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The Persistence and Disproportionate Impact of Felon Disenfranchisement

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THE PERSISTENCE AND DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT OF FELON
DISENFRANCHISEMENT

by

REBECCA JAFFE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Political Science
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Thesis Chair: Kenicia Wright, Ph.D.

Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the persistence of disenfranchisement policies and the disproportionate impact these policies have on marginalized groups of the American electorate, specifically black Americans. Felon disenfranchisement, or the restriction of voting rights for criminals convicted of felonies, has been a long-standing policy throughout the United States. Using public opinion data from the 2014 General Social Survey (GSS), this paper analyzes how certain characteristics, such as race, age, and political party identification, can influence opinions about democratic rights and whether criminals should lose theirs once convicted. The results of this analysis could help explain why disenfranchisement policies have persisted throughout U.S. history, especially if these policies have consistently high levels of support from the general public.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 2018 midterm election, Florida voters successfully passed the Voting Rights Restoration for Felons Initiative, also known as Amendment 4. The amendment restores voting rights to those convicted of a felony and had served their criminal sentence. Felons convicted of murder or felony sexual offenses are excluded from the amendment and will continue to have their voting rights revoked. This ballot measure was a historic moment for Florida, a state that previously had the strictest felon disenfranchisement laws in the nation (Mower, 2020).

The practice of restricting the civil rights of criminals, known as felon disenfranchisement, exists in the United States since the nation's inception (Manza & Uggen, 2004, p. 492). By restricting their fundamental rights, felon disenfranchisement bars individuals convicted of felony crimes from participating in the country's political processes. In the modern world, the permanent removal of voting rights and the ability to participate politically does not exist in most countries. The United States is unique in this aspect, as it is common for states to disenfranchise criminals as they see fit. Additionally, the United States is almost the only democratic country in the world that does not guarantee the right to vote for *all* citizens (Manza & Uggen, 2004).

In the United States, felon disenfranchisement disproportionately affects Black citizens. This excludes a significant demographic from political activities. For example, a 2017 report from the League of Women Voters in Kentucky concluded that the state's disenfranchisement laws barred more than 300,000 people from voting – 25% of whom were Black (“Felony disenfranchisement in the Commonwealth of Kentucky,” 2017). Kentucky's disenfranchisement

laws permanently ban anyone with a felony conviction from voting (Schroeder, 2018). In states like Florida, where over 20% of its Black voting age population is disenfranchised, these laws can exclude over one million people in the state from voting (Lewis, 2018, p.1). The data show that by mass exclusion of a particular racial demographic – in this case, the Black electorate – the outcomes of elections and the political influence of certain groups can be significantly impacted (Uggen & Manza, 2002).

The research question I examine in this thesis is: what are the factors that influence public opinion on felon disenfranchisement policies in the United States? Public opinion on these policies might be a contributing factor to its persistence throughout U.S. history. In this thesis, I explore my research question by reviewing existing literature on the history of felon disenfranchisement in the United States, including its connections to slavery and the Reconstruction Era, and the political consequences of felon disenfranchisement in states across the US. Then, I move into my theory, hypothesis, and analysis of public opinion data related to disenfranchisement and government respect of democratic rights. I end with a consideration of the restrictions to my analysis and the questions that future felon disenfranchisement research should explore.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary felon disenfranchisement raises questions about the fundamentals of citizenship and equality. By restricting the rights of offenders, disenfranchisement deems those affected to be of lesser status than the rest of the citizen population. Within democracies, “the construct of citizenship is predicated on equal representation” (Phillips & Deckard, 2015, p. 2). Without the right to vote, disenfranchised felons have no say in who represents them and their political interests, effectively excluding the voice of an entire demographic of voters. Disenfranchisement of criminals can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome and medieval Europe. Although the practices were slightly different, they all had the same goal of restricting the rights of citizenship for offenders and outlaws. In ancient Rome, just some of the penalties for those punished with *infamia* – condemnation for people declared to be infamous – was the loss of suffrage, or the right to vote (Manza & Uggen, 2004, p. 492). In ancient Greece, the status of *atimista* “originally amounted to outlawry, total loss of rights vis-à-vis the individual or community” (Gomme & Rhodes, 2015). Later, the status indicated one’s loss of civic rights.

