

Teen Perception of Felon Disenfranchisement: Exploring Ideologies of Future Voters

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ABSTRACT

Felon disenfranchisement continues to have a significant impact on the function of our democracy. While some argue that committing a felony constitutes a breach of the social contract warranting the denial of voting rights, others argue that such a denial is itself a violation of democratic principles that undermines the foundation of the social contract. As public opinion influences state laws on felon disenfranchisement (FD) policies, there has been significant research on public opinion on FD laws. The current research focuses on adolescent opinions about FD policies in an attempt to capture future directions of voter opinion on this critical issue.

Introduction

The universal right to vote has been a staple of democracy, and the U.S has prided itself on the open and free right to vote. However, while many believe that universal suffrage was achieved with the 15th and 19th amendments of the constitution, this is simply not true. Millions of people are kept from voting each year for a single reason: being sent to prison. About half of U.S. states keep current felons from voting, and several remove the right to vote for life. The existence of felon disenfranchisement (FD) policies demands the collective questioning and re-evaluation of American democracy. In doing so, it is essential that the history of FD and the original intentions of these laws be taken into consideration. These factors create the backdrop for understanding the urgency of the debate over such policies. Surveying public opinion has been crucial in gauging public opinions on FD, which is important when dissecting this issue, as the beliefs held by the populace are heavily intertwined with state policy. However, one aspect that has not been touched upon in these surveys is the voices of adolescents. These voices are important because they are the future voters; surveying this population will help fill the current gap in the research by providing insight about their beliefs regarding FD, which may provide insight into future political trends.

Literature Review

The existing research on FD clusters in three major areas: the impacts of FD on the broader political landscape, the continuation of the historical racial motivations for FD, and the importance of public opinion on shaping FD policies.

Felon Disenfranchisement - Political and Social Impacts

In a country that prides itself on suffrage, the removal of the right to vote from a group of people is a policy that needs to be explored. Denying felons a voice in our democracy has a significant impact on them as they are stripped of any form of advocating for themselves; the removal of voting rights equates to an erasure of their political power and voice. This is no small issue because across all 50 states, “an estimated 6.1 million people are disenfranchised due to a felony conviction, a figure that has escalated dramatically in recent decades” (Uggen, et al., 2016, p. 3). To fully

understand the magnitude and scope of such a statistic, it can be useful to look at the impact that it has in individual states. Over 10% of Mississippi’s voting age population has been disenfranchised due to felony conviction. This figure is also astonishingly high in other states such as Alabama (9%), Florida (almost 8%), and Tennessee (9%) (Uggen, et al., 2020). A full map of nationwide FD laws can be seen in Fig. 1.

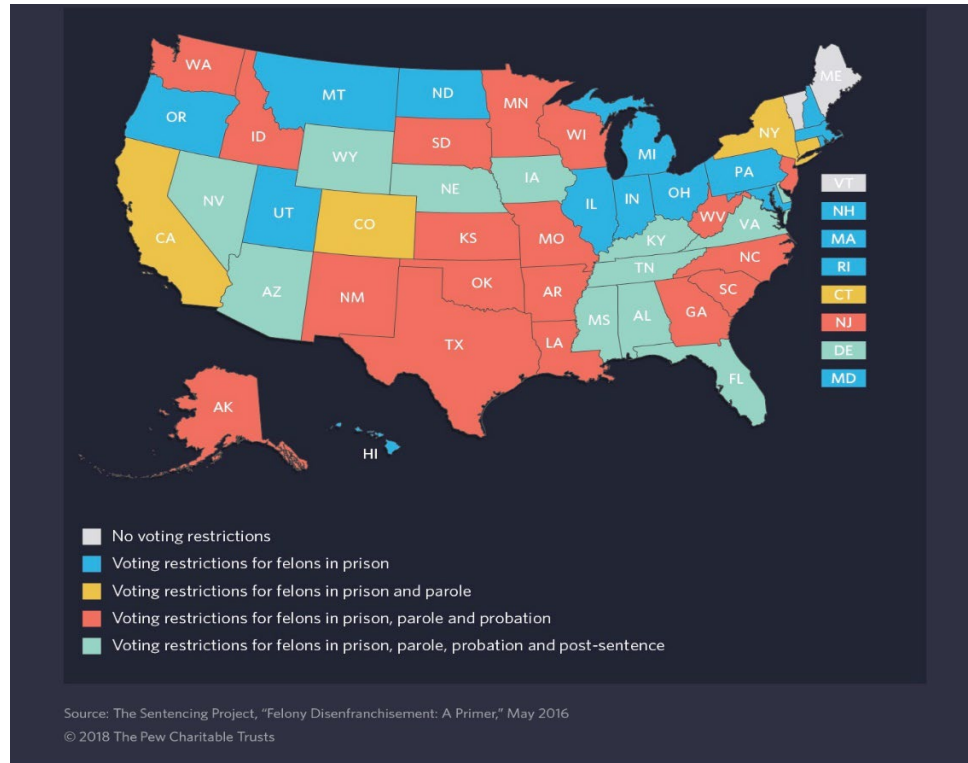


Figure 1. Map of Felon Disenfranchisement Policies by State (Chung, 2016, as cited in Beitsch, 2018)

It is undeniable that these numbers have widespread influence on our political system. Professors with the Metropolitan State University of Denver point out, “FD policy can undermine the mechanism of political socialization, leading to potentially greater biases in the electoral arena than previously thought” (Bowers & Preuhs, 2009, p. 272). In other words, the current political situation in the U.S is being dramatically skewed by disenfranchisement. To put the size and relevance of the impact in context, “Approximately 2.5 percent of the total U.S. voting age population – 1 of every 40 adults – is disenfranchised due to a current or previous felony conviction” (Uggen, et al., 2016, p. 3), meaning “disenfranchised felons now constitute, by far, the largest group of Americans denied the franchise” (Manza et al., 2004, p.276). Restricting the voting rights of this many people constitutes an influential political issue that warrants serious and ongoing investigation.

