, there were 19 males and 15 females that took it. As shown in Appendix C, most respondents were between the age of 20 and 21. A majority of respondents, 89%, have never been on the receiving end of SNAP benefits. The spread of political ideology is shown in the figure in Appendix D, with a one being very conservative and a five being very liberal. A majority of people identified as either a three or a four on the political ideology scale, which is moderate and slightly liberal. This is important to keep in mind as certain sides of the political spectrum feel differently about social welfare programs. In the following sections, unless there is a massive disparity between strongly either agree or disagree, the totals will be combined as strongly agree/agree, strongly disagree/disagree, and neither agree nor disagree.

### Positive Frame

The positive frame, in theory, was expected to draw more positive responses from survey participants. The results were not as positive as expected. 36% of respondents believed that SNAP benefits encouraged people to work less while 37% disagreed. However, 79% believe SNAP benefits help people get back on their feet, and 81% believe SNAP benefits help prevent hunger and food insecurity. Most people did not have an opinion about whether it encourages women to have children out of wedlock. Sixty-nine percent of respondents believed that SNAP benefits should continue to be offered, and only 12% disagreed.

### Negative Frame

The negative frame, in theory, should influence people to respond more negatively to the topic. The results were more positive than initially anticipated. 63% of survey participants disagreed that SNAP encourages people to work less while 23% agreed. Forty-six percent of respondents disagreed that the U.S. federal government spends too much money, while 44% of people did not have an opinion on the subject. The consensus was overtly positive, and 87% of respondents agreed that SNAP benefits should continue to be implemented. Eighty-six percent of respondents agree SNAP benefits help them get back on their feet, and 84% of people agree SNAP benefits prevent hunger. The main reason why the researcher believes this has positive results is that no respondents registered as a one (conservative) on the political scale. Eighty-two percent registered as threes and fours, which is moving towards liberal. Sixty-nine percent of negative respondents disagreed that SNAP encourages people to work less while only 37% of positive respondents disagreed and 44% of neutral respondents. This does not align with the original hypothesis, where it was guessed that the negative result would elicit negative responses.

### Neutral Frame

The neutral frame, in theory, is supposed to capture people's initial, unprejudiced feelings towards a subject as it is given the same information that both frames are given. While it is acknowledged that people already have preconceived notion, the unprejudiced refers to the respondents not receiving the positive or negative frame. In this survey, 41% of respondents agree that SNAP benefits encourage people to work less, while 44% disagree. Eighty-three percent of respondents agree that SNAP benefits help prevent hunger and helps people get back on their feet in times of crisis. Forty-eight percent of people disagree that the U.S. federal government spends too much money, and 43% did not have an opinion. Seventy-two percent of respondents felt that the program should continue, while 23% had no opinion. The neutral frame was more in line with the results of the positive frame, which were overall more negative than the results of the negative frame. While 71% of neutral and 69% of positive respondents believe that SNAP benefits should continue, 88% of negative respondents believe that it should continue. Seventy-one percent is high for the number of respondents that want the benefits to continue; however, the 88% of negative respondents heavily outweigh it.

## **Effectiveness**

The frames had odd results. As a result of negativity bias, the negative frame was expected to have lower results. However, the positive frame appeared to have the most negative results. This could be because a majority of respondents scored themselves as a three, two, or one on the political scale. However, all in all, the positive frame did not do what it was expected to do. The negative frame had even more positive results than the neutral frame. In these results, there were more males than females. Generally, women are seen as the more compassionate people and would, in theory, support SNAP benefits more because they empathize (Epstein). However, there were more males in this survey. In total, 33% of people believed that welfare

encouraged people to work less while 36% disagreed. For how positive the negative frame was, it is surprising that, in total, the numbers were so close.

## **Study Limitations**

There are a few aspects of the survey that could be altered in the future to obtain clearer and more concise results. One problem that surfaced during the analysis of the results was the fact that an option of neither agree nor disagree was included on the Likert scale. Many participants chose the option of neither agree nor disagree. This is probably because of social desirability. However, for a topic as decisive as SNAP, a 4-point Likert scale would have been more effective. By forcing people to take a stand on their opinion, the data would have more accurately represented people's opinions (Bohon). Even though the survey was anonymous, people may have felt guilty for expressing their real opinion, so they chose the safe option of neither agree nor disagree. For some difficult questions, many people chose neither agree nor disagree option, which made it difficult to compare the results of the section. Also, in the demographic section, a question about the race of the survey respondent would have been useful. Some sections of the literary analysis talk about how different races view SNAP benefits; therefore, a question regarding the race of participants would be useful in order to tie the results back to the literary analysis more strongly. If this experiment were to be conducted again, it would be recommended not to include a neutral option and including a race demographic section.

## **Conclusion**

This topic is especially timely because of the global pandemic that has broken out, leaving many families without a source of income. SNAP benefits are especially prevalent for



many families as a record number of families are applying for SNAP benefits because of the global pandemic that has ensued (Aguilera). Especially with the new changes that President Trump aimed to implement started on April 1st. These new regulations sought to tighten the aid and to focus it more on forcing people to work, at least 20 hours a week, to be eligible to receive these benefits (Aguilera). However, because of COVID-19, the new regulations did not begin on their intended date, and they are being pushed back until the pandemic begins to reside. Also important is the fact that no matter what frame the question was posed, more than 80% of respondents wanted to keep SNAP benefits around and believe it does more good than bad. This survey was conducted before the pandemic and while the economy was thriving. The results could have differed based on if the survey was conducted during March/April when many families depended on SNAP benefits to survive. All in all, a majority of people want the program to continue, and it is likely to continue to be implemented for the foreseeable future.

