

**LOST VOICES:**  
**THE CIVIC AND POLITICAL VIEWS OF DISFRANCHISED FELONS\***

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## LOST VOICES: THE CIVIC AND POLITICAL VIEWS OF DISFRANCHISED FELONS

Incarceration may affect many aspects of community life, from demographic composition to public safety. In this chapter we consider how criminal punishment further impacts communities by diluting the political strength and quieting the political voices of millions of disfranchised felons. Our goal is to provide new information about the civic and political views of convicted felons, as well as to consider the extent to which franchise restrictions distance them from the political system.

The criminal justice system in the United States is unique internationally not only for the relatively high rate at which it incarcerates citizens, but also for the sharp restrictions placed on the political rights of offenders and ex-offenders. Nearly all states (48 out of 50) bar incarcerated felons from voting; most (37 states) bar either parolees or probationers, or both, from voting; and a minority (13 states) ban some or all *ex-felons* from voting.<sup>1</sup> We estimate, based on a detailed, state-by-state canvass, that as a result of these various voting restrictions approximately 4.7 million felons and ex-felons are currently prevented from voting. This group represented approximately 2.3 percent of the voting age population in 2000, more than tripling the 1976 disfranchisement rate of .74 percent. The burden of disfranchisement falls especially heavily on African-American voters, both because of high conviction and incarceration rates and because they are disproportionately located in states with expansive disfranchisement laws (cf. Behrens, Uggen, and Manza 2002).<sup>2</sup>

When we compare the U.S. to other countries, the unique character of American felon disfranchisement and the political consequences of the criminal justice regime are thrown into sharp relief. In many countries, even prison inmates are permitted to vote (e.g., Denmark, Iceland, Ireland, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland, as

well as South Africa and Australia outside the EU), while in a number of other nations only certain categories of prisoners are denied voting rights.<sup>3</sup> A handful of European countries – mostly from the former Soviet Union, but the United Kingdom as well – restrict the voting rights of all prisoners. We are aware of no country (or region) in Europe that bans ex-offenders who have completed their sentences from access to the ballot.

[Figure X.1 about here.]

Figure X.1 shows the distribution of U.S. disfranchised felons at year-end 2000 across correctional supervision categories. We include a very conservative estimate of the legally disfranchised jail population, based on 10 percent of the inmate population at year-end 2000, though a much larger number of jail inmates are practically, if not legally, disfranchised.<sup>4</sup> Though the precise distribution is shifting continuously as states alter their disfranchisement laws, it remains the case that *only a minority of disfranchised felons are prison inmates*. In 2000, almost three-fourths of those disfranchised were either supervised in their communities or ex-felons who had completed their sentences. The rationale for disfranchisement would appear to be different for current prison inmates than for those who have completed their sentence (ex-felons), or those otherwise deemed fit to maintain community ties (probationers and parolees). Just as the loss of voting rights is a powerful symbol of a felon's "outsider" status, their restoration serves as a clear marker of reintegration and acceptance into a community of law-abiding citizens.

In discussions of the community impact of high criminal conviction and incarceration rates (including those explored in other chapters of this volume), one largely neglected question has been how these restrictions on the voting rights of felons impose costs on individual felons,

underrepresented groups, and on American democracy as a whole (for a handful of exceptions, see Demleitner 2000; Fellner and Mauer 1998; Keyssar 2000, pp. 62-63, 302-08; Manfredi 1998). The loss of the right to vote may be significant for individuals when it is experienced as a denial of a core right of citizenship (cf. Shklar 1991) or on groups such as African Americans, who are disproportionately disfranchised. For the polity as a whole, restrictions on the franchise matter if they influence election outcomes and change the balance of political power (Piven and Cloward 2000; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; cf. the historical examples in Keyssar 2000). If so, rising incarceration rates may constitute a unique “democratic reversal,” leading away from the universal trend towards franchise extension and the spread of democratic governance (Manza and Uggen 2003; Uggen and Manza 2002).

In our previous work, we have considered the macro-level impact of felon disfranchisement. We conducted a counterfactual analysis in which we asked what would have happened to election outcomes in the United States if felons had the right to vote (Uggen and Manza 2002). Matching known demographic characteristics of the felon population to those of the electorate as a whole to estimate turnout and vote choice, and taking into account the size of the disfranchised population in each state, we concluded that a number of Senate and Gubernatorial elections won by Republican candidates in recent years would likely have been reversed had felons been permitted to vote.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, we give attention to the political voices lost through disfranchisement by examining the substance of the political attitudes, preferences, engagements, and voting behavior of citizens convicted of crime. We make use of a mixed-method design employing two new sources of information: data from an ongoing panel study of former public school students in St. Paul, Minnesota (the Youth Development Study, or YDS) and semi-structured interviews with

33 convicted felons in Minnesota. To our knowledge, the YDS is the only representative survey containing information about the political preferences and behaviors of both offenders and non-offenders. The information we present here provides a unique, if limited and primarily suggestive, portrait of the disfranchised population.<sup>6</sup>

The chapter is organized as follows. Part one situates the study of political attitudes and behavior in a comparative frame of reference, noting that low levels of political knowledge and high levels of apathy can be found across the entire electorate. Part two reports our findings from the YDS survey. In part three, we allow felons to speak for themselves on politics, government, and public policy. A short conclusion summarizes our findings and suggests some policy implications.

#### A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON FELON POLITICAL ATTITUDES

An obvious starting assumption – based on widely held beliefs about criminal offenders – is that poor education and below-average citizenship norms would make criminal offenders a low-information group with high levels of political apathy. On the basis of demographic information, we would further expect to find very low turnout rates among offenders when they are eligible to vote (U.S. Department of Justice 1993; 2000).

Before jumping to such conclusions, however, it is vitally important to keep in mind some well-documented aspects of the American electorate as a whole. Let us consider political participation first. By comparison with other postindustrial democratic countries, turnout rates in U.S. national elections are shockingly low. While 70 to 90 percent turnout rates are common in national legislative elections in Europe, only about half of the U.S. voting age population has voted in recent presidential elections, and little over one-third in midterm (non-Presidential)

national elections.<sup>7</sup> Turnout rates are far lower in state and local elections without national contests, or in primary elections where major party candidates are selected. As we will see in this chapter, levels of political participation by criminal offenders (when they have been eligible) may be low, but so too is the electorate-wide mean.

Next, consider political knowledge. Low levels of political information among the mass public have been widely documented since the pioneering work of the Michigan School in the early 1960s (most notably, Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). Attempts to tie rising education levels and increasing availability of political information through the media to higher levels of political knowledge (cf. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979; Inglehart 1990) have generally not been supported (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Smith 1989). Indeed, as one recent textbook puts it, “many – often most – citizens are ignorant of rather basic facts...the data suggest massive public ignorance” (Glynn et al. 1999, p. 251).

Finally, consider apathy and distrust of government. The production of non-political orientations to the world around us, and the systematic avoidance of thorny political issues, are widely developed in American society and institutions (cf. Eliasoph 1998). Widespread (and growing) distrust of politicians and the government are also very common in American politics (cf. Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997). Again, the existence of such beliefs among criminal offenders would hardly be unique.

In addition to properly situating the political consciousness of offenders alongside the limited competence of the mass public, it is also worth noting that there may be ways in which – at least in some times and places for some inmates – incarceration actually stimulates political consciousness. In fact, the politicization of U.S. prisoners attracted some degree of scholarly attention in the 1960s and 1970s (Brody 1974; Burdman 1974; Fairchild 1977; Wright 1973).

Although both the prisoners' rights movement (Smith 1993) and rehabilitation programs have significantly eroded over the past three decades (e.g., Lin 2000), inmates do often acquire more education or have time to reflect about the outside world in ways that they did not while on the street (cf. Edin, Nelson, and Paranal, this volume; Maruna 2001, p. 97).

In unusual cases, prisoners have used their time for intensive study and activism. As Malcolm X put it, "where else but in a prison could I have attacked my ignorance by being able to study intensely sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day?" (1965, p. 180). The Norfolk Prison Colony afforded Malcolm X other opportunities for political action, including a forum for educating or radicalizing other inmates and a weekly debating program that provided a "baptism into public speaking (1965, p. 182). Upon entering San Quentin a generation later, Sanyika Shakur was told, "You'll feel the comrade strong here. Bro, you'll read books here, see things that are gonna change the way you walk, talk, and think. This is the best place for an aspiring young revolutionary. This is repression at its best" (Shakur 1994, p. 341). Progressive or radical politics are embedded in several first-person accounts of prison life, both because such messages echo the experiences of "caged-up" men (Malcolm X 1965, p. 182) and because the radical press is viewed as more trustworthy in describing prison conditions and events (Abbott 1981). Various forms of collective action among prisoners, including in extreme cases riots (Goldstone and Useem 1999; Pallas and Barber 1973; Useem and Kimball 1991), may also stimulate a broader sense of political engagement and power. More typically, perhaps, many inmates simply develop greater interest and participation in politics as they begin to cultivate a pro-social identity for themselves upon release (cf. Maruna 2001; Uggen, Manza, and Behrens 2002).