History of FD Laws

Voting restriction for felons was explicitly created as a Jim Crow era law that many believe persists as racially motivated suppression of voting rights. This has been a subtle shift from “‘Jim Crow racism’ to ‘laissez-faire racism.’ The latter is based on notions of cultural rather than biological inferiority, illustrated by persistent negative stereotyping, a tendency to blame African-Americans for racial gaps in socioeconomic standing” (Behrens et al., 2003, p. 569). There is substantial research showing that Jim Crow era laws have continued their trend of targeting minority groups and harming them at disproportionate rates. As Daniel Goldman writes in the Stanford Law Journal, “felon disenfranchisement provisions are the most noteworthy of a growing number of consequences of criminal sentences, often

referred to as ‘civil disabilities’ that perpetuate the economic, social, and political exclusion of minorities” (2004, p. 612). Goldman goes on to compare FD to the historically oppressive literacy tests for voting, drawing comparisons to the racial bias present and the systematic use of discrimination to exclude minorities from the vote. This evaluation is in agreement with other works highlighting the institutional means by which people of color are oppressed because “whites may push for political restrictions on racial minorities if they are concerned that these groups may mobilize and take action against them.” (Behrens et al., 2003, p. 573). Others point out the deeply connected issues of race and the criminal justice system because “Numerous studies demonstrate the relationship between perceptions of Blacks and attitudes towards policies in the domains of criminal justice” (Wilson et al., 2015, p. 76). This is very important when looking at reasons why people hold the beliefs that they do regarding FD since we see that these laws and the reasons for them remain intertwined with ideas of bigotry and oppression.

These racialized beliefs translate to a significant disparity in the impact that FD laws have on communities of color. The severity of the impact on the African American community should not be understated as “one in 13 African Americans of voting age is disenfranchised, a rate more than four times greater than that of non-African Americans. Over 7.4 percent of the adult African American population is disenfranchised compared to 1.8 percent of the non-African American population” (Uggen, et al., 2016, p. 3). These numbers, while shocking on the surface, have even deeper implications when we look at the history of FD laws and notice how little progress has been made in regards to eliminating Jim Crow laws from our legal system. Additionally, these trends of exclusion, cemented into our system, are not limited to the Black community but have also been harming voting power of other communities of color: “The effects of the use of mass incarceration as a social tool in the Latino community cannot be measured solely by the harms they cause on the individual prisoners, nor the disruption and dislocation they produce for families, important as those may be...felon disenfranchisement directly affects Latino voting strength by robbing potential votes from Latino neighborhoods.” (Cartagena, 2008, p.194). Disenfranchisement not only eliminates the vote of the individual but also takes voting power away from the community, effectively reducing the vote so much that some communities’ political power becomes nullified. Critics state that this is the exact impact intended.

Public Opinion

Understanding political and social trends is key in understanding our political system and analyzing our country's values. This is relevant because those values translate into legislative action. Robert S Erickson, who specializes in American political behavior, and elections, has “reported strong correlations between state opinion and state policy” (Erikson, 1976, p. 32). While this does not establish a causal link, it is undeniable that there are strong connections between what people believe and the laws that are in place, making the observation of public opinion on political problems very important.

Existing research identifies ideas about felon deservedness as primary factors for opinions about FD, specifically whether they deserve punishment or opportunity. Those who think that prison should be primarily used for punishment also tend to think that rights, such as the right to vote, can be justly removed during incarceration because “criminals have violated the social contract, and, thus, deserve to lose their benefits of citizenship,” (Wilson, et al., 2015, p. 77). However, the majority of Americans believe that reentry of felons into society should involve voting rights; in fact, “Recent public opinion surveys find that over 80% of Americans believe that ex-offenders should regain their right to vote” (Karlan, 2004, p. 1148). This support can vary widely, however, based upon the nature of the crime committed (Manza et al 2004). These beliefs indicate the values that in turn determine what laws and regulations stay in place in this country. Accurately observing patterns in these values will be key in understanding our laws because of the relationship between public belief and state policy.

While substantial research has been done regarding beliefs on FD, a gap exists in examining the opinions of new and future voters. Understanding what adolescents believe about felon disenfranchisement is something that may prove to be impactful in understanding the trends and patterns that our political system may take. Given the complex relationship between racial attitudes, opinions on felon disenfranchisement, and state policy, surveying these beliefs

at a young age will prove to be informative when comparing to the larger scope of research on the topic. This gap leads to the following research questions: What do teens believe about FD? What factors are related to those beliefs? Understanding these trends is essential in laying the groundwork for future political work, as adolescents' political beliefs will determine what the future political landscape will look like.

Methodology

This research is designed to capture the complexity of teens' developing opinions about FD and explore potential factors that may be related to those beliefs. In order to accomplish this, the population has been narrowed to two high schools located outside a large Midwestern city. While both public schools are only ten miles apart, they have distinct differences in student body. School 1 is predominantly white and has a largely wealthy student body (61% white, 17.2% Hispanic, 16.3% Asian, 2% Black, 19% Low Income), while School 2 is the most diverse public school in the state (30% white, 31% Hispanic, 21.7% Asian, 12.5% Black, 50% Low Income) (ISBE, 2021). Targeting these two schools allows for the observation of larger patterns across both populations in comparison with existing research with adult voters, while also providing a comparative study to discern potential distinctions between the two schools and patterns of beliefs within subgroups.