## **Appendix:**

### Appendix A:

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, “provides nutrition benefits to supplement the food budget of needy families so they can purchase healthy food and move towards self-sufficiency.” For example, Morgan is a single mother of three children on SNAP benefits. She bounces between jobs because she has trouble finding childcare when she has to work. She lives in a small two-bedroom apartment and struggles to put food on the table.

In 2016, the government allocated \$66.5 billion dollars to SNAP, and 42.6 million Americans received SNAP benefits. An individual is eligible to apply for SNAP benefits if they are working for low wages or working part-time; unemployed; receiving welfare or other public assistance payments; elderly or disabled and are low-income; or homeless.

Positive: Ninety percent of people receiving SNAP benefits need and depend on them.

Negative: Ninety percent of people receiving SNAP benefits need and depend on them,

Neutral: Ten percent of people abuse the SNAP benefits system.

Questions:

1. Government welfare programs encourage people to work less.
2. Government welfare programs help people get on their feet when facing difficult situations such as unemployment, divorce, or a death in the family.
3. SNAP benefits help to prevent hunger and food insecurity.

4. The U.S. government spends too much money on the SNAP benefit program.
5. SNAP benefits encourage women to have children without being married.
6. SNAP benefits are necessary and should continue to be provided.

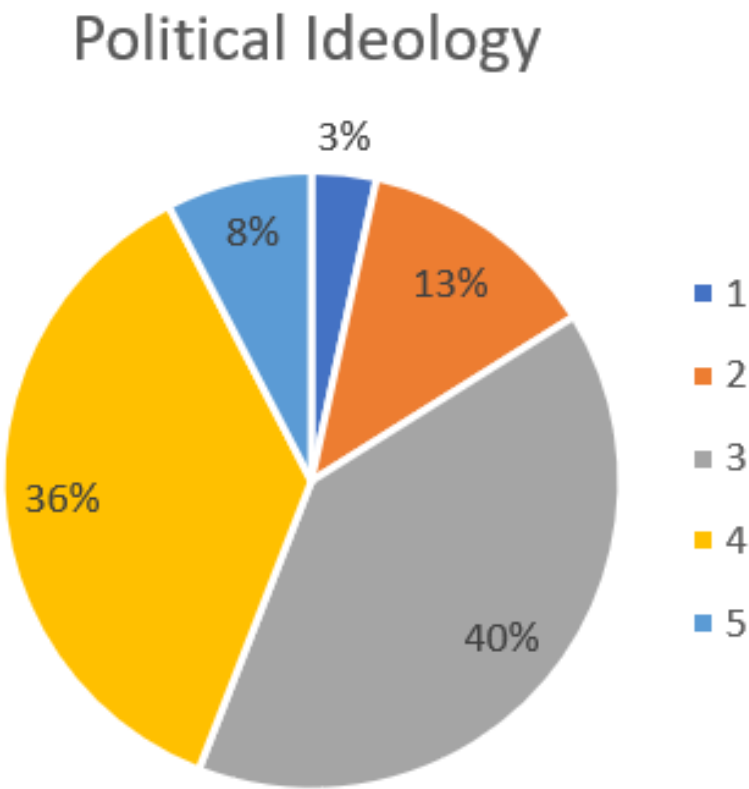
Demographic Questions

7. Have you or your parents ever received SNAP benefits?
8. What is your preferred gender?
9. How long have you been an IU student?
10. What is your age?
11. Rate your political ideology on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very conservative and 5 is very liberal.
12. In which campus unit are you enrolled?

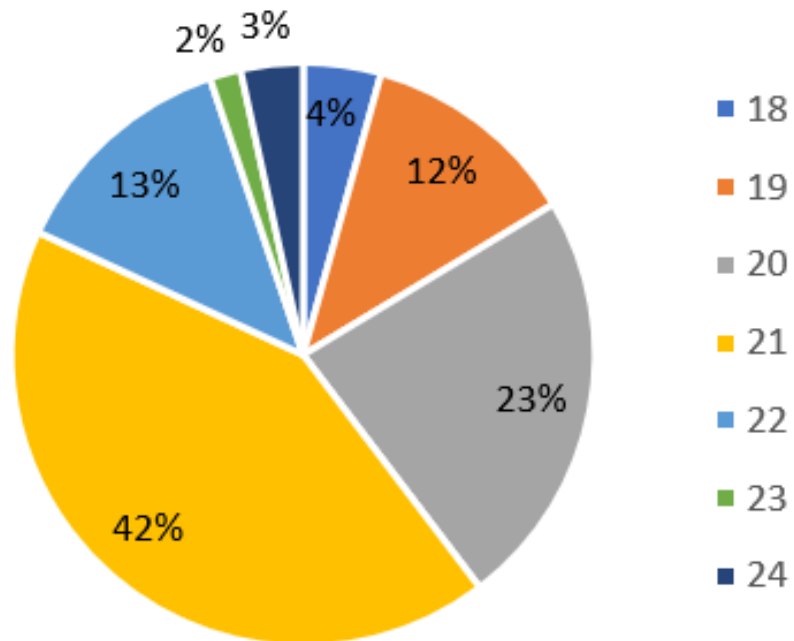
Appendix B:

In which campus unit are you enrolled in?





## Age of Respondents



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