In view of all of these considerations, it is important not to exaggerate the degree of political apathy, disinterestedness, or low levels of political participation on the part of criminal

offenders, but rather to treat it as a question to be interrogated. Both our survey questions and in-depth interviews are designed to explore the extent and depth of political consciousness among convicted felons in the United States.

## SURVEY RESULTS: THE 2000 YOUTH DEVELOPMENT STUDY

We begin our analysis by drawing on survey data to compare the political preferences of offenders and non-offenders. This portion of our investigation is based on the Youth Development Study (YDS), a survey of 1000 persons who began the study in 1988 as ninth-graders in St. Paul, Minnesota public schools. Self-reported crime and arrest data were collected between 1988 and 1998. Political participation questions are taken from the twelfth survey wave in 2000, when a total of 757 respondents, now aged 26 to 27, remained in the sample.<sup>8</sup>

[Table X.1 about here.]

In Table X.1, we contrast four groups: YDS respondents who had never been arrested, YDS arrestees, YDS inmates (mainly former inmates), and, to place the results in a national context, data from the 1997 Survey of State Prisoners (U.S. Department of Justice 2000). As the table shows, approximately 23 percent of the YDS sample had been arrested and 10 percent of the sample had been incarcerated by 1998. About 36 percent of the YDS non-arrestees are male, 82 percent are white, and 29 percent are married. YDS arrestees and inmates are much more likely than non-arrestees to be male, non-white, and unmarried, though to a lesser extent than state prisoners. Similarly, YDS arrestees and inmates report lower levels of education and income than other YDS respondents, but higher levels of socioeconomic attainment than



observed in the national prisoner survey. When offenses are ranked by severity (with violent ranked as most severe, followed by property, drug, and other offenses), the most serious offense among YDS arrestees was a violent crime in 18 percent of cases, a property crime for 39 percent, a drug crime for 23 percent, and some other offense (such as a weapons or public order violation) for 19 percent. Overall, Table X.1 suggests that YDS respondents who had experienced criminal sanctions were generally less advantaged than the Minnesota cohort from which they were drawn, but more advantaged than the typical U.S. inmate serving time in a state penitentiary.

### *Political Attitudes and Engagement*

The 2000 YDS contains a number of items that tap aspects of respondents' political attitudes, political efficacy, and political engagement. Table X.2 contains a summary of the main results, showing comparisons between arrestees and non-arrestees, and between those incarcerated and not incarcerated.<sup>9</sup> Many of the questions we used were identical to long-standing items on the biennial National Election Study, thus incorporating tested items and enabling comparison to national election survey results.<sup>10</sup>

[Table X.2 about here.]

The results shown in Table X.2 underscore the extent to which the political beliefs of respondents who have been arrested or incarcerated conform to our starting assumptions, but also reveal that not all of the differences with non-arrestees are statistically or (perhaps) substantively significant. Arrestees and inmates are significantly more likely to claim independent partisan identification than the rest of the sample, though this result must be interpreted cautiously in

view of the very strong attraction of Jesse Ventura's 1998 independent gubernatorial campaign to Minnesota offenders (which we discuss below). Fully 54 percent of the incarcerated or formerly incarcerated respondents say they "do not lean toward either the Republican or Democratic Party." Lack of partisan identification among the remaining YDS sample is also high by comparison with the national mean.

Ideological self-identification, and identification with the Christian Right, is not markedly different across groups, though incarcerated respondents report greater conservatism than the rest of the sample). The latter may be somewhat surprising at first glance, but less so in view of the sociodemographic composition of the offender respondents (and the interview results reported below).

It is when we come to questions about attitudes toward government that the most striking and consistent differences between inmates, arrestees, and the remainder of the sample are to be found. One of the most widely discussed trends in U.S. public opinion over the past decade has been declining levels of public confidence in the government (e.g. Brooks and Cheng 2001; Hetherington 1998; Nie, Zelikow, and King 1997). YDS respondents were asked several questions about how much they trust politicians and their government. On all of these questions, arrestees and inmates exhibited significantly less trust than those who had not been arrested or incarcerated. They were also much more likely to express no confidence in the criminal justice system, a hardly surprising result but one which may have been produced by conflicting responses, as our interview data below suggest.

We also probed about respondents' beliefs that political action can be meaningful. A sense of political efficacy has long been identified as an important factor stimulating participation in civic life (cf. Almond and Verba 1963; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1997).

Arrestees and inmates are significantly less likely to think that they can influence public officials, or even have some say in politics. The differences between those who have been incarcerated and those who have not (over one-third of one point on a four point scale) are statistically and, we suspect, substantively significant.

Conversations with friends, co-workers, and family members represent an important source of political information and a stimulus for interest in politics (cf. Lipset 1981 [1960]). Although inmates may discuss political issues with staff or among themselves, their access to friends, relatives, and coworkers is likely to be restricted during periods of incarceration. When it comes to discussing politics, we find that those who have experienced criminal justice sanctions are indeed somewhat less likely to engage in such conversations. Arrestees are less likely to speak with their spouses or relatives about politics than non-arrestees, and inmates are significantly less likely to have such discussions with friends than non-inmates.

### *Political Behavior*

Voting is the most fundamental form of political expression in democratic polities. Table X.3 shows YDS turnout rates in the elections of 1996 and 1998, and plans for participating in the 2000 elections. We found large and statistically significant differences between the groups, with the greatest differences between those who had been incarcerated and those who had not.<sup>11</sup> Individual self-reports of voting always produce inflated estimates, so it is the gap – rather than the percentages reporting voting – that is of greatest interest. In the 1996 election, arrestees were 19 percent more likely to vote than non-arrestees, and inmates were 25 percent more likely to vote than non-inmates. The turnout gap for the 1998 mid-term elections, when participation is much lower overall, is smaller between those who have and have not ever been arrested (13

percent), growing slightly when respondents were asked (in May 2000) if they expected to vote in the 2000 election. The gap between those who had and had not been incarcerated remains consistently high across the different electoral contexts.<sup>12</sup>

[Table X.3 about here.]

In Presidential politics, the former public school students in urban Minnesota exhibited strong support for the Democratic incumbent Bill Clinton in the 1996 election, so much so that there were essentially no differences between arrestees, inmates, and the remainder of the YDS sample. The most startling differences, however, register in the highly unusual 1998 Gubernatorial race, where those who have been arrested exhibit significantly greater support for former professional wrestler Jesse Ventura. Among those who report voting, fully 74 percent of arrestees supported Ventura. The difference between those who had and had not been incarcerated was also large (10 percent), but is not statistically significant. Ventura, like Clinton, drew strong support among the entire sample of young Minnesota adults, but his appeal is even higher among those who have been arrested or incarcerated.

## THE POLITICAL VIEWS OF CRIMINAL OFFENDERS: EVIDENCE FROM IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

The new survey results discussed in the previous section provide some baseline information about the political orientations of respondents who have had contact with the criminal justice system, relative to a comparison group. In this section, we go well beyond those

survey results to detail the underlying attitudes and dispositions of convicted offenders, based on our semi-structured interviews with 33 Minnesota prisoners, probationers, and parolees in the Spring and Summer of 2001.<sup>13</sup> The questions we posed addressed political participation, partisanship, trust in government, and attitudes about other civil disabilities. The interviews were designed to elicit in more detail the political attitudes of offenders, and the deeper significance of the loss of voting rights posed by felon disfranchisement.<sup>14</sup> We asked respondents questions such as the following: What kinds of political experiences have they had? Will they participate in the future? Are any political issues especially salient? How does losing the right to vote affect their ideas about being a part of a community? About their government? Do politics and voting affect their ability to stay away from crime on the outside?

We carried out these interviews at two state correctional facilities and one county community corrections office. Although the interviews were conducted within these facilities, we arranged for a private room with a closed door so that correctional and administrative staff would not overhear the interview questions or responses. The interviews generally ran from 45 minutes to over an hour, and (with the permission of the interviewees) were recorded and later transcribed. To protect the participants' confidentiality, we identify neither their race nor real names when quoting from the transcripts. All major offense categories were represented among the interviewees, and almost all had been convicted of serious or index crimes.

[Table X.4 about here.]

Table X.4 provides some descriptive information about the interviewees. Respondents varied in race and gender and ranged from 20-54 years of age; we spoke to people in prison, on

probation, and on parole. Relative to national prison populations, women are significantly over-represented among our interviewees. In view of the broader questions about citizenship and political rights we are posing in this chapter, however, we do not necessarily anticipate large gender differences in respondent preferences on most topics.<sup>15</sup> Reflecting in part the unusual demographic profile of the felon population in Minnesota, white respondents constituted a majority (67 percent) of the interviewees, and Native Americans comprised an additional 15 percent. Our sample is likely somewhat more conservative politically than the population of U.S. felons and ex-felons (Manza and Uggen 2003; Uggen and Manza 2002), with 24 percent expressing a preference for George W. Bush in the 2000 presidential election.