Sample

To accurately represent these specific populations, sampling methods for each school have been constructed. For School 1, with just under 3,000 students, a sample population of 100 could gain baseline representation, but because of the low numbers of certain demographic groups, 400 students were selected to receive the survey to try to capture those voices. Additional targeted sampling was planned if needed to adequately include underrepresented demographics. For School 2, with a population of around 2,000 students, 300 students were selected to receive the survey; a second targeted survey was unlikely to be necessary as the school's diversity would yield sufficient demographic representation in round one. The goal was a return rate that represented approximately 10% of each schools' population.

The sample was determined through a process of random selection of a mandatory class (English), ensuring that almost all students within each population had a chance of being selected. A random period (7) was selected, followed by a random selection of teachers (12/10) from each English department. The selected teachers who had a class during 7th period were asked to distribute the survey to their students by posting it on their academic workflow site and asking students to respond if they were inclined. While this method of data collection partially compromises the randomness of the sample, it was essential to maintaining the anonymity of participants as it did not require contacting students directly. Additionally, asking the survey to be distributed in class was thought to increase response rates when compared to emailing the survey to random students. Return rates differed significantly between the two schools, as teachers in School 2 allowed class time to complete the survey, while teachers in School 1 did not. The effect was that School 2 had sufficient data after round 1 with a very strong representation of the school demographics, while School 1 required 4 rounds of selection in order to generate sufficient data.

Instrument

In order to address the multiple levels of inquiry, a survey was determined to be the most effective way of gathering data because "by asking questions of only a few hundred or thousand members of a carefully defined population, we can make fairly precise estimates of the distribution of behaviors and opinions" (Stern et al., 2014 p. 285). While the scope of this research is limited to two high schools in the suburbs of a large city, the implications are exceptionally

useful for an area of research that has not been examined, as it lays the groundwork for new research in the field. The survey addresses three areas: opinions on FD, a measure of racial bias, and demographic information.

Questions about FD beliefs were adapted from the paper “Public Attitudes Toward Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States” (Manza et al., 2004). This decision is informed by the fact that “using survey questions and scales that have previously been validated and tested by other researchers can improve the soundness of study results” (Redmiles et al., 2017, p. 5). A reduction and simplification of the questions was determined to best fit the adolescent audience as well as the format (online survey instead of phone interview).

It is clear from the literature that race is deeply intertwined with feelings regarding FD; therefore, the survey needed to account for racially biased attitudes. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to survey for this type of data because “respondents tend to under-report socially-undesirable behaviors such as drug and alcohol-use, bankruptcy, energy use, criminal behavior, and racist attitudes (Redmiles et al., 2017, p. 3). Therefore, an established, validated survey on racial bias that has been found to correlate with racial prejudice has been used: “Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale” (Neville et al., 2000). This portion of the survey is designed to see if the trend of racial bias having an inverse relationship with support for felon enfranchisement is already established in the beliefs of adolescents.

The final section of the survey asked respondents to answer a variety of questions about demographics and related information that may be related to developing belief systems. Relationships between demographic information, racial bias, and FD beliefs will inform data interpretation.

The expectation is that this exploratory survey will yield useful information about what adolescents believe about FD and discern patterns that may indicate what factors are related to those beliefs. Data will be analyzed in aggregate across demographic groups and also in comparison to capture the nuances of these dynamics. Filling this gap in the research may provide information about the future social landscape of support for FD and direction for advocates of felon enfranchisement to shape or leverage these opinions.

Data Analysis

In order to most efficiently and effectively put the results of the current study in conversation with existing research, findings and discussions of those findings will be presented together within three different subcategories: comparing adolescent and adult beliefs regarding FD, relationships between racial bias and FD beliefs, and comparing School 1 and School 2 responses.

Comparing Adolescent and Adult Beliefs Regarding FD

The results for the entire sample ($N=489$) are presented in Fig. 2. The findings indicate strong theoretical support for felon enfranchisement on a theoretical level, but significantly less when considering specific crimes. This is in stark contrast to the finding that 80.2% of respondents believe that the main goal of prison should be rehabilitation with only 12.5% stating that punishment should be the main objective of prison. These findings, however, are consistent with existing research, where “reference to any of the specific types of criminal conviction results in lower levels of support” (Manza et al., 2004, p. 281). This research, from which the first part of the current survey was adapted, produced similar basic trends with differences in degree: 80% support for ex-felons, 63% if labeled specifically as white-collar felons (illegal trading of stocks), 66% for those convicted of a violent crime, and 52% for those convicted on a sex offense. Table 1. Presents percent support for enabling the right to vote for felons. The first four questions ask about belief in regards to current state of incarceration. The final three add specific crimes to the state of having served entire sentence and are currently living in the community.

Table 1. Percent Support for Enfranchisement for Specific Felon Category

Population	In Prison	On Parole	On Probation	Served Entire Sentence	Served Entire Sentence: White-collar Crime	Served Entire Sentence: Violent Crime	Served Entire Sentence: Sex Crime
Adolescent Respondents' Level of Support (2022)	50.5%	81.2%	83.6%	93%	80%	61.3%	43.1%
Adult Respondents' Level of Support (Manza et al., 2004)	31%	60%	60%	80%	63%	66%	52%

These numbers indicate that teens have a higher level of theoretical support for felon enfranchisement but are harsher when it comes to judging specific crimes, with the exception of white-collar crimes where teens had a higher level of support by a margin of 19%. This trend might be explained by the fact that “perceived victimization risk is an important determinant of punitive public attitudes toward crime and criminals” (Holtfreter et al., 2008, p. 52). This paper goes on to explain, this is why people are less forgiving of sex and violent crimes as opposed to white collar crime, as white-collar crime does not have the same level of personal threat fear. This trend is perhaps heightened among teens as lack of personal assets reduces impact and therefore fear of white-collar crime. The vastly lower levels of support for those convicted of a sex crime may be attributable to both an increased level of perceived threat in adolescence, who may view themselves as more vulnerable to sexual assault, as well as the corresponding growth of the MeToo movement, which has heightened both awareness and stigmatization of sex crimes. It is notable that the previous research was conducted prior to the MeToo movement, which may explain the decreased support for enfranchisement of sex offenders in today’s teens.