As history progressed, disenfranchisement persisted. The practice was continued in medieval Germany and England, where criminals were given “outlaw” status, and persisted into feudal law, which allowed “the declaration of ‘civil death’” (Dilts, 2014, p. 7). In modern history, however, disenfranchisement is rarely seen in these countries where it once existed. Most countries in Europe allow convicted felons and current prisoners to vote, unless disenfranchisement is a specific condition of their prison sentence. Loss of voter rights appears to be given on a case-by-case basis and is certainly less pervasive compared to the United States, where statewide policies impact the entire population.

Looking at the United States, John Locke's version of social contract theory can be used to understand the arguments for the disenfranchisement of criminals. Social contract theory, as understood by Locke, is the idea that people in a state are naturally free and equal and will, under certain conditions, surrender some of their rights in exchange for security and stability in their lives (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020).

Dilts explains that, in this framework, criminals have violated the social contract and, as a result, "have lost their right to self-representation" (2014, p. 85) and are no longer full members of society. Conversely, Locke also argues against "excessive and disproportionate punishment" (p. 85), creating an arena for debate about the proportionately of disenfranchisement as a punishment. While debate about the fairness of disenfranchisement as a punishment has looked to other sources, the importance of Locke within this discussion cannot be overstated. Locke's theories have often been used a guide in legal decisions of disenfranchisement cases (Dilts, 2014, p. 86). However, these decisions heavily rely on social contract theory and fail to consider Locke's other arguments, including the condemnation of disproportionate punishment. Disenfranchisement can also be viewed, in Locke's terms, as the continuation of the state of war against criminals who have completed their punishment (Reiman, 2005, p. 13). Felons who have served their sentence and are no longer prisoners of the state are, in theory, full members of society again. But the inability to vote raises doubts against the status of these felons; can one truly be a member of society, subject to its laws and rules, without representation? If a citizen is unable to vote, then they cannot elect their own representatives. Reiman (2005) explains, in the eyes of the disenfranchised, that "Without a right to vote, I am subject only and not sovereign. Thus I am in subjection, like a slave" (p. 13). If the words of Locke are to be used in support of

disenfranchisement, then the ideas that vehemently oppose the nature of felon disenfranchisement as a punishment must also be considered.

The first felon disenfranchisement laws in the United States were not as widespread as they are today. Rather, these laws were limited in their scope and only applied to a few criminal offenses. It was not until white male offenders were enfranchised that the laws expanded. In the 1840s, states widened the scope of its disenfranchisement laws and created the first of many waves of disenfranchisement. The second wave, happening after the Civil War and during and after Reconstruction, created the first significant impact against Black Americans, who were beginning to construct a large proportion of the felon population (Manza & Uggen, 2004, p. 492). After slavery was outlawed, states began to enact legal measures to reduce Black Americans' ability to vote. Black codes and Jim Crow laws ensured that newly-enfranchised Black Americans would have little to no political power in the United States (Behrens, Uggen, & Manza, 2003). Between 1850 and 2002, the percentage of states with felon disenfranchisement laws rose from 35% to 96% (Behrens et al., 2003, p. 564).

In addition to disenfranchisement laws that continue to disproportionately target Black voters, poll taxes and literacy tests were tools used in the South to exclude this demographic from the polls and ignore their political interests (Phillips & Deckard, 2015, p. 4). Research into the political interests of Black voters shows their interests to be largely left-leaning. Black voters are often united in favor of affirmative action and anti-discrimination policies, welfare programs for poverty and healthcare, and increased government spending; the white American electorate typically votes against these policies (Phillips & Deckard, 2015). As white Americans have

historically made up the majority of government and political leaders, the suppression of Black voters translates into the suppression of Black political interests and needs.

The percentage of Black Americans in the felon population varies throughout the country, as states create and enact their own disenfranchisement laws. As a result, states have different amounts of overlap in their Black and felon populations. As of 2015, the average percentage of disenfranchised Black Americans was lowest in the Northeast region, which had an average percentage of 2%; on a state level, Maine and Vermont both had averages of 0% (Phillips & Deckard, 2015, p. 5). The region with the highest percentage – 10% - was the South, with Florida having a state average of 23% of its Black population being disenfranchised (Phillips & Deckard, 2015, p. 5).