We began the interviews by confirming that respondents had been convicted of a felony and asking whether they had ever voted. When asked about their voting rights, we discovered that few respondents were aware how long they would be disfranchised, though all knew that they were not permitted to vote for some period. Respondents learned about disfranchisement from probation and parole officers, Department of Corrections officials, or other convicted felons, though a few “just knew” beforehand that a criminal conviction would deprive them of the right to vote.<sup>16</sup> We then asked a series of open-ended questions concerning political involvement, attitudes and awareness; partisanship, efficacy and trust; and, community involvement and reintegration. Finally, we asked whether respondents wanted to add anything that had yet to be discussed and whether they had any questions for us. As we discuss below, voting was a salient issue to most respondents, and they readily shared their political views.

### *Political Participation*

We found great variation in respondents' self-reported political participation prior to their most recent felony conviction. Of the 33 interviewees, 22 reported having voted at least once in the past, and a few were active and enthusiastic voters prior to their conviction. For example, Lynn, a 38 year-old prisoner, tried to impress the importance of voting upon her disinterested son:

I take [voting] very seriously. ... This was the first year my son was able to vote, and he wasn't going to and I literally put him in the car and took him to vote. I mean it was "You're living in my house, you're going to vote" kind of thing because I can't, so... I've voted every time I can since I've been eighteen, and I think this is the worst, one of the worst things about being a felon, having a felony, is not being able to vote.

To be sure, admitting to not voting is awkward, a failing of basic citizenship duties that is reflected, for example, in the over-reporting of turnout by all survey respondents (such as those in the YDS). Of those who had been old enough to vote in a previous election but *volunteered* that they had not, justifications for the failure to participate were similar to those often expressed by Americans. Henry, a 25 year-old male parolee who had never been eligible to vote, feels that his one vote is unlikely to have much impact:

I feel that I'm not too involved. The reason I say that is 'cause I feel one person doesn't have enough power. It takes a group. A majority, you know? And I've kind of lowered my standards on how much to give off. I figure if I don't count for much, why get involved, you know? But they say one can make difference sometimes. So either way, you can look at it either way, but I look at it as I wouldn't make a difference politically.

Ironically, however, Henry also told us that when he did attempt to vote in the 2000 presidential elections, he was denied the right to participate because of his current parole status. Some respondents suggested that while felon disenfranchisement was a barrier, they might not have voted anyway. Michael, a 23 year-old male probationer who had been old enough to vote since the 1996 presidential election, explained, "I never voted. Never. ... I couldn't 'cause I just caught that felony [in 1996]," before adding, "I really don't think I'd vote anyway."

Our interviews also suggested an interaction between the right to vote and the willingness to invest in political knowledge, awareness, or interest, which might stimulate participation in the first place. A 31 year-old prisoner named Susan told us that her disfranchisement was a source of frustration that discouraged her from thinking about politics:

I was thinking about getting involved with politics when I get out, and how I'd love to, and then I'm like, "Well, I can't vote," so it's so discouraging. I'm not gonna read this article on this candidate's views or, you know, I'm not going to research on it. But then the only thing that motivates me is that the people around me don't know I'm an ex-con and can't vote, and so I don't want them to think I'm just lame and ignorant because I can't participate in their political conversations. So that's like my only motivation, and that's not a lot of motivation because, I mean, being able to vote, my vote making a difference would be more motivation than the rare political conversation.

Susan's position – echoed in different ways in other interviews – is a very rational response to disfranchisement. If you are categorically prevented from participating, there is little incentive to maintain an interest in an activity. Viewed in this way, it is probably surprising our interviewees have as much political interest and engagement as they do.

In addition to the disincentives prison or a felony conviction creates for political participation, a number of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated felons also noted substantial barriers to acquiring information about the outside world while in prison. These barriers include limited contact with family and friends (and the reduced likelihood that precious time for interaction would be used to discuss political matters – as reflected in our survey evidence); restricted access to television in a communal setting where the daily news may already be a low priority for many inmates; and, of course, the inability to access political life outside prison walls. Lynn, the politically enthusiastic mother quoted above, describes some of these problems:

I [used to] go to *city council meetings*. I want to know what's going on. That's the one thing I hate about being in here. Nobody wants to watch the news. And so I ... broke down and spent the \$250 and got a TV. ... I like to know what's going on. I'm part of this world, whether I'm in here or not. I'm not going to be here



that long, I'm still going to be out in the real world. I want to know what's going on, and I want to know what's changed since I've been in here. You try to watch news in here, oh no. ... And that really irritates me. (emphasis added)

Despite these barriers, prison cannot be viewed simply as a roadblock to political interest and consciousness. We were struck in our conversations, paralleling the findings of Edin, Nelson and Paranal in their chapter earlier in this volume, about the degree to which time in prison encourages reflection on civic duties and responsibilities (see also Uggen, Manza, and Behrens 2002). Many of the inmates with whom we spoke told us that their time in prison made them *more* interested in political issues. Dylan, a 29 year-old who had been incarcerated continuously since age 16 for a serious violent offense, described how he gradually developed an interest in politics:

I mean early on when I was a teenager and I was first incarcerated, obviously, if it ever came to mind, it was, "I don't care." You know? Or "It doesn't affect me," and the whole attitude of that, I suppose. But as I've matured over the years in prison, and started looking forward to all the trappings of society and what it's going to mean to be free again, and that was one of the considerations that, you know, I start forming actual political opinions about these- you watch these politicians on TV and say, "This guy's a scum bag. I wouldn't vote for him," or whatever. Or you see someone that actually has a good agenda. And, I don't know, I've gotten more and more interested in it over the years in talking to other guys, my age or older, that have more of a political opinion, that have been following politics longer than I have. Just get pulled into discussions there."

Several other respondents echoed Dylan's burgeoning interest in political life. Louis told us that "No [I have never voted]...but after being incarcerated and having that time to reflect on all the issues, I see how important it really can be." A 38 year-old prisoner named Alan described the change in his viewing habits, and increased attention to political news, while in prison:

You know it's weird because before my crime I really, up until '95, I really didn't follow the elections or anything that close. And since I've been in prison, I've been *watching the way the Senate works* on like channel 17. ... I've been watching the political process a lot since I've been in here. ... I'd say 200 percent more at least. You know? 'Cause before I didn't even turn on the TV. You know I

rarely watched the news or anything like that. Now I watch the city council meetings sometimes if they have them. Like [city name] has a local station that has their city council meetings on, and channel 17 has the Senate coverage and things like that. (emphasis added)

Like most Americans, many of our interviewees reported closely following the 2000 presidential election and its aftermath, although here it is hard to separate the entertainment value of that unique event from its substantive political meaning. We were, however, also surprised to learn from Alan that inmates in several housing units or “cottages” organized their own mock election:

Yeah, they were [talking about the 2000 election in here]. There was a lot of going back and forth on it [between wanting Bush or Gore to win] ... people were going around doing kind of a silent mock election just to see how people would vote even in our cottage. And, you know, the winner was, was Bush. But not by very much. It was, you know, out of 74 people in our cottage, I think it was pretty split down the middle, you know? But, and I know that was happening in other cottages, but I didn't really pay attention.

Here again, it is hard to square such initiatives with models of complete disinterest and lack of concern about politics among inmates.

### *Views About the Right to Vote*

With the exceptions discussed below, our respondents were well aware of the restrictions on their right to vote, and they offered a variety of articulate responses to questions about the implications of this loss. Particularly striking were the connections between the right to vote and the process of reintegration back into their communities. Pamela, a 49 year-old female prisoner, described how losing the right to vote was like rubbing “salt in her wounds”:

I think that just getting back in the community and being a contributing member is difficult enough.... And saying, “Yeah, we don't value your vote either because you're a convicted felon from how many years back,” okay? ... But I, hopefully, have learned, have paid for that and *would like to someday feel like a, quote,*

“normal citizen,” a contributing member of society, and you know that’s hard when every election you’re constantly being reminded, “oh yeah, that’s right, I’m ashamed.” ... It’s just like a little salt in the wound. You’ve already got that wound and it’s trying to heal and it’s trying to heal, and you’re trying to be a good taxpayer and be a homeowner. ... Just one little vote, right? But that means a lot to me. ... it’s just loss after loss after loss. And this is just another one. Another to add to the pile. ... When I said salt in the wound, the wound’s already there. Me being able to vote isn’t going to just whip up and heal that wound. ... And I am looking forward to and trying to prepare to be that productive member of society that I’ve always wanted to be. I have this wound and it’s healing. ... But it’s like it’s still open enough so that you telling me that I’m still really bad because I can’t [vote] is like making it sting again. It’s like haven’t I paid enough yet? ... You can’t really feel like a part of your government because they’re still going like this, “Oh, you’re bad. Remember what you did way back then? Nope, you can’t vote.” (emphasis added)

For others, the restoration of voting rights serves as a powerful symbol signifying the recovery of manifold privileges of citizenship. In the words of Karen, a 39 year-old female prisoner,

I voted every single solitary year from the day I was granted voting privileges when I was eighteen until I was convicted. ... For me it’s important because I like to know that when I leave here, I will start- I will *continue* my life because I won’t start it over- *although there’s a whole new part of me coming out of here- I will continue my life*, and I would like to have that position back. To be able to vote. (emphasis added)