As for probationers and parolees, the existing data on adults continues, “between 60 and 68 percent of the public believes that felony probationers, who make up a full one-fourth of the disenfranchised felon population, should have their voting rights restored. Moreover, 60 percent support voting rights for parolees” (Manza et al., 2004, p. 283). Based on the heightened levels of teen support for voting rights for these groups (83.6% and 81.2% respectively), a shifting in public opinion to be even more in favor of enfranchisement opens an opportunity for legislative change as the established link between public opinion and state policy shows that “legislators themselves take public opinion into account when deciding how to act” (Erickson, 1976, p. 34). The current research solidifies the claim of Manza, Brooks and Uggen that “findings suggest little support for the assumption that the American public consistently supports the disenfranchisement of felons and ex-felons who are not currently incarcerated” (2004, p. 283). Therefore, advocates for felon voting rights may be able to leverage this increased support to move for meaningful policy change.

As for the disconnect between the participants' extremely high levels of theoretical support for enfranchisement and their lower level of support when attaching specific crimes, a long-standing body of research shows that there is “almost unanimous support for general statements expressing approval for abstract principals such as majority rule, minority rights, and democracy itself. But this consensus disappeared on attitudes toward particular application of the same principals” (Searing et al., 1973, p. 422). This trend seems to be particularly true among teens in spite of their strong belief that the purpose of prison is rehabilitation (80.2%). While this belief would seem to indicate support

for felon enfranchisement (since the return of civic participation would constitute a full rehabilitation of membership within society), this is clearly not the case when associated with specific crimes.

Part of the explanation for this may be found in what Matt Whitt, a post-doctoral fellow in the Duke University Philosophy Department, describes as a “new wave” of philosophical defense of felon disenfranchisement policies based upon democratic theory in which, “disenfranchisement is not a form of punishment, nor a mode of regulating citizenship, but a tool for collective political self-determination” where “the right to vote is [seen as] a conditional human right that may be forfeited if one commits certain kinds of criminal acts” and demands that “currently incarcerated felons must be excluded from the franchise in order to preserve the integrity of democracy” (Whitt, 2017, pp. 287, 288, 289). This theory plays to a certain level of democratic idealism that matches the idealism expressed in the general support for felon enfranchisement and belief in rehabilitation. It may be that adolescents have higher support for theoretical principles that match such pure ideals but are therefore more reactive to actual criminal behavior that threatens those ideals, which might explain both their higher levels of theoretical support for enfranchisement as compared to previous research with adults as well as the significantly lower levels of support when specific crimes are mentioned.

Racial Bias

The second part of the survey was a measure of racial bias; individual racial bias scores were compared to responses on each question regarding FD. The results show that higher racial bias consistently yields overall lower support for felon voting rights as demonstrated in Fig. 2.

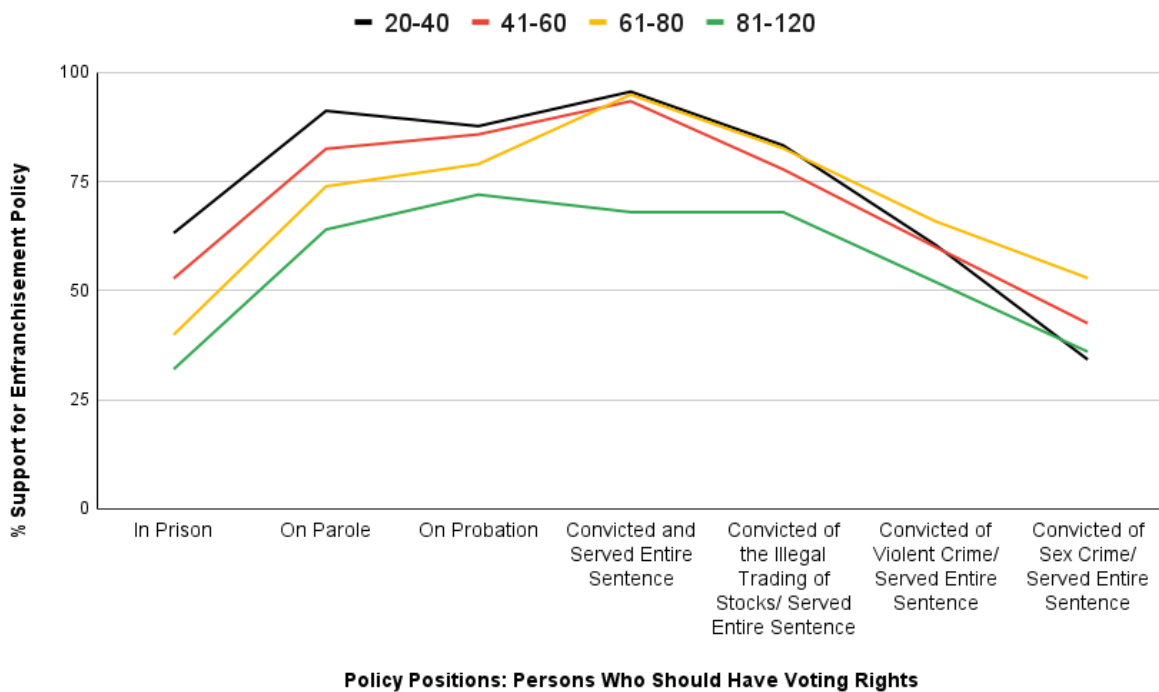


Figure 2. Relationship Between Racial Bias and Felon Enfranchisement Policy Support: Racial-Bias Score. Lines indicate the percent of respondents within each range of racial bias scores that support felon voting rights for specific conditions. The 20-40 range indicates the lowest levels of racial bias, while the 81-120 range indicates the highest levels of racial bias. The 81-120 range collapsed two subcategories as only two out of the 489 respondents scored above a 100.