In 2010, 23% of Florida's Black voting age population – around 520,500 voters – were unable to vote due to felony convictions and the subsequent loss of voting rights (Phillips & Deckard, 2015, p. 6). Former governor Charlie Crist implemented a process that allowed felons to vote after they completed their sentence and paid all fees and restitution (Phillips & Deckard, 2015). Through Crist's process, 155,000 ex-felons had their right to vote restored (Taylor, 2019). However, in 2011, the process for voting rights restoration for felons became arduous as a result of Rick Scott's election as Florida's new governor. Scott, a Republican, removed the automatic voting rights restoration that had been previously implemented by Crist, a former Republican (now Democrat). The process now required a 5-7 year waiting period and an application for restoration, with accompanying court documents; as a result, only 78 people had their voting rights restored in 2011 (Phillips & Deckard, 2015, p. 7).

The citizenship aspect is also important in discussions of the impacts of felon disenfranchisement. Scholars highlight that by restricting one's rights as punishment for committing crimes, the state can legally create a demographic of second-class citizens. For example, Phillips & Deckard note that in the case of Black Americans, "the enhancement of protections of basic civil rights would enhance citizenship" (Phillips & Deckard, 2015, p. 8). If the right to vote – an integral concept of democracy – is restricted, a person might feel as though they are second-rate citizens and are ignored by the rest of society. Disenfranchisement continues the marginalization of certain communities – in this case, the Black community in the United States. Disenfranchisement also continues the cycles of poverty and inequality seen in Black communities, as felony convictions come with a wide array of punishments, including difficulties in securing housing and employment. In Florida, felons are also unable to serve on juries, possess firearms, and hold public office (Florida Association of Counties, 2018).

The case of Florida is especially important in the discussion of felon disenfranchisement because of the state's significant political power. If the 1.5 million disenfranchised voters in Florida had been allowed to vote, Meredith & Morse conclude that Trump likely would have lost the state of Florida's electoral votes (2018). The potential ability of felons' votes being able to decide elections in a battleground state like Florida is incredibly significant and cannot be ignored in the discussion of disenfranchised felons and their restoration of voting rights. To understand why disenfranchisement policies continue to exist, despite evidence that their repeal would allow millions of Americans to participate in democracy via voting, there must be an investigation into who supports disenfranchisement and what factors influence opinions of support.

Previous research has found that certain factors may have a greater influence on the likelihood of states adopting or maintaining felon disenfranchisement policies. An analysis of state disenfranchisement policies by Murphy, Newmark, and Ardoin (2006) find that only a few factors were statistically significant. The factor with the most impact was statewide political culture: states with more “traditionalistic” views – like favoring less government intervention to solve problems – were significantly more likely to adopt restrictive felon disenfranchisement policies (Murphy et al., 2006, p. 12). Other factors that predicted statewide adoption of disenfranchisement policies include the ideology of a state’s citizen population. The authors write that “more conservative states are significantly more likely to adopt more restrictive disenfranchisement policies, even including political culture in the model” (Murphy et al., 2006, p. 13). Finally, the last factor found to be significant was whether a state was urban, though this predictor was less significant compared to the previous two.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS

Past research indicates that Black Americans are disproportionately affected by felon disenfranchisement - estimates show that about 1 in 13 Black Americans are unable to vote due to felony convictions (Schroeder, 2018). There are several theories about why this occurs. Black voters tend to be united in support for social programs, as their unity in voting can help leverage political power for their demographic (White & Laird, 2020). Typically, red states and right-leaning voters have low levels of support for social welfare programs. By reducing the number of eligible voters who favor these initiatives, red states can ensure that social welfare programs – such as housing assistance and affordable healthcare – are reduced and left-leaning political interests are not represented. Understanding public opinion regarding this loss of voting rights is important because in a democracy there is an expectation of a connection between the public’s desire and implemented policies. In this thesis, I study the factors that explain public opinion surrounding felon disenfranchisement by arguing that race and political party identification are the most significant factors that influence respondents’ opinion about measures related to disenfranchisement.