Finally, a number of respondents noted how losing the right to vote marks them as non-citizens, people without voices. Consistent with our survey results showing diminished political efficacy among arrestees and inmates, Paul, a 37 year-old male prisoner, commented that:

I have no right to vote on the school referendums that will affect my children. I have no right to vote on how my taxes is going to be spent or used, which I have to pay whether I’m a felon or not, you know? So basically I’ve lost all voice or control over my government. ... And this system, once you’re a felon you’re punished for life. And you don’t have a voice. ... People don’t want to recognize that *we can still be citizens and still be patriotic* even though we made a mistake. And that’s a hard pill to swallow. ... I can’t say anything because I don’t have a voice. Or ‘cause I can’t vote about it. ... I’m not saying give back gun rights or anything like that to people that definitely don’t deserve them. But giving back voting rights is another way to make a person feel part of that community. How can you feel that you’re giving back to a community that you’re a part of when

you're *exiled* from it by not being able to vote and have a voice in it? (emphasis added)

One thing that was particularly startling to us – and reflected in Paul's comments – was that many of our respondents assumed that they were disfranchised for 10 years or more (with several assuming they had lost the right to vote for life). In fact, Minnesota law permits all ex-felons to vote once they are “off paper,” having completed incarceration and any probation or parole supervision. Although we lack systematic data on this question, it is entirely possible that such misperceptions about voting rights, combined with hesitancy to inquire about eligibility for fear of being told no, may extend the impact of voting restrictions far beyond a formal period of legal disfranchisement.

#### *Views About Government and Public Policy*

Our survey findings that arrestees and inmates – in comparison to non-offenders – lack confidence in government and believe the political system is corrupt was reflected in many of our conversations. But as we probed deeper into these sentiments, we also heard some more nuanced explanations of *why* the political system was viewed as untrustworthy. We asked each of our respondents to define in their own words what “politics” means to them, and we were told many times that “politics” is about politicians who are corrupt or greedy. For example, Thomas, a 23 year-old male parolee, told us politics for him is

Crap. Or, as in my man, he says, “Who wants to be a millionaire?” ‘Cause in politics everyone wants the prize. You know? I know a lot of things cost money. ... Just to make that next dollar. So I'm going to politics, Congress, it's *money*, yeah. Nobody goes to Congress, or into politics just to go “Okay, I'm gonna make a lot of laws.” No, it's too much money. It's too much money. (emphasis added)

Such blanket dismissals leave little room for a positive appreciation of government as a potentially valuable social institution. But other interviewees, while endorsing a similar view of corruption, articulated substantive *reasons* why the political system falls short of an ideal democracy. Consider the views of a 28 year-old prisoner named Nathan:

To me a politician's nothing but a *crook*, you know? They're making laws, but I never thought it would never affect me, and I- "go make your laws." Because I believe the government's all wrong. We've gotten so much with politicians and with the governor, but yet they don't hear what the people have to say. I mean I thought we were based on the Constitution and "we the people" have the say over what the government has to say. I thought we're the ones that are supposed to, they're the ones who are supposed to look up to us and say, "What do you want us to do? We're working for you. What do you want us to do?" ... It's like, "well, if they're working for us, why aren't they in my community asking what we want?" (emphasis added)

Nathan's broad characterization of politicians as "crooks" is combined here with a real and substantive conception of what a non-criminal democratic politician would do: go to the community and "ask what we want," and then act as an honest delegate. Such a vision of democracy, in which politicians act as brokers of majoritarian opinion, is a view that some sophisticated models of democracy embrace.<sup>17</sup>

For those whose primary contact with the state occurs through the criminal justice system, levels of trust and confidence in the government are undoubtedly shaped by that engagement. Scott, a 26 year-old probationer, described how his experiences with the police eroded his overall level of trust in government:

Well, who can you trust anyway? 'Cause I think a lot of it's superficial ... I grew up where the police, you know, the police beat up people. And that didn't happen in every instance, you know, but *you learn to not have trust, you know?* ... I don't think I have a say about what the government does. They look good for awhile, then they get elected and you hear all kind of junk. [The police,] that's the *immediate government* right there. (emphasis added)

Mary, a 40 year-old female prisoner who believes she was wrongly convicted, detailed how her views of government had changed as a result of her experience with the criminal justice system:

Five years ago I was sitting on the streets, and I was, you know, doing my own thing and I was a law-abiding citizen, and I didn't have these problems, I didn't have these concerns, I didn't even think about things like that you know, you know? I thought, well, you know "Geez, believe in the judicial system. Believe in the politics of the system because they're what's going to support you." That's a mistake.

Disgust with politics was sometimes accompanied by a preference for local or sub-national politics. Consider the views of two respondents, the first from Karen, a 39 year-old female inmate, and the second from Andrew, a 29 year-old male probationer:

I think that since I've been incarcerated, and even more so, not as strongly would I focus on national politics as I have always been far more concerned about the *politics right here and now*. You know, more *grassroots*. How it affects- I don't want to say small-town community, because I think that small-town communities, farming communities, all those types of things, you know- have a lot of power, but I think more things like the sheriff being elected, Appellate Court judges, Supreme Court judges, legislators, you know ... maybe because it was just closer to home for me ... [I'm] closer to Democrat, and I think, a good chunk of that is the born and raised, *Iron Range union person* inside of me. (emphasis added).  
*Note: The "Iron Range" is a Minnesota region with a reputation for mining and pro-labor politics).*

I think it's easier to trust the *local* government, which is why my beliefs are as they are. National government, I just think there's so much money involved that corruption might be a little more likely. Not saying that it's, you know, ruined society. I'm not that big of a naysayer, but I just think accountability is a little easier locally. I think we can trust our local governments more. (emphasis added)

Preferences for local government, or governing units below the federal level, are quite common in American society. In the comments of Karen and Andrew, we see two quite different underlying theories of why localism is preferred. For Karen, a more viable democracy with higher levels of citizen activism, are more likely at the local level. For Andrew, local governments are more trustworthy and accountable.

What about specific policy concerns? In explaining their political views, most interviewees stressed *specific* policy questions, rather than making generalizations about politics, parties, candidates, or voting. For example, Sally commented,

Here amongst us, we don't do a lot of talking about like politics type stuff. We just we don't really do it that often. We talk more about specific issues that have to do with politics, but we don't sit and talk about "Are you a Republican, are you a Democrat, who would you vote for?" We talk about specific issues, you know? ... We talk about *same-sex marriages* or *raising children*. You know like should-you know the rights of same-sex couples, stuff like that. Well, I've mentioned the *welfare* stuff. Sex offenders. You know the *laws with the sex offenders*. ... Those are mainly the three issues that we talk about that have a lot to do with the government, the political stuff. (emphasis added)

Other particular areas of concern that came up in our interviews included new time limits on receipt of public assistance (especially among female inmates), education, health care, and more generally, inequality in American society.

Not surprisingly, given their direct connection to the criminal justice system, numerous interviewees expressed strong and articulate views about criminal justice, although not all of these views inclined toward leniency for their fellow inmates. Peter, a young probationer, explained his opposition to George W. Bush because "I heard he's supposed to hire more police officers and all that, and I think Bush would have been looking out more for the rich and less for the poor." Others discussed specific laws. Minnesota applies restrictive civil commitment laws to certain sex offenders, under which "sexually dangerous persons" may face an indefinite and involuntary period of confinement beyond any court-imposed criminal sentence (Minn. §253B.02 Subd. 18b-18c). The anomalies of these laws occasioned comment by several of our interviewees who were serving time as sex offenders. Alan, for example, noted,

When I get committed [as a sexually dangerous person under the civil commitment law] one of my projects is to try and overturn the Sexually Dangerous Predator law because right now it's so broad. The legislature has worded it so broad that you could have five parking tickets and be committed.

Alan also made clear, however, that he supported laws against child pornography and had begun active lobbying:

One of things I'm doing is calling, there's a guy named [names state legislator], I think his name is, and he's trying to get a *child pornography law* through. You know and I've been calling there a couple times a week going, "Yeah, I still support it. Keep pushing" (emphasis added)

Others drew similar distinctions, critiquing the apparent irrationality of particular laws and policies (including disfranchisement) and advocating more reasoned – though not necessarily more lenient -- approaches in their place.

### *Political and Partisan Preferences*

Some of our interviewees expressed clear political and partisan identities. We asked each about the hotly contested 2000 presidential election, and for those who indicated a preferred candidate, why they supported that candidate. Among Al Gore supporters, a number of respondents invoked class- or race-based themes along the lines of those that Gore emphasized during the campaign. For example, Sally, a 30 year-old prisoner, told us that

It's my opinion of Bush basically is that he is just *doesn't care about lower-class* people. He's, to me, seems more about people who have money. I just don't see that- I see that there's more middle and lower class people than there is, you know, upper-class. . . . Listening to [Gore] speak, he seems like a more caring, a more caring person. Like he cares about the people. (emphasis added)

For Sally, as for many of our interviewees, Bush's upper-class origins contrasted sharply with a view of Gore as "for the average person." Steven, a 52 year-old male probationer, invoked similar themes in describing his support for Gore:

Gore's more for the people and *the average person*, and, Bush, he's more for the rich. And I have nothing against rich people if they make it fair and square, but there's a lot of things that are going on that ain't right. But I got nothing against rich people otherwise but you gotta, you know, you gotta care about people and even if they're not rich. (emphasis added)



Similarly, Marvin, a 24 year-old prisoner, noted that he supported Gore “because Gore seems like a person that’s there for the people.”

