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The Effects of Voting on Social Connectedness for California's Formerly Incarcerated: An Executive Summary

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## Executive Summary

### *Introduction and Problem Statement*

Voting is much more than just a “civic duty;” actively participating in the electoral process bestows a sense of responsibility onto ordinary individuals which then increases feelings of connectedness to the broader society. Further, voting gives citizens faith that their leaders will implement laws and financial decisions that reflect the desires of the people. However, voting is not accessible to all, making it so resources are unevenly distributed and leaders set decisions based on the views of only some subpopulations. One such group that is often denied the right to vote is the formerly incarcerated. Felony disenfranchisement has been utilized for centuries to minimize the political power of those who have broken laws, claiming “irresponsibility” as motivation for removing such privileges (Chung, 2021, p. 3). Today, over 5.5 million Americans are barred from voting due to a previous felony conviction (Uggen et al., 2020). Communities of color feel the greatest effect of such policies, as they make up a large portion of those incarcerated nationwide (Porter and McLeod, 2023). This exclusion from the benefits of voting can disrupt social harmony and may ultimately lead to a cycle of more crime.

Since 1849, California has barred those with a history of felony convictions from partaking in electoral decision-making (Romero and Chami, 2022, p. 5). In 2020, California Proposition 17 automatically restored voting rights to nearly 50,000 people on parole, adding to previous reforms that worked to minimize the permanent impact of felony disenfranchisement on the lives of the state’s formerly incarcerated (Romero & Chami, 2022); however, many remain unaware of such policy reforms and how to restore their right to vote due to ambiguity regarding whose right to vote is revoked and inconsistencies between each state’s legislation on the topic

(Mauer, 2018; Uggen et al., 2020). While such individuals have a strong desire to be involved in their communities, they often feel unable to fulfill this goal due to such structural barriers (Vargas-Edmond et al., 2019, p. 7). Clarifying policies regarding who can vote, and, in turn, increasing re-enfranchisement, is necessary to give those both currently and not currently eligible to vote opportunities to voice their political opinion.

To assess if expanding the right to vote amongst the formerly incarcerated impacts community safety trends, we must have a better grasp of the voting behavior of the formerly incarcerated in California since the passage of Prop 17. Past research has shown that increased feelings of belonging to one's community have reduced crime rates, making for a more cohesive and well-functioning democracy (Stuart and Taylor, 2021). In turn, this research seeks to examine: *What are the effects of having the right to vote on feelings of social connectedness to one's community for California's formerly incarcerated population?* If it was determined that voting behavior had an impact on one's social connectedness, researchers would have confidence that involvement in civic engagement work has an impact on public safety and crime rates. With this information, Initiate Justice Action (IJA), a non-profit that works to bring about criminal justice reform, could further advocate for the expansion of voting rights, especially for those who have been historically neglected from political decision-making.

### *Lit Review*

Studies have begun to examine how minimized civic engagement following incarceration, among other barriers to re-entering society, may lead to a subsequent lack of social capital, which allows one to feel more connected to one's community (Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004; King & Erickson, 2016, p. 803). This reaction stems from an understanding that the formerly incarcerated are less respected and trusted due to their record (The Brennan Center for

Justice, 2009; Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004). In turn, declines in community involvement among the formerly incarcerated are often recorded. While social capital has long been overlooked in the success of societal reintegration upon release from prison, avenues of strengthening community ties and support will ultimately increase feelings of collective efficacy and trust among citizens. In effect, making these individuals feel as if they are valuable members of society is necessary to increase their care and feelings of group responsibility (The Brennan Center for Justice, 2009, Vargas-Edmond et al., 2019, p. 14, Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004). Through increased skill development and prosocial tendencies, minimized rates of future crime - such as depressed rates of “murder, rape, robbery, assault, burglary, and motor vehicle theft” - amongst the population have been proven to emerge (Stuart & Taylor, 2021, p. 23-24).

To increase feelings of trust and connection amongst the formerly incarcerated to ultimately spur increased peace, voting must be addressed as a valuable strategy for increasing social capital. Not only do the majority of those who are formerly incarcerated believe that voting would increase their connection to their communities, but it has also been proven that voting transforms one’s self-image and identity for the better (Vargas-Edmond et al., 2019, p. 8; The Brennan Center for Justice, 2009, p. 13; Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004). Through the act of voting, one implicitly recognizes that their voice will make an impact on the lives of future generations, creating a sense of group unity and heightened personal value (Uggen and Manza, 2004, p. 195; The Brennan Center for Justice, 2009, p. 5). In turn, voting behavior among those who have previously been made to feel isolated from society must be encouraged rather than inhibited to make those desire to support and protect their community following an arrest.

Studies have started to reveal the positive effects of voting on crime rates as well. Uggen and Manza found in their 2004 paper that those who participated in the 1996 presidential election

were three times less likely to get arrested or become incarcerated in the following years than those who did not vote (p. 204-205). Additionally, states that have more restrictions on voting tend to have higher rates of recidivism, proving this correlation further (Vargas-Edmond et al., 2019, p. 19). Even the formerly incarcerated themselves believe that voting would help them stay out of jail. While this connection between voting and criminal behavior has not been fully explained, perhaps viewing voting as an indicator of one's willingness to follow norms and assist their community could explain this correlation (Uggen and Manza, 2004, p. 213).

While it remains unconfirmed if voting reduces rates of crime, in part because data on voting does not include criminal activity rates, viewing voting and civic engagement behaviors as a means for increasing one's social capital may help to establish such a correlation (Romero & Chami, 2022, p. 4). Utilizing past research that confirms the role of community connectedness in criminal activity will help to establish such a connection.