Fig. 3 indicates that for those on probation, parole, and in prison there is a defined inverse relationship between racial bias and support for enfranchisement. For ex-felons, white collar, and violent crime status, there is no linear correlation with racial bias. Fig. 3 seems to indicate that theoretical positions on enfranchisement based upon current status are directly related to racial bias, whereas beliefs on enfranchisement based upon type of crime are not, except for the most biased individuals. In fact, there is almost universal support for enfranchisement for ex-felons except for the group scoring the highest on the racial bias scale, for whom support drops to 68%. This is in line with previous research that indicates that “people who have higher levels of racial resentment show greater opposition to restoring political rights to felons” (Wilson et al., 2015, p. 82). This dynamic is deeply rooted in beliefs regarding the criminal justice system and race and is consistent with findings discussed in the literature review, as those who have a high racial bias are more likely to support legislation that targets communities of color, thereby limiting Black and Hispanic political power. The difference with the adolescents in the current study, however, is the lack of linear relationship in regards to specific crimes, indicating outlier status for only the most racially biased participants. This, in turn, indicates an opportunity for policy change as even those with moderate racial bias overwhelmingly support enfranchisement of ex-felons and are often at similar levels of support as the least racially biased when it comes to specific crimes. This may be an indication that the intertwining of racial bias and FD beliefs has not yet solidified for adolescents. Alternatively, it may indicate that adolescents are less racially biased in theory than they are in specific practice.

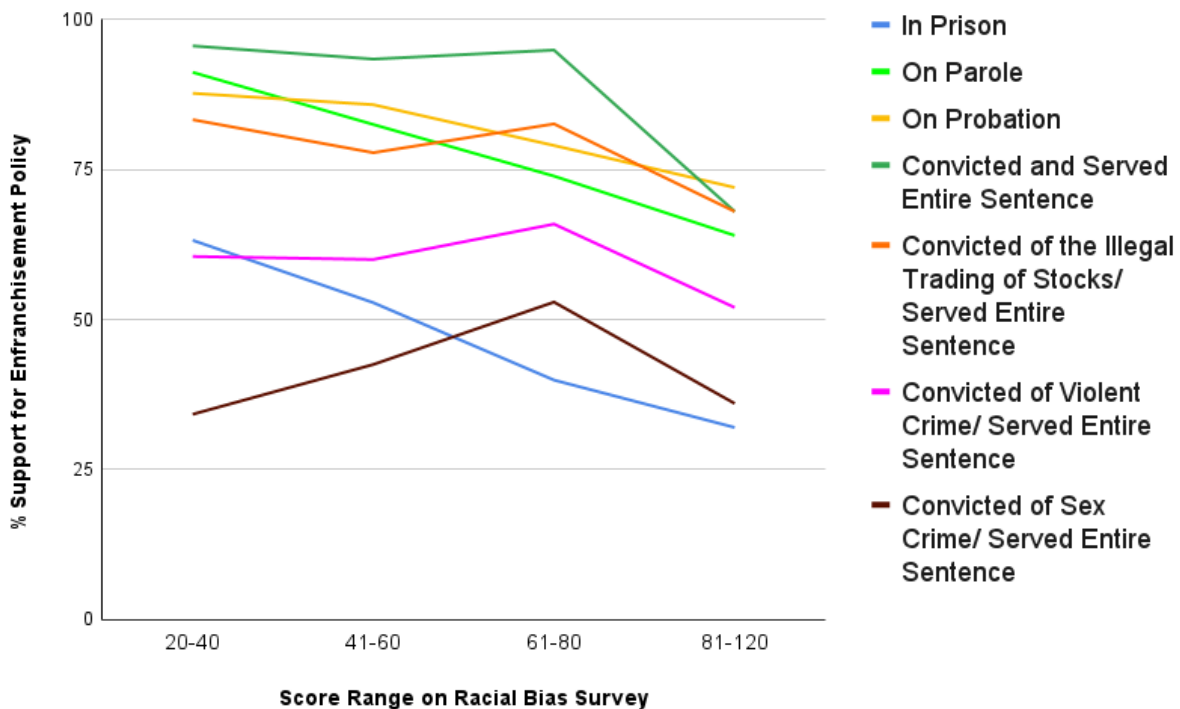


Figure 3. Presents the percent of support across ranges of racial bias for each specific policy position in regards to felon voting rights.

While the abstract notion of ex-felon seems to have more support than ever with this group, there is a distinct difference with the question regarding sex crime as results show that those who scored the lowest racial bias scores also showed the lowest amount of support for ex-felons who committed a sex crime. Possible reasoning for this fact could be that those who are the least racially biased are the most empathetic to causes regarding underrepresented groups. This would explain the lack of support for those who committed a sex crime, generally thought of as crimes targeting women, children, or other vulnerable populations. Further research on this finding is warranted.

School Comparison

Overall, the two schools produced results with very similar trends, as demonstrated in Fig. 4 (SCHOOL 1) and Fig. (SCHOOL 2). However, when looking closer and at the breakdown of support at each school, a few key differences were noted. First, overall support was higher in School 1 for every condition of enfranchisement, an unexpected result given each school's demographics, where it might be assumed that the significantly more diverse school would have more support for enfranchisement. Reasons for this can be sought in research regarding community perception of crime, with fear of crime leading to more punitive opinions. Research shows that “fear of crime is higher among victims, women, blacks, and Latinos; education, income, and age are negatively associated” (Callanan, 2012, p. 102), which could be a possible explanation for the slightly lower levels of support at School 2, which has significantly larger black, Hispanic, and low-income populations that may have this increased fear of crime and lead to higher support for FD.