We also found a healthy sampling of support for George W. Bush, and as with Gore, the themes endorsed by Bush supporters often paralleled those invoked by Bush on the campaign trail. James, a 24 year-old male prisoner said, “Since this incarceration I’m kind of anti-criminal. And he did some good stuff in Texas.” Daniel, a 31-year-old prisoner, endorsed Bush’s positions on gun control and education:

Well, I liked a lot of what Gore had to say, but his *politics on guns* kind of turned me off that. So I was more Bush for his, if he does anything about what he said. Education as far as, you know. ‘Cause some areas do get more money allocated to them than poor areas. I kind of like his *voucher* system. (emphasis added).

In talking about politics and elections, we also heard many references to what is sometimes called “candidate-centered politics,” which some believe has become increasingly common in contemporary American political life (cf. Wattenberg 1991). For example, Pamela, a 49 year-old prisoner, told us that “character” was important in shaping her views of Bush as a candidate.

*Uggen:* Well, what about in the last presidential election? Do you think you would have voted if you had the legal right to vote?

*Pamela:* Yes -- Bush.

*Uggen:* You would have voted for Bush?

*Pamela:* Absolutely. Mainly because the issue, his opinion on abortion. I found him much more real as a person. It’s a *character thing*. I just felt like he had so much more character and he was much more consistent. He wasn’t like a chameleon like changing. ... I just felt that Bush was more honest and, uh, I liked his wife. ... I think he has an honor for our original amendments and everything, you know, that I haven’t seen in anyone for awhile. I didn’t see it in Clinton. Just that ... kind of a reverence. Or an honor looking at how our forefathers really set up the country ‘cause it was all about God. It was all about God. And it just got neutralized, neutralized, neutralized as the time went on.

When it comes to ideological labels, however, most of our respondents were less engaged, and it is important to try to understand why such labels appear less salient. Only about half of our respondents identified themselves as “liberal” or “conservative,” and in many cases these broad labels were given meaning in personal rather than political terms. For example, the term “conservative” connoted maturity, sophistication, or an aversion to risk for many respondents, rather than the economic and social approaches of the Republican Party or the preservation of existing political institutions.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, party labels held greater meaning for most respondents, as a negative heuristic if nothing else. Eighteen of the 33 interviewees identified with the Democratic Party, most doing so in class or race terms. Comments about the reasons for identifying with the Democrats from Peter, a 24 year-old probationer, and Mary, a 40 year-old prisoner, respectively, present typical class-based perceptions about the parties:

I would probably prefer to the Democrats more because I feel they look out more for the *poor*. And Republicans, you know, they gonna look out more for the rich, and less for the poor really. That’s how I see it. (emphasis added)

I feel that *the little people* is what needs the help. Not the big businesses and the big people, you know? And that’s what the Republicans represent, you know, I feel essentially. You know the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and there’s really no in between. (emphasis added)

Race emerged as a clear factor in Democratic Party identity for a number of African-American respondents, with some suggesting that disfranchisement laws are intended to dilute the voting strength of racial minorities. Michael, a 23 year-old African-American male probationer, characterized the different social bases of the two parties (and his reasons for supporting the Democrats) in the following terms:

It seems like the Republicans don't really be for the minorities, they're like for the majority. And the Democrats seem like they, you know, *more minority-based*, trying to help, you know, better the community, *our community*. Stuff like that. ...

Well, I think the Republicans more based in the middle-class area... They try to do for them. But the Democrats, you know, try to help out with child care... They really don't want people on welfare, you know, they try to help you get off welfare and get a stable job. Whereas, the Republicans, they just, they just want you to be based how you already is, you know... That's, that's my view, that's my opinion, I really don't know too much about politics, but from what I be seeing... *Democrats can more help, you know, my people out more* (emphasis added)

Other respondents cited a family history of support for one of the major parties as helping to crystallize their own partisanship. Lynn, a 38 year-old female prisoner, told us that:

I vote Democratic. I'm not ashamed to say it. I'm a Democrat. ... The thing is from what I've gathered through the years and what I guess I grew up with, my *parents* were, are both Democratic, um, it always seems that the Democrats fight a little harder for the *middle-class, the underdogs*. Um, their, the *education* issue, the *welfare* thing was [a] big thing because I think it's about time that the welfare- or something has to be done. People shouldn't be- you know, and I've used the system, but only when I've needed to so I think the five years and off is great, and it's not just a kick-you-off program. They go out of their way to try and help you get jobs, to make you self-sufficient. ... Basically any issue that is on the Democratic side, I'm pretty much, pretty much with. It's, you know, the *health care*, that was a big one. (emphasis added)

A perception that the Republicans are less receptive to the needs and interests of low-income urban communities provided some interviewees with another basis for identification with the Democratic Party. A 23 year-old former gang member named Thomas, recently out on parole, described his experiences with party politics in Chicago:

I look at myself more as a Democrat. ... Where I come from, Chicago, we did a lot of talking. We did a lot of, you know, men organizations, that I was in organizations, you know what I'm saying? A lot of people would say gang, but I call it organization. We did a lot of, you know, there's like a lot of community work... In Chicago, they came, and you know there's a lot of Democrats, you know what I'm saying? With, not that we have anything against them, but we more like, speak out more. Democrats gonna *speak out more*. The Republicans gonna, in my eyes, is gonna be like a snake, a serpent. You know, reach out for the weak. And they're gonna use you, twist you, spit you out whatever. They don't need them, throw them away. That's why so many people are in prison now, you know? Anything to send a person to prison... There was one guy, you know, he was a part of the *organization* once before, and he became, you know, he kind of turned his life around, you know? And he came and talked to us, you know? And we wasn't feelin' it at first. We was like, "No, we don't understand that." But

he said, “Well, listen to me. They’re having an election downstairs-” Okay, they came to [names building], and it was like the school. It was like seventeen, eighteen was over. And they said you have a chance to make a- *to do some type justice* because you’re probably gonna get this chance again. You know, just do the time, just do the- and it’s like okay. And just do the time with Million Man March, is gonna go on, and things like that. And they were *grassroots*. And the Republicans, they was like, you know, “*Why* are they marching?” (emphasis added)

Those who identified with the Republicans (a quarter of the respondents) frequently linked a preference for limited government to Republican partisanship. In the words of Larry, a 30 year-old male prisoner,

I like the idea that Republicans are more in favor of the *smaller government* and they’re not so interested in the push towards socialism that our country seems to be heading for right now. You know like socialized medicine and, you know, trying to take control of everything ... [Money is] one thing that would make me lean toward the Republican viewpoint is their, they think that, you know, the government shouldn’t have so much money and, you know, shouldn’t be as big as it is and have so much power and authority, which all really comes from money, I guess. But they think it should be more of the people. (emphasis added)

We also spoke with a number of respondents who characterized themselves as political “independents.” These people often expressed a basic distrust of each major party, or disaffection from political life more generally. These views were often accompanied by a pragmatic nonpartisan approach to politics, although in practice these two meanings of political independence overlapped.<sup>19</sup> Roger, a 54 year-old male probationer, characterized his political independence in candidate-centered terms:

I consider myself to be an *independent* voter. ... I let the man dictate how I vote and not the party. I would have voted for Jesse Ventura had I been able to vote. ‘Cause he made the most sense. ... [In the past] I would say I supported Jimmy Carter. I supported Ronald Reagan. Especially John Kennedy. Because he was a mover and a shaker. And I tend to probably vote more so that way. Towards the *movers and the shakers*. Because it just makes a lot more sense. Yeah [I put Ventura in that camp]. I don’t care for some of his antics. But I do care for the way he carries on the office as governor. And I guess if you have to put up with one thing, you know. The antics I’ll put up with because you see him doing some

stuff that is, so to speak, against the political machinery. You know, myself I'm middle-income and I would say that we been, basically, we've been the class of people that have been where everything falls onto. And because of that, you know, that's where I would see the need for change. You've got the Democrats, of course, for the working-person, you've got the Republicans, so to speak, for the upper class, and, you know, in the midst of that, the *middle class gets trampled*. (emphasis added)

By contrast, Craig, a 22 year-old male prisoner, said he supported independents because in their nonpartisanship they cut "against the grain" of conventional politics:

I do like some of the, the independents and the, the alternatives just because it's just that. It's not so polarized. So I do tend to side when it will come to voting with Independent or somebody that at least sounded like they were *against the grain*. And not just the same old talk. Somebody that sounded genuine and didn't sound like maybe a career politician (emphasis added)

For both Roger and Craig, political independence allows them to choose, rather than to be forced out of habit or convention, whether or not to support major party candidates (cf. Rose and McAllister 1986).