My primary research question for this thesis is: what are the factors that influence public opinion on felon disenfranchisement policies in the United States? To answer this question, I will investigate the strength of support from different demographics towards felon disenfranchisement policies.

When it comes to support for disenfranchisement policies, I expect that citizens who identify as white and Republican are more likely to support disenfranchisement policies and

restrictions on civil liberties for criminals compared to other groups. As Murphy et al. (2006) found in their study of felon disenfranchisement policies, states with large conservative populations were significantly more likely to adopt strict felon disenfranchisement legislation (p.13). The strict felon disenfranchisements laws in Republican-led states give them political and electoral advantages because Black Americans – the primary demographic impacted by disenfranchisement – tend to support Democratic policies, like increased government spending and increased social welfare programs. Since the citizens most likely to be affected by disenfranchisement policies are Black and align with the Democratic Party, I expect the “inverse” of these characteristics – that is, white and Republican – will be the strongest supporters of disenfranchisement.

DATA AND METHODS

To explore my research questions, I analyzed public opinion data related to disenfranchisement and loss of civil liberties as punishment for crimes committed. The data focuses on public opinion related felon disenfranchisement and felons more broadly, such as how the country views felons and their rights as citizens. The data used in my analysis came from the 2014 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is “a nationally representative survey of adults in the United States conducted since 1972” (NORC, n.d.) and covers a wide range of research topics, including civil liberties. I used 2014 GSS data because this is the only year that the dependent variables I chose were included.

Dependent Variables

I used two dependent variables in this study: “gvtrghts” and “crimlose.” The variables ask respondents to state on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is “not at all important and 7 is “very important,” how important it is that the government respect democratic rights “whatever the circumstances” (gvtrghts) and that “people convicted of serious crimes lose their citizen rights” (crimlose). For “gvtrghts,” there were 1,182 observations recorded, with a mean of 5.95 and a standard deviation of 1.38. For crimlose, there were 1,131 observations recorded, with a mean of 5.02 and a standard deviation of 1.98.

Independent Variables

In order to test my theory that whites and Republicans will have significantly higher levels of support for disenfranchisement than Blacks and Democrats, I include race and political party affiliation as two independent variables in this study. Respondents self-reported their

answers to these questions of identity. The original variable for race included the categories “white,” “Black,” and “other.” Since my theory only focuses on white and Black individuals, I recoded this variable to exclude the “other” category and renamed it “race2.” The categories in this variable were white (1) and Black (0). The other independent variable, “partyid” (political party identification), was also recoded. The original variable was an ordinal variable that measured the strength of party affiliation, from strong Democrat to strong Republican. Other party identifications were included in a separate category labeled “other.” This variable was recoded as “polparty” and condensed the answers to Republican (1), Independent (2), and Democrat (3). I eliminated the “other” party identifications in my recoded variable as it was irrelevant to my analysis. Additionally, the strength of party affiliation was removed because my hypothesis – that Republicans are more likely to support disenfranchisement policies than Democrats – does not specify the strength of Republican party affiliation.

Control Variables

The control variables for my analysis are factors that existing research suggests may be important in shaping the opinions I am studying. I include age, socioeconomic class, sex, and religiosity. It is possible that sex could influence one’s opinion on disenfranchisement, because there is past research that indicates men and women have different political beliefs. The control variable for “sex” was recoded to “male” in order to evaluate whether the respondent identifies as male (1) or female (0). Also, socioeconomic class can affect political beliefs because public policies can have a direct impact on the financial situations of voters. The “class” variable measures four categories of socioeconomic identification: lower, working, middle, and upper class. I included age as well because older voters are more politically active than younger voters,

which indicates a higher level of awareness about political issues. The “age” variable records the self-reported age of respondents, with separate categories for ages 18-88. Ages 89 and up were grouped into one category and no ages under 18 years old were reported.