Another surprising finding that may be related to the first is that when looking at the breakdown by race at School 2, support for enfranchisement is highest among white respondents for every question. Additionally, the only area in which School 2 elicited higher support than School 1 is when looking at the white students at each school. This suggests that integration in a diverse population may result in more liberal perspectives on FD for white students in particular when compared to non-white students in the same school or white students at less diverse schools. This may be influenced by the fact that “decreasing levels of segregation only occur in schools with more than two races. When there are only two races in the school, there is a greater likelihood for ‘us vs. them’ social dynamics” (Moody, 2001, p. 708), which could indicate that the white students at School 1 feel a greater level of racial threat from the growing Hispanic population, thereby suppressing their support for enfranchisement as compared other students at School 1 or the white students at School 2 where a greater level of integration has occurred.

However, this does not explain why the white students at School 2 demonstrate the highest support for enfranchisement as compared to their non-white classmates. Research has indicated that “whites are more likely than non-African American racial minorities to believe that restoring voting rights will make society better” (Wilson et al., 2015, p. 83), but there is, as of yet, no consistently held reasoning for this belief, nor does it explain why the white students at School 2 support every position of enfranchisement more than their black peers. It may be connected to the aforementioned fear of crime and the possibility that the white students at School 2 do not see themselves as likely victims of crime. Furthermore, research indicates that in some highly diverse contexts, “among African Americans...the perception that Hispanics live nearby increases [perceived victimization] risk” while “Hispanic respondents are threatened in relation to the perceived proximity of other Hispanics and blacks” (Chiricos et al., 2001, p. 331, 333). To the extent that “mobilization of social control is influenced by the perception of criminal threat associated with the proximity of racial others” (Chiricos et al., 2001, p. 322) and that restriction of voting rights constitutes a measure of attempted social control, the overall lower support among participants in School 2, particularly in the Hispanic community makes sense. The same perceived threat dynamics may also explain the lower than expected support for enfranchisement from Black respondents, as well as the relatively low support in the Asian respondents from School 2 as compared to the Asian respondents from School 1. Further research regarding these patterns is required in order to determine the social causes of such trends.

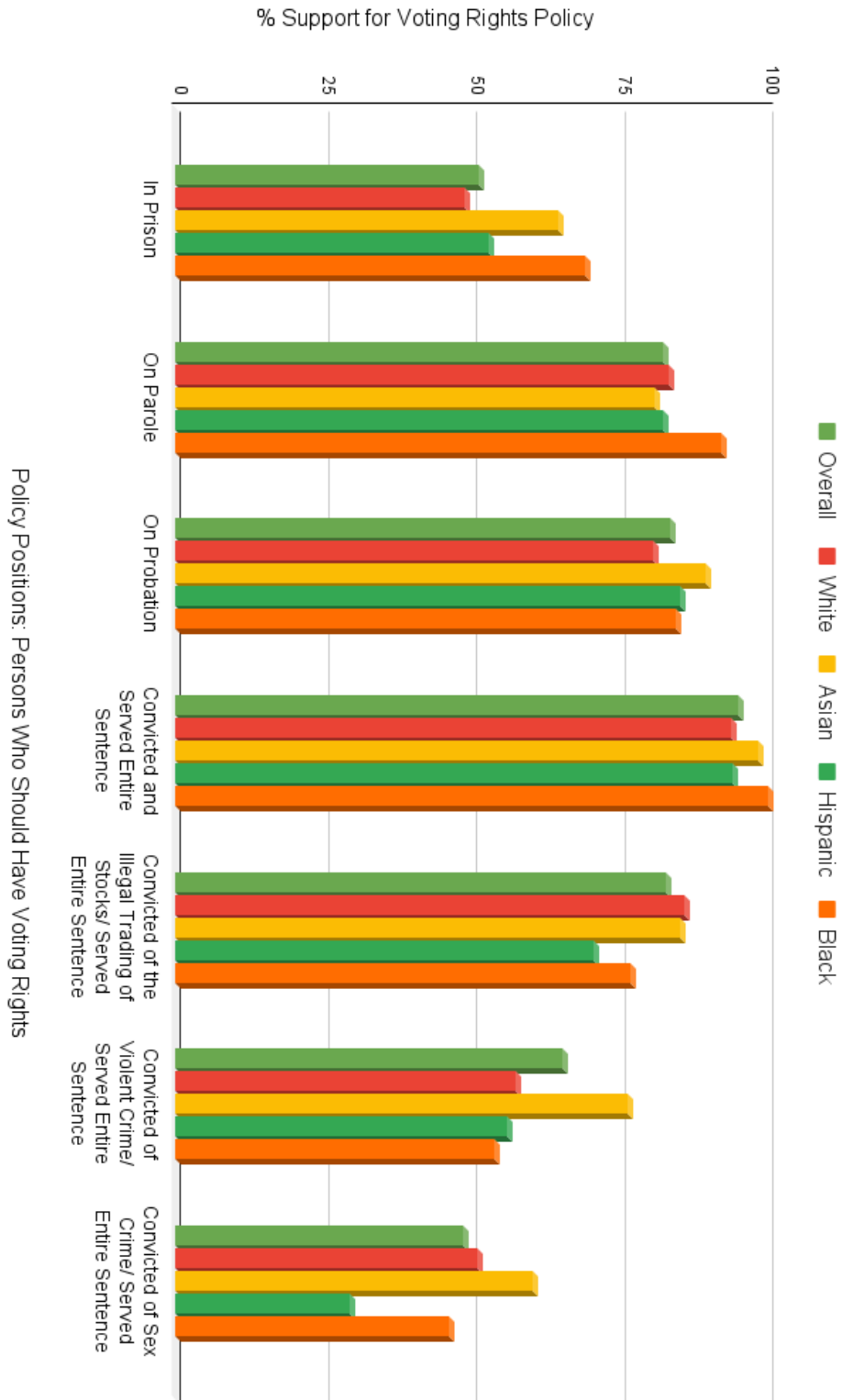


Figure 4. School 1 Support for Felon Voting Rights Policies. Presents percent of respondents from School 1 who support felon voting rights for specific conditions. Results are broken down by overall sample, and White, Asian, Hispanic.