### *Learning from the Interviews*

In contrast to images of offenders as an ill-informed, apathetic group with low citizenship norms, sophisticated underlying political views and concerns emerged in our in-depth interviews, only a sample of which we have reported here. As Louis, a thirty-seven year old prisoner argued:

For me not to participate in all the inevitable rights that are given unto me is to just give 'em away. You know that's foolish ... These things that are given to me make me a part of society. And if I continue to run from them, I'm just furthering myself *away* from society. So by participating in those little things that we don't think about- Because *maybe one day they may just say, "If you not, if you ain't had a perfect life and your income is such here you can't vote."* You know I don't know where that's gonna go, but before I allow all that to get out of hand, I need to let my voice be heard. *Whether it be publicly or on paper as a vote.* (emphasis added)

Our qualitative interviews sensitized us to a number of issues that we had not considered in planning and executing our survey and macro-level analysis of voting behavior (Uggen and Manza 2002; Manza and Uggen 2003). Most importantly, we gained a sense of the salience of disenfranchisement to felons who may have more pressing security and survival needs. The denial of voting rights is perceived as “another loss to add to the pile,” that still carries a sting for citizens convicted of crimes. In addition, we learned that convicted felons do not speak with one voice. Even within the same institution, we were struck by the diversity of political views and concerns expressed by offenders. Though disenfranchisement laws generally treat “felons” as a homogeneous mass, those affected by these laws make important distinctions by offense type and other status markers. This led some respondents to advocate for more narrowly tailored restrictions on their political behavior, asking what their particular crime had to do with voting and why disenfranchisement was imposed as a collateral consequence of their sentence.

In crafting subsequent surveys on the basis of these results, our interviews suggest that researchers devote greater attention to the broader political impacts of felony convictions. For example, one respondent noted that although he would like to participate in “peaceful demonstrations” upon release from prison, he was reluctant to do so because an arrest at such an event could result in his return to the penitentiary. Several interviewees also remarked on the influence of their felon status upon political conversations with non-felons and their level of attentiveness to political and civic affairs. We also learned that labels such as “liberal” and “conservative” have far different connotations among convicted felons than among the general population. In a correctional setting, it is vitally important to present oneself as “conservative” in manner and dress, regardless of one’s political beliefs.

Finally, the interviews also point out how social divisions along race, class, and gender lines remain important for understanding the political attitudes and behaviors of convicted felons. In particular, our African American interviewees generally expressed much greater distrust in the criminal justice system and in government more generally, with several arguing that disfranchisement laws intentionally curb African American political power (cf. Behrens, Uggen and Manza 2002). Although few of our respondents would be considered middle class by conventional criteria, our discussions showed substantial variation in the sort of class-based themes invoked in expressing preferences for particular political parties and candidates. Although we are reluctant to generalize from the small number of female inmates we interviewed, these women expressed much greater concern for issues such as welfare reform, education, and health care relative to the male interviewees. Despite important differences in the orientations and social positions of our interviewees, however, it is important to reiterate that a disproportionate number of the lost political voices in the United States are those of young men of color. Criminal punishment and disfranchisement directly dilute the political power of African Americans, males, and poor and working class U.S. citizens.

## CONCLUSION

Mass incarceration and felon disfranchisement have become growing impediments to American democracy, and to the political participation of an expanding group of U.S. citizens. With over 2 percent of the electorate now disfranchised due to a past or current felony conviction (approximately three fourths of whom are living in the community, and some 35 percent of whom have completed their sentence entirely), there are good reasons to be concerned that rising

rates of criminal punishment affect communities by influencing political outcomes in a highly competitive, two-party system.

In this chapter, we have tried to convey some of the political voices muted through disfranchisement by presenting new information about the political consciousness of those who have experienced criminal sanctions. We drew upon both survey data to compare the political views of arrestees and inmates with non-offenders, and a series of in-depth interviews we recently conducted with convicted felons serving sentences inside and outside of prison.

Several points jump out from the results of our investigation. First, to a certain extent, felons are distinct from the rest of the population in their political tastes, preferences, and dispositions. They have below-average levels of political interest, and below-average levels of political participation. They are significantly more Democratic and more likely to have independent political partisanship than the rest of the electorate. Not surprisingly, the YDS results suggest that offenders are also far less trusting of government and the criminal justice system than non-offenders.

One important qualification about these observations may be useful here. In other analyses not presented here (see Uggen and Manza 2002), we have shown that a large portion of the differences in political participation and vote choice between offenders and non-offenders in the YDS is attributable to sociodemographic differences between the two groups. Once factors such as education level, marital status, employment history, race, and gender are taken into account, the turnout gap and differences in voting behavior diminish dramatically.<sup>20</sup> In other words, we would be cautious in attributing too much solely to the experience of being incarcerated, or receiving a felony conviction.



Second, we think these results confirm that while offenders may be more alienated from mainstream politics than the rest of the population, they have valuable political views and interests to contribute. Something is lost, as a consequence, when they are written out of the political system by criminal punishment and disfranchisement. Of course, low rates of political participation are endemic in the United States and many felons would not vote even if they had the opportunity to do so. The difference between convicted felons and other citizens who choose not to vote is that felons have no choice; though many of us do not *exercise* our right to vote, we view the right itself as fundamental to citizenship.

While the reduction of these voices at the margins may appear politically insignificant, we think that is not likely to be the case. As we noted above, our macro-level investigations suggest that several Senate races since 1978, and two presidential elections in the past 40 years, have been influenced by felon disfranchisement (Uggen and Manza 2002). It is likely that election outcomes beneath the state level are also influenced by felon disfranchisement, although we currently lack the fine-grained data needed for such investigations.

Finally, there is also some evidence that felon disfranchisement has legislative-district impacts that may magnify these effects (albeit in ways that are hard to measure). Felons are drawn disproportionately from low-income urban areas (see, e.g., Rose and Clear 1998); removing them from the electorate reduces the weight of the votes from those areas, quelling not only felon voices but also those of other poor people. Moreover, because the U.S. Census counts prisoners as living wherever their prison is located, the placement of prisons in more conservative rural areas further diminishes urban representation (Beale 1996; Kilborn 2001).

*Postscript*

When we began work on this project a couple of years ago, there were virtually no public discussions of the issue of felon disfranchisement, and the implications for the reintegration of felons back into society. Much has changed since that time. Disfranchisement of ex-felons in states that impose lifetime bans has been the subject of considerable discussion and policy activity. Congressional Democrats have sponsored legislation which would prevent the states from maintaining ex-felon bans; on February 14, 2002, the Senate defeated an amendment to electoral reform legislation sponsored by Harry Reid (D-NV), on a 63-31 vote. The bill gained the striking support of at least one Republican, former prosecutor Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, who commented that “this provision would aid ex-convicts in being reintegrated into society and would be a fair provision on the basic proposition that these people have fully paid their debt to society.”

[Table X.5 about here.]

In addition to federal action, efforts have been mounted in many states to eliminate voting restrictions on ex-felons, parolees, probationers, and even incarcerated felons. In the past few years New Mexico has eliminated its ex-felon ban, Texas eliminated its two-year waiting period for ex-felons, and Maryland narrowed its ban to include only violent recidivists. Connecticut restored the voting rights of felony probationers. On the other hand, we should note that there is not a one-sided movement towards liberalization; states such as Massachusetts and Utah have added *new* restrictions on felon voting rights. As Table X.5 documents, over the past two decades, an approximately equal number of states have liberalized and restricted their disfranchisement provisions (see Behrens, Uggen, and Manza 2002; Manza and Uggen 2003).

The debate over these questions is likely to intensify in the near future, as this and other collateral consequences of the incarceration boom are subject to greater scrutiny.

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**Table X.1. Comparison of YDS Arrestees and Inmates with 1997 National Survey of State Prison Inmates.**

Variable	Youth Development Study				National Inmate Survey State Prisoners <sup>c</sup>
	ARRESTED <sup>a</sup>		INCARCERATED <sup>b</sup>		
	Not Arrested (N=574) 76.6%	Arrested (N=175) 23.3%	Not Incarcerated (N=655) 89.4%	Incarcerated (N=78) 10.6%	
<i>Sex</i>					
Percent male	35.7*	65.1*	40.2*	70.5*	93.7
<i>Race</i>					
% White	82.4*	72.5*	79.0	68.8	33.0
% Black	5.3*	11.7*	6.8*	16.9*	47.0
% Hispanic	4.3	4.1	4.2	3.9	17.0
% Other <sup>d</sup>	8.0	11.7	10.2	10.4	3.0
<i>Family</i>					
% Currently married	29.0*	20.0*	27.0	22.0	17.7
Number of children	0.5* (0.9)	0.9* (1.1)	0.6* (1.0)	1.0* (1.2)	2.5 (1.9)
<i>Age</i>					
	24.4 (0.6)	24.5 (0.6)	24.4 (0.6)	24.5 (0.6)	34.8 (10.0)
<i>Education</i>					
Mean years education	14.2* (1.7)	13.3* (1.8)	14.1* (1.8)	13.0* (1.7)	10.7 (2.5)
<i>Employment</i>					
% Full-time employed	58.6	57.5	57.8	58.5	56.0
Annual Income	\$19,160 (\$10,830)	\$18,780 (\$11,160)	\$19,430	\$18,490 (\$12,400)	\$14,430 (\$32,398)
<i>Most Serious Offense</i>					
% Violent	0	18.2	2.7*	14.8*	47
% Property	0	39.2	3.5*	40.7*	22
% Drug	0	23.3	5.8*	22.2*	21
% Other	0	19.3	2.7*	22.2*	10

\* indicates that difference is statistically significant at .05 level (2-tailed test); Standard deviations for continuous variables in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup> Reference category for arrested is not arrested

<sup>b</sup> Reference category for incarcerated is not incarcerated (not shown in table).