### *Methods*

To assess if expanding the right to vote amongst the formerly incarcerated impacts community safety trends, we must have a better grasp of the voting behavior of the formerly incarcerated in California since the passage of Prop 17. Analyzing data that details forms of civic engagement most common amongst the formerly incarcerated, the percentage of California's formerly incarcerated who are aware of such changes to voting rights (e.g., the passage of Prop 17), and feelings of social connection following voting will help reveal if there is a link between civic engagement and crime. Further, such information will demonstrate if civic engagement generally or voting specifically is most impactful regarding one's social connectedness.

To gather this data, I created an online survey that IJA helped to distribute to formerly incarcerated individuals from California who have a history of working with them. The

non-profit posted information and the link to the survey on their listservs and social media to spread the word. Twenty questions were included in the survey to gather vital information regarding participants' demographics, their level of civic engagement at different moments in their lives, and personal reflections on the impact that voting has had on them. Participants were informed that their answers would remain anonymous and were offered a \$10 stipend for completing the form. The survey was intended to reveal trends regarding levels of exposure to civic engagement opportunities for California's formerly incarcerated both before and following their time in prison. Utilizing a survey to gather data regarding civic engagement allowed me to access both qualitative descriptions and quantitative statistics in an online format that would hopefully increase participant honesty. In total, 15 survey responses were recorded. These Google Form responses were then converted into graphs, charts, and a Google Spreadsheet to assist with data analysis. I studied these visualizations and looked for patterns throughout the accompanying free-response questions to identify trends.

### *Reliability and Validity*

As someone passionate about civic engagement, I come into this research as a strong proponent of the positive benefits associated with voting, which I assume will carry on throughout the formerly incarcerated population once their right to vote is restored. However, I also recognize my privileged position as someone without any personal interactions with the justice system, which makes it even more necessary for me to learn from those directly impacted. To ensure that the data gathered and analyses drawn are trustworthy, I worked extensively at the beginning of my research project to refine my survey to avoid leading or confusing questions. Reviewing the questions with IJA staffers before collecting data assist me in creating a survey that will best deliver the data I aim to pursue and rid the language of assumptions. Being

conscious of time and the mentors I have at my partner organization helped me to best mitigate the effects of my personal bias on this research.

### *Findings*

Utilizing a survey to gather data regarding civic engagement allowed me to access both qualitative descriptions and quantitative statistics. On the quantitative side, the survey demonstrated the stark increase in voting recorded amongst the survey participants following their incarceration. Further, survey responses revealed a sharp increase in feelings of social connectedness following their incarceration. When asked to rank how connected they felt to their community prior to becoming incarcerated on a scale from 1-5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being highest feelings of connection, 86.6% of survey respondents rated themselves as a 3 or lower. However, following their release, 73.3% of respondents indicated that they felt as if their connection to their community was a 5. Social connectedness was shown to be most heightened for communities of color, only increasing the importance of restoring voting rights to those who have been formerly incarcerated. Last, all survey respondents indicated that voting made them feel more connected to their communities, suggesting a correlation between these two variables.

On the qualitative side, short-answer responses emphasized how strongly the respondents feel about voting through the use of strongly positive phrases. Through studying these responses, several key themes emerged. First, the responses revealed how intrinsic voting is to regaining one's sense of citizenship following incarceration. In addition, survey respondents highlighted how voting provides them with a sense of responsibility to their society, which empowers them to contribute to rectifying systemic inequalities. Across the board, quotes highlighted how voting is deeply powerful and that the formerly incarcerated are aware of the power that they harness when given the opportunity to vote. Simply, these testimonials add more credibility to the

correlation between civic engagement involvement and increased social connectedness.

### *Discussion*

In assessing this research design, a handful of strengths and weaknesses emerged. Utilizing an online survey hopefully worked to minimize interviewer effects on the participants, leading to more authentic responses. Since this survey was mainly based on self-perceptions of respondents who chose to participate, we cannot guarantee the accuracy of the responses. For instance, all but two survey respondents indicated that they were aware of the passage of Prop 17. It is unclear if this statistic is representative of the population since survey participants have worked with IJA in the past. Further, the short timeline given to complete this project hindered my ability to be thorough in forming and maintaining such relationships with the participants, which could have bolstered the accuracy of the responses. However, relying on IJA to help form the research question and design brought a knowledge of and relationships with the community along with it, bettering the quality of the project. Such strengths and weaknesses must be further considered as future research is planned and executed.

Through such preliminary research, the link between social connectedness and voting starts to be revealed. This is important because recently, public opinion has shifted away from the problem of felony disenfranchisement and towards issues such as public safety. By researching the positive effects of having increased voting access on feelings of unity and group membership, the correlation between voting and crime rates becomes illuminated. Drawing these connections will allow IJA to then further advocate for the expansion of voting rights, especially for those who have been historically neglected from political decision-making. Also, understanding the ripple effect of felony disenfranchisement on other forms of community and political involvement only heightens the urgency to increase eligibility for electoral participation.



*Recommendations*

To verify the survey results, more research is needed. To best determine if voting causes increased feelings of social connectedness, experiments and random sampling must be used in future studies. When conducting future advocacy work in regards to expanding voting rights, we must not forget the power of nonprofits. Survey responses indicated a deep sense of gratitude for IJA. Many attest that if it was not for IJA they would not vote today. Such quotes indicate the need to continue supporting such community programs and non-profits in their efforts to promote civic engagement amongst the formerly incarcerated in order to make felony re-enfranchisement most effective.

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