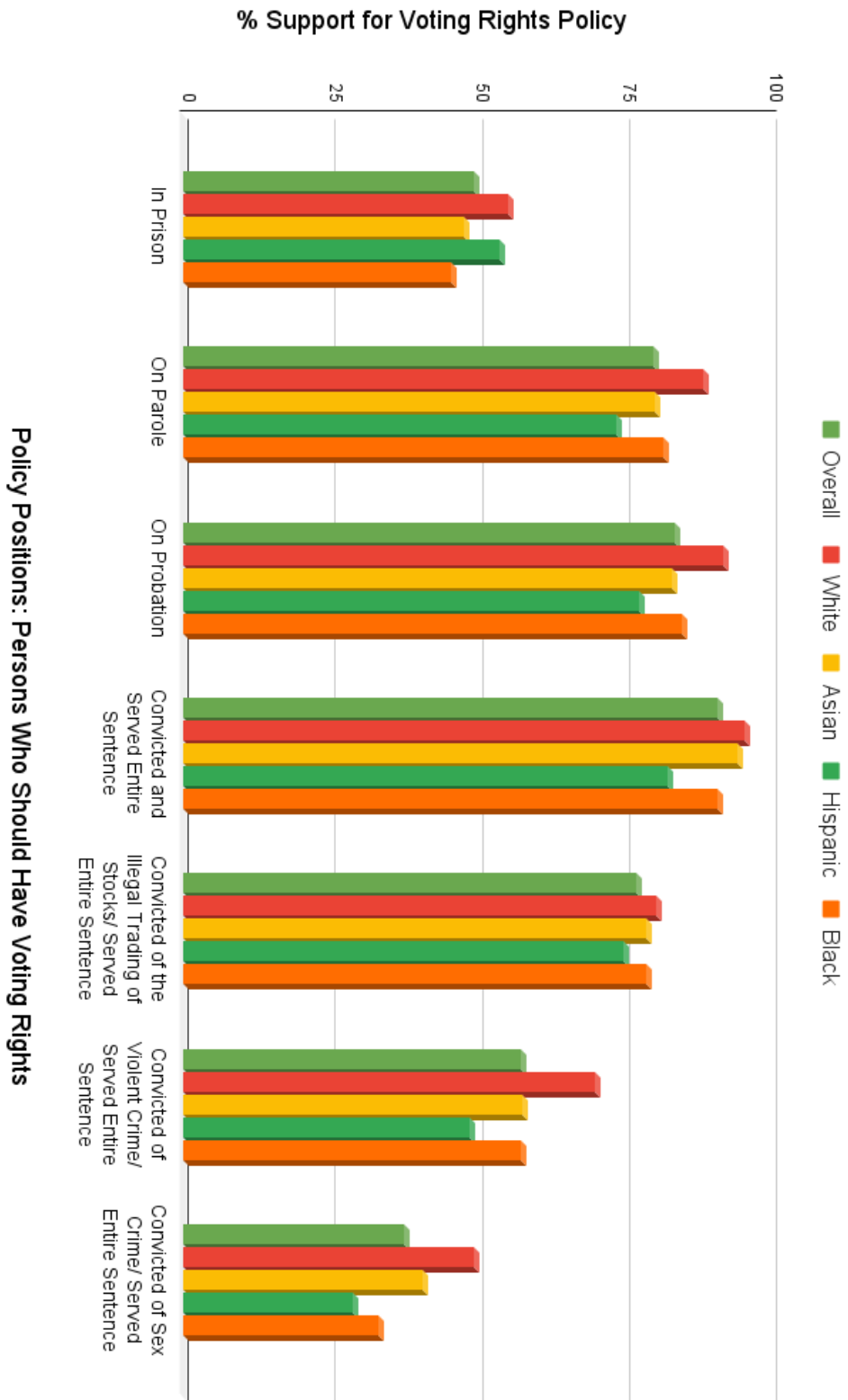


Figure 5. School 2: Support for Felon Voting Rights Policies. Presents percent of respondents from School 2 who support felon voting rights for specific conditions. Results are broken down by overall sample, and White, Asian, Hispanic,