<sup>c</sup> Source: Uggen, Thompson, and Manza 2000, adapted from U.S. Department of Justice's "Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities" (2000).

<sup>d</sup> "Other" category includes those of "mixed" race in YDS data.

**Table X.2: Relationship Between Criminal Sanctions and Political Attitudes and Experiences.**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>ARREST</i>		<i>INCARCERATION</i>	
	<i>Not Arrested</i>	<i>Arrested</i>	<i>Not Incarcerated</i>	<i>Incarcerated</i>
<b>POLITICAL ORIENTATION</b>				
% Republican	15.4	11.8	14.7*	7.9
% Democrat	48.2*	39.2*	45.9	38.2
% Neither party	36.4*	49.0*	39.4*	54.0*
<i>Ideological Self-Identification</i> (1=extreme liberal; 5=extreme conservative)	2.74	2.88	2.75*	2.96*
% Christian Right	13.0	13.1	13.3	14.1
<b>POLITICAL ATTITUDES</b> (1=strongly disagree; 4=strongly agree)				
<i>Trust in Government</i>				
Government cannot be trusted	2.54*	2.79*	2.59*	2.82*
People running government are crooked	2.79*	2.99*	2.81*	3.08*
No confidence in criminal justice system	2.75*	3.09*	2.80*	3.09*
<i>Political Efficacy</i>				
People like me have no say	2.31*	2.56*	2.36*	2.70*
Get nowhere talking to public officials	2.30*	2.52*	2.34*	2.69*
<i>Political Engagement</i>				
% Talk with spouse/partner, 2000	49.0*	32.5*	45.4	35.9
% Talk with friends, 2000	40.0	36.4	39.7*	28.2*
% Talk with relatives, 2000	44.4*	32.5*	41.7	30.8

\* indicates that difference is statistically significant at .05 level (2-tailed test)

**Table X.3. The Relationship Between Criminal Sanctions and Voter Turnout and Vote Choice**

Variable	ARREST <sup>a</sup>			INCARCERATION <sup>b</sup>		
	Not Arrested	Arrested	Gap	Not Incarcerated	Incarcerated	Gap
<b>TURNOUT</b>						
% 1996 turnout	70.1*	51.0*	19.1	67.7*	43.2*	24.5
% 1998 turnout	54.3*	41.5*	12.8	52.3*	28.6*	23.7
% 2000 turnout plans	82.2*	66.0*	16.2	79.5*	59.7*	19.8
<b>VOTE CHOICE</b>						
% Clinton (D) 1996	73.0	73.6	0.6	73.3	77.8	4.5
% Perot (I) 1996	13.7	18.0	4.3	14.3	11.1	3.2
% Dole (R) 1996	9.5	5.6	3.9	8.9	11.1	2.2
% Other 1996	3.9	2.8	1.1	3.6*	0.0*	3.6
% Ventura (I) 1998	56.3*	73.8*	17.5	59.6	69.6	10.0
% Humphrey (D) 1998	22.2*	11.5*	10.7	20.4	13.0	7.4
% Coleman (R) 1998	19.6	13.1	6.5	18.2	17.4	0.8

\* indicates that difference is statistically significant at .05 level (2-tailed test)

<sup>a</sup> For the 1996 election, arrest refers to an arrest prior to 1997. For the 1998 and 2000 elections, arrest refers to an arrest prior to 1999.

<sup>b</sup> For the 1996 election, incarceration refers to incarceration prior to 1996. For the 1998 and 2000 elections, incarceration refers to incarceration prior to 1999.

**Table X.4. Characteristics of Felon Interviewees. (n=33)**

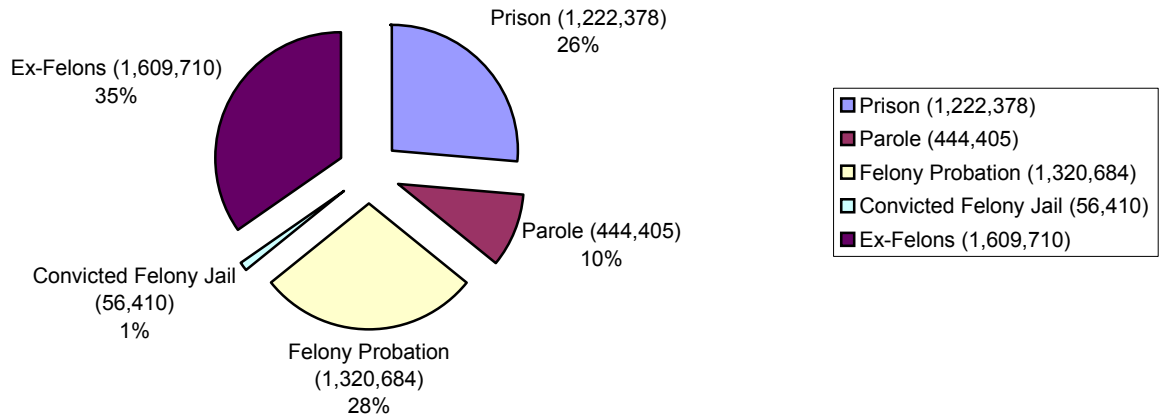
<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>RACE</b>		
White	22	67%
Black	6	18%
Native	5	15%
<b>PARTY</b>		
Democrat	18	55%
Republican	9	27%
Independent	2	6%
Don't Know/Unknown	3	12%
<b>SEX</b>		
Male	23	70%
Female	10	30%
<b>POLITICAL LABEL</b>		
Conservative	9	27%
Liberal	7	21%
Moderate	2	6%
Conservative or Moderate Liberal	3	9%
"Independent"	1	3%
"Everything"	1	3%
Don't Know/Unknown	10	30%
<b>CORRECTIONAL STATUS</b>		
Prison	23	70%
Probation	7	21%
Parole	3	9%
<b>EVER VOTED?</b>		
Yes	22	67%
No	11	33%
<b>PLAN TO VOTE IN FUTURE?</b>		
Yes	24	73%
No	1	3%
Unknown	8	24%
<b>2000 PRESIDENTIAL CHOICE</b>		
Gore	16	48%
Bush	8	24%
Nader	3	9%
No Preference/Unknown	6	18%



**Table X.5: State Disfranchisement Law Changes since 1980.**

<b>Expanded Voting Rights</b>	<b>Restricted Voting Rights</b>
1981: South Carolina (automatic restoration upon completion of sentence)	1983: Georgia (disfranchised felons convicted in any state)
1983: Georgia (automatic restoration upon completion of sentence)  Texas (automatic restoration two years after completion of sentence)	1993: Colorado (disfranchised parolees)  Nebraska (disfranchised for non-pardoned out-of-state convictions)
1997: Texas (automatic restoration upon completion of sentence)	1995: Pennsylvania (five-year post-prison voting ban)
1998: New Hampshire (inmates received voting rights through court decision)	1997: Colorado (disfranchised felons convicted in federal court)
2000: Delaware (voting rights restored five years after completion of sentence)  Pennsylvania (five-year post-prison waiting period eliminated)	1998: Utah (disfranchised inmates)
2001: New Mexico (automatic restoration upon completion of sentence)	1999: Louisiana (limited automatic restoration for first-time offenders)
2002: Connecticut (expanded franchise to probationers)	Oregon (disfranchised federal inmates)
2003: Maryland (automatic restoration upon completion of sentence)	2000: Massachusetts (disfranchised inmates)  New Hampshire (court re-disfranchised prison inmates)

**Figure X.1. Estimated Distribution of Legally Disfranchised Felons in the United States, 2000 (Uggen and Manza 2001)**



**Figure X.1. Distribution of Disfranchised Felons**

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The only states that allow currently incarcerated felons to vote are Vermont and Maine, although even in these states those convicted of treason, bribery, or election offenses may be permanently disfranchised (Olivares et al. 1997; U.S. Department of Justice 1996). As of May 2002, 10 states (Alabama, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, Tennessee [for those convicted prior to 1986], Virginia, Washington [for those convicted prior to 1984], and Wyoming) permanently deny convicted felons the right to vote (unless reinstated by a pardon or executive clemency procedure). Additionally, Arizona and Maryland permanently disfranchise recidivists (those with two or more felony convictions) and Delaware requires a five-year waiting period (effective June 2000). Effective January 2003, Maryland will restore voting rights to recidivists upon completion of sentence, unless both convictions were for violent offenses.