In addition, I included religiosity as a control variable because the topic of felon disenfranchisement could be considered a moral issue. Since these policies are centered around convicted felons, there was an issue of morality that respondents could consider when forming their opinion on whether felons should be enfranchised. The variable “relpersn” was recoded as “religious.” This variable was a self-reported measurement of respondents’ religiosity. It did not identify the specific religion of respondents. I recoded the variable to reverse the order of answers. Originally, the variable went from “very religious” to “not religious.” I changed the order of the scale in my recoded variable: “not religious” (1), “slightly religious” (2), “moderately religious” (3), and “very religious” (4). While I do not believe these variables will be the most influential on respondents’ opinions, I added them to my analysis as control variables because of their potential as alternative explanations to my findings.

I used an ordered logistic regression for my analysis. I ran the two dependent variables against the independent and control variables and combined the results into a single table. These results are reviewed and discussed below.

FINDINGS

Table 1

Results For Both Dependent Variables

VARIABLES	(1) Criminals should lose citizen rights	(2) Government should respect democratic rights
Identifies as white	0.255 (0.168)	0.214 (0.173)
Political party	-0.206*** (0.0690)	0.177** (0.0718)
Age	0.0128*** (0.00353)	0.0133*** (0.00365)
Class	-0.179** (0.0879)	0.0558 (0.0921)
Identifies as male	0.0148 (0.116)	0.142 (0.120)
Religiosity	0.166*** (0.0631)	-0.0381 (0.0651)
Observations	972	1,015

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 1 presents the results of my overall analysis. According to the second row, political party identification is statistically significant for both variables. There was a negative relationship between political party identification and opinion towards criminals losing citizen rights: as respondents identified as Democrats, they did not feel it was important that criminals convicted of serious crimes lose their citizen rights. The relationship between political party identification and opinion towards government respect of democratic rights was the inverse: as

respondents identified as Democrats, they felt it was increasingly important that democratic rights be respected by the government.

Age was also a significant factor in respondents' opinion towards the two survey questions. The older the respondents were (according to self-reports of age), the more likely they were to value the government respecting democratic rights *and* criminals losing their citizen rights. It is particularly interesting that older respondents believed both governments respecting democratic rights and criminal losing their citizen rights to be important. This finding should be explored further, as it seems contradictory to support democratic rights, but also the restriction of those rights against people convicted of serious crimes. Other potential factors that could help explain this finding are control variables not measured in this analysis, alternate data measured over a longer period of time, or specific subgroups of age. Conversely, a 2018 analysis of the factors that influence individuals beliefs about felon disenfranchisement found that older individuals opposed felons having the right to vote more than they supported it (Wilson, Carter, & Brown-Dean, pp. 24-25). This inconsistency should also be investigated in future research that addresses the factors people use to form opinions about policies like felon disenfranchisement.

Sex had no significant effect on respondents' opinion. Whether a respondent identified as male or not had no bearing on their opinion towards the two research questions chosen for this analysis. There was a stronger effect of male identity on opinion towards the government respecting democratic rights, but this effect was not statistically significant and therefore not explored in this thesis. The religiosity of respondents affected their opinion towards criminals losing citizen rights, but not the government respecting democratic rights. There was a strong positive association between the strength of respondents' religious faith and their belief that

criminals should lose their citizen rights. This finding is discussed further in the following section.

Contrary to my hypothesis, race – specifically, whether or not respondents identified as white – was not a statistically significant factor towards respondents’ opinion about criminals losing their citizen rights and governments respecting democratic rights. While there was a positive association between race and both dependent variables, neither of these relationships were statistically significant. This finding is explored in the final subsection of my discussion.

Support For Criminals’ Loss Of Citizen Rights

Table 2

Factors That Influence Opinion On Criminals Losing Citizen Rights

VARIABLES	(1) Criminals should lose citizen rights
Identifies as white	0.255 (0.168)
Political party	-0.206*** (0.0690)
Age	0.0128*** (0.00353)
Class	-0.179** (0.0879)
Identifies as male	0.0148 (0.116)
Religiosity	0.166*** (0.0631)
Observations	972

Note: Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

As previously observed, there was a negative relationship between political party identification and opinion towards criminals losing citizen rights. Table 2 shows that as respondents moved further left on the political spectrum, they were less likely to feel it was important that people convicted of serious crimes lose their citizen rights. The measurement of political party identification was coded as Republican (1), Independent (2), and Democrat (3). The strength of political party identification was not measured. I sought to find out if Republicans, regardless of the strength of affiliation, were more likely to support disenfranchisement. My theory – that Republicans were more likely to support disenfranchisement than Democrats – was supported by my findings. Although this variable did not specify felon disenfranchisement, loss of voting rights is presumed to fall under the wide scope of the question this variable asked. My finding that Republicans were more likely to support criminals losing their citizen rights aligns with recent data from the Pew Research Center, which found that Democrats were significantly more likely than Republicans (82% and 55%, respectively) to support policies allowing convicted felons to vote once they completed their sentences (2018).

The other statistically significant variables in my analysis were age, class, and religiosity. The religiosity variable did not record respondents' specific religions; instead, respondents self-reported the strength of their faith. For age and religiosity, there was a positive relationship between the self-reported measurements and strength of support for criminals losing citizen rights. As respondents reported being older and more religious, they were more likely to support the loss of citizen rights for criminals convicted of serious crimes.

There was a negative relationship between class and support for criminals losing citizen rights. The class variable was coded as lower class (1), working class (2), middle class (3), and upper class (4). The negative, statistically significant relationship shown in Table 2 indicates that as respondents reported being in a higher socioeconomic class, they were less likely to support criminals losing their citizen rights.

Support For Government Respect of Rights

Table 3

Factors That Influence Opinion On Government Respect Of Democratic Rights

VARIABLES	(1) Government should respect democratic rights
Identifies as white	0.214 (0.173)
Political party	0.177** (0.0718)
Age	0.0133*** (0.00365)
Class	0.0558 (0.0921)
Identifies as male	0.142 (0.120)
Religiosity	-0.0381 (0.0651)
Observations	1,015

Note: Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 3 shows the relationship between political party identification and opinion towards government respect of democratic rights. As respondents moved further left on the political spectrum, they were more likely to feel it was important that the government respect democratic rights. In my hypothesis, I expected Democrats to be more supportive of the government respecting democratic rights compared to Republicans. This is supported by the findings in Table 3. If Democrats are more likely to support democratic rights being respected, then it can be inferred that democratic rights are seen as highly valuable. Disenfranchisement policies go against this belief, thus supporting my prediction that disenfranchisement is less supported by Democrats.

Unlike the findings in the previous section (Table 2), the only other statistically significant factor was age. As respondents reported being older, they were more likely to support the government respecting democratic rights. Earlier, I discussed the significance of this finding, along with the role that age plays in determining levels of support for criminals losing democratic rights. Age as a factor in determining support for disenfranchisement is not an outcome I expected. Further research should explore this finding in more detail. If age is a factor, then the details of its influence should be investigated. Possible explanations for age as a factor could include differing levels of support among specific age subgroups, such as younger adults versus older adults, other control variables not included in this analysis, or how opinions change over time as one ages. Opinions can change over time and this analysis did not include any previous opinions held by the same respondent at a younger age. These alternatives should be considered in future research.

DISCUSSION

In my theory, I expected that the race of respondents would be a strong influence on their opinions about democratic rights. Disenfranchisement policies, which can be traced back to the Reconstruction Era in the United States, were originally supported by white male voters and disproportionately targeted Black men. Recent polls conducted by the Pew Research Center (2019) also show that, while the majority of adults in the United States support felons having their right to vote restored, Black respondents were significantly more likely to support the idea compared to white respondents, with 83% of Black respondents in favor compared to 68% of white respondents. With this information in mind, I theorized that white respondents in the survey were significantly more likely to support disenfranchisement compared to Black respondents. In other words, I expected race to be a significant factor in predicting respondents' answers to the two survey questions selected for this analysis. However, my hypothesis was partially false. It is possible that, among the respondents who participated in the 2014 GSS, race was not as salient as political party identification or other factors. It could be that race was just not as important to respondents when they considered their feelings about the questions I chose to analyze. In this case, it is not that race was unimportant, but other factors were just more important and thus statistically significant in my final models.

While my hypothesis about race is not supported by my findings, my hypothesis that political party identification is statistically significant in predicting levels of support is supported by my analysis. My results are comparable to a 2018 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, which found that while there was a majority (>50%) in both political parties that supported enfranchisement for felons, Democrats (85%