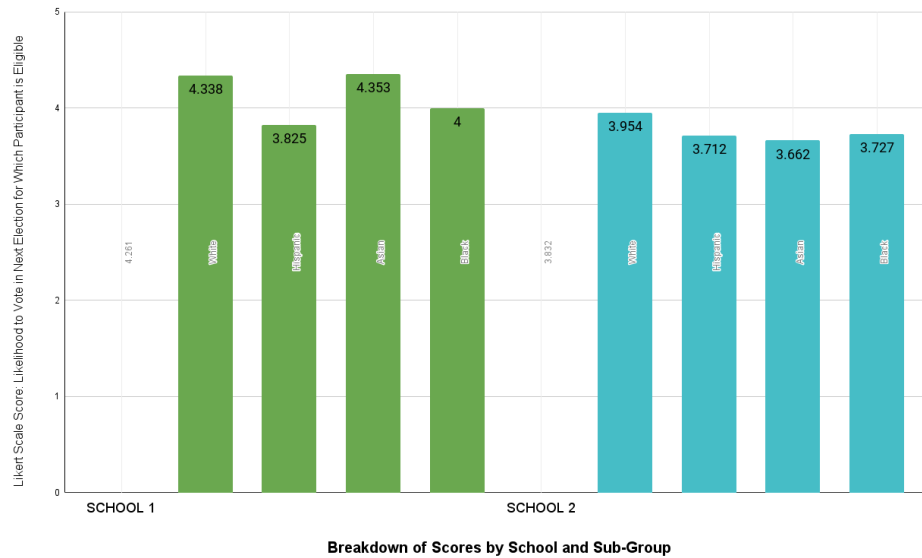


Figure 6. Participant Likelihood to Vote in Next Eligible Election. Presents percent of each sample that says they are likely to vote in the next election for which they are eligible. Data is presented for entire sample and

Another significant trend was that the likelihood to vote was higher at School 1 across all demographics, as seen in Fig. 6. When looking at the entire sample, the respondents from School 1 report a Likert Scale score of 4.261 as compared to 3.832 for School 2. These findings are interesting because the large body of research that concludes that FD policies suppress a community’s voting power “by the reinforcement or creation of apathy which could lead to decreased political participation among those who are legally eligible to vote” (King & Erickson, 2016, p. 804) may extend beyond specific racial lines impacting all voters within a highly heterogeneous community and may begin before they are even eligible to vote. Alternately, this dynamic may be a factor of wealth and privilege equating to a sense of empowerment through political participation at School 1, while participants at School 2, with 50.5% of students reporting family incomes of less than \$80,601 (21.2% at School 1), may feel that their political voices matter less. In either case, the fact that the population that is most likely to be impacted by FD laws either directly or indirectly because of the disproportionate numbers of people-of-color represented in the felon population are significantly less likely to vote reveals a troubling likelihood of ongoing impact. Also noteworthy is the significantly lower likelihood to vote for Hispanic respondents at School 1 (3.825) as compared to other demographic groups at School 1. As the largest minority population at School 1, their lower levels of voting likelihood speak to a sense of disempowerment as compared to their peers. This may well be tied to FD laws that not only restrict the voting rights of the felons themselves, but “renders voiceless the home communities from which they came, and dilutes the collective voting strength of Latinos as a whole” (Cartagena, 2008, p. 193). As discussed above, political policy is likely to follow public opinion, but only if the public lets that opinion be known through the legislative process and activism. In this case, the suppressed vote may be both an indicator and a perpetuator of the negative impact of FD on communities of color.

A final salient finding is the overall low level of knowledge about felon disenfranchisement, with an average Likert Scale score of 2.18. As this is such an impactful dynamic on the function of our democracy it is concerning that the next wave of voters has such low levels of knowledge, with 177 of the 489 respondents (36.2%) reporting little to no knowledge of the subject. This seems like a clear point of interest for advocates as constituents who have no information on the impact of FD policies are unlikely to advocate for change even if they overwhelmingly disagree with such policies.

Limitations

The major limitation noted in the sampling section was the difference in survey dispersal between the two schools, which likely skewed the results of School 1 with a less accurately representative sample and a high likelihood of self-selection bias impacting the validity and reliability of the results for that school.

Another limitation is that this study was conducted with students in a single Midwestern state with only moderately restrictive FD laws, which limits generalizability to the larger American population and especially individual states with more restrictive laws and higher levels of racial bias. That being said, in capturing the dynamics of these two schools, this easily replicable study could be used in other areas to explore regional differences or scaled up to include a national sample.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

The significance of FD and public opinion on it is worth noting as this longstanding Jim Crow legislation has severe political and social impact on the U.S with harmed minority voting power and the political exclusion of an entire nationwide population. Surveying public perception of this field is also very important and the continuance of research regarding FD opinion and associated factors is essential. One major implication of this study is creating a foundational understanding of the importance and complexity of teen beliefs on this subject. The teenage perspective is essential to gauge an accurate and comprehensive image of public opinion in order to predict future political trends. This information, as well as a look into the formation of these beliefs, can lead to opportunities for advocates of felon enfranchisement to create legislative pressure.

Additionally, since teenage opinion on this topic has not been surveyed before, further inspection by researchers could lead to additional significant findings. The first direction for future research is the recommendation for replication studies to confirm the current findings from this data and determine if these are national or localized trends. Comparing results by state or to a nationwide sample could further inform our understanding of future political trends and the varying impacts of racial bias on political beliefs.

Additional research could also incorporate qualitative methods to examine the reasoning behind FD beliefs for teens. For example, the fact that at School 2, it was the white students who showed the highest support for felon enfranchisement was consistent with aspects of research done by Wilson, Owens and Davis, yet does not align with other findings on white opinions regarding FD. Furthermore, the understanding of why racial bias correlates with support for some voting rights policies but not others could be enhanced by qualitative inquiry. These, along with many other interesting findings from the disconnect between theoretical and specific support for enfranchisement to the disparity in Asian support between the two schools could benefit from explanations about why each subgroup holds their opinions. The existence of these patterns is fascinating, but explanations as to why they exist requires further investigation.

These many directions for future research tie back in to the central implication of this research, which is that adolescent opinions on this topic matter and should be paid attention to. Even though it is again worth noting that this study was limited to two different schools, the powerful and curious insights provide an opportunity for advocates and educators. By targeting younger populations, who have strong opinions but admittedly little information on the subject, they may find a path towards meaningful political change that puts the country one step closer to the democratic ideals on which it is built.

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