<sup>2</sup> We estimate that 1.8 million of the 4.7 million disfranchised felons and ex-felons are African American; in a number of states, the disfranchisement rate of black men is over 30 percent (see Uggen and Manza 2002; Uggen, Manza, and Thompson 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Among the countries restricting the voting rights of some categories of prisoners are Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, and Norway. In Austria (over one year) and Belgium (over four months), length of sentence is the determining factor in the loss of voting rights. In France and Germany, judges can restrict voting rights as an additional sanction (for the details of the German case, see Demleitner 2000). In Italy and Norway, some specific offenses trigger the loss of voting rights. Only eight European countries, most in the former Soviet bloc, impose complete bans on all incarcerated offenders (the only non-East European case is the United Kingdom). Some countries make direct

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provision to enable incarcerated individuals to vote. For example, Australia provides a mobile polling staff to visit prisons to facilitate inmate voting (Australian Electoral Commission 2001). We thank Joe Levinson at the Prison Reform Trust, and Femke van der Meulen at the International Centre for Prison Studies, both in London, for making the results of their international survey of felon voting rights in Europe available to us. See also Allard and Mauer 1999; Fellner and Mauer 1998.

<sup>4</sup> For details, see Uggen and Manza 2002. At year-end 2000, we estimate 57,708 legally disfranchised jail inmates, but over 600,000 who were “practically” disfranchised (lacking access to a polling place) on election day (U.S. Department of Justice 2001).

<sup>5</sup> If not for disfranchisement, control of the U.S. Senate may have shifted from Republican to Democratic control during the Clinton Presidency in the 1990s. Perhaps not surprisingly, we also found that the 2000 Presidential election would have been reversed, if only *ex-felons* in a single state (Florida) had the right to vote. Our analysis focused only on the most significant state-level elections; it is quite likely that the effects of these lost votes would have been decisive in lower-level elections as well, but in the absence of sufficiently disaggregated data it is difficult to make those calculations.

<sup>6</sup> There are a number of appropriate cautions about the results presented in this paper. First, our survey and interview data are drawn entirely from the state of Minnesota. This state is unique in having one of the lowest incarceration rates in the U.S (U.S. Department of Justice 2001). It has a relatively low proportion of African Americans both in the state, and in the criminal justice system (although as in other states, African Americans are significantly over-represented). It also had an unusual political context at the time these data were collected, as the state’s Governor was political independent Jesse

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Ventura, who changed the tenor of political discussion through his upstart 1998 gubernatorial campaign and resulting term as governor (and indeed, he proved quite popular among offenders). It is conceivable that Ventura both reinforced anti-government sentiment while heightening general awareness of conventional political institutions among offenders.

<sup>7</sup> For comparative evidence on cross-national voting trends, see Norris 2002, chap. 3. In recent presidential elections, turnout rates of the entire voting age population have been around 50 percent (e.g. 50.1 percent in 1988, 49.8 percent in 1996, 51.1 percent in 2000), with the 55 percent turnout in 1992 (the year of the first H. Ross Perot campaign) as an outlier. Turnout rates in non-Presidential midterm elections, analogous to Parliamentary elections in European countries without a Presidential system, have been in the mid–30 percent range.

<sup>8</sup> As in other longitudinal surveys, race and family income are associated with sample attrition in the YDS. In supplementary analysis, however, we found no evidence that estimates reported here are biased by sample selectivity or attrition. More complete information about the YDS can be found in Mortimer (2003) and Uggen and Janikula (1999).

<sup>9</sup> We consider arrestees as well as inmates because, as noted in Figure X.1, many disfranchised felons receive probation sentences and are never incarcerated. The larger number and sample proportion of arrestees also provides greater statistical power to detect differences across groups.

<sup>10</sup> Lack of space precludes a detailed discussion of that comparison here. See Manza and Uggen (2003, chapter 4) for more information.

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<sup>11</sup> It is likely that at least part of this remaining turnout gap is due to the legal disfranchisement of arrestees due to ongoing criminal sanctions. In Minnesota, those convicted of felonies may not vote until after they have completed probation or parole supervision, in addition to any prison sentence. Unfortunately, we lack data indicating whether an individual was under correctional supervision at the time of the election.

<sup>12</sup> Since better-educated and more affluent citizens are more likely to report voting (Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001) and criminal offenders have mean levels of income and education significantly below those of non-offenders (U.S. Department of Justice 1993), some of the differences between the two groups may reflect socio-demographic differences. We test this proposition in multivariate analyses reported in Uggen and Manza (2002), discussed in note 20 below.

<sup>13</sup> Prison respondents were recruited by including an invitation to participate in “a study about voting and politics” in the daily announcements at each facility. Prisoners then sent a response to a staff contact person to schedule interviews. Probation and parole participants were recruited by (1) office staff mentioning the study at the conclusion of their daily interviews; and, (2) a posted invitation (again inviting participation in “a study about voting and politics”) outside the door to the interview room. Probationers and parolees were paid \$10 upon completion of the interview. Unfortunately, prisoners could not be similarly compensated – staff suggested that such payments were likely to create a surplus of respondents that would introduce potential inequities among volunteers *not* selected to participate. Moreover, we also encountered logistical difficulties in setting up a payment transfer system to credit inmates’ institutional accounts. For these reasons, we suspect that the inmate volunteers were likely to have a higher degree of political interest

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and experience than non-volunteers, but that the probation and parole volunteers were perhaps more representative of the daily clientele visiting the large, urban, community corrections office.

<sup>14</sup> Use of in-depth interviews to explore political attitudes in ways not well-captured in conventional survey research has a long history; see especially the classical work of Robert Lane (1962); and more recently, in the work of Gamson (1992). For a historically informed critique of survey research as a measure of public opinion, see Herbst (1993) and Lee (2002, chap. 3).

<sup>15</sup> To be sure, clear evidence of a growing political gender gap in the United States (Manza and Brooks 1999, chap. 5) does mean that there are some important policy and partisan differences between men and women.

<sup>16</sup> Participants were also asked about other rights they may have lost, prompting most to discuss the right to “bear arms” or own a gun. While this was inconsequential to many of the felons we interviewed, others were passionate about gun rights.

<sup>17</sup> Another inmate, Diana, complained in a similar manner about the lack of openness in the political system as undermining her trust in government:

I don't know, I think they should do something every, instead of every four years, they should have something – I think the government should open up and feel what the people need. Some countries don't have any say in the matter at all. But United States, we're supposed to be more open and more freedom, and more proud, we should be able to open up more, and expand more. You know there's a lot out there that the government's not taking care of, and people aren't able to voice their opinion.

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<sup>18</sup> For example, Thomas, a 23 year-old male parolee, Dennis, a 37 year-old male prisoner, and Steven, a 52 year-old male probationer, described their identity as “conservative” in the following terms respectively:

[I think of myself as] Conservative, definitely. Definitely. Because I look at myself as a more mannerable and very conscious man. I wouldn't become more disrespectful, I would just become more persistent. I wouldn't become mad, I might become angry. Can't no man make me mad. Can't nobody make me mad, but myself. I become angry of mistakes I've made and try again to be a more conservative type person.

I'd probably put myself as a conservative 'cause I'm a very casual, respectable type person. When I'm out there in the real world, and freedom, I- Suits- gotta look good. Very respectable looking. You know very respectful towards other people and carrying myself very proper. It's a little different in here ... But otherwise, I'm a very casual, respectable kind of person.

I was a liberal Democrat most of my life, but *due to my problems I have to be conservative 'cause I can't cope with my problems and be liberal*. You know, I have to- Well, I'll admit like when I got drunk and became sexual act-, sexually prone, you know? It was like the alcohol and the sex were one and the same. ... Yeah, I grew up in a liberal environment. ... And I grew up, you know, I grew up in the 60s when a lot of changes in this country happened. ... And that, now, that actually hurt me because even though alcohol affected me so severely, I was liberal, you know, and I didn't, I wasn't proud of not drinking. I was “if I want to go out and get drunk with the guys, well, so what? I'm gonna go out and get drunk with the guys.” But being, switching to conservatism, now I, you know, I have to be conservative 'cause I- With my medications and stuff, and my mental problems, if- without being conservative, I'll be in trouble. (emphasis added)

<sup>19</sup> In response to specific questions about party affiliations, those who classified themselves as “independents” often mentioned independent political parties, whereas those who were unfamiliar with political parties responded with “I don't know.” Many respondents referred to themselves as independent thinkers but still indicated a preference for either the Republican or (more typically) the Democratic Party.

<sup>20</sup> We found that when the independent variables in our multivariate models were set to their mean values, the predicted probability of voting in 1996 was about .63 for arrestees



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and .69 for non-arrestees. At least part of the remaining turnout gap is likely due to the legal disfranchisement of arrestees still under correctional supervision. In Minnesota, those convicted of felonies may not vote until they are “off paper,” or have completed probation or parole supervision, in addition to any prison sentence. Unfortunately, we cannot determine from these data whether individual arrestees were legally eligible to vote at the time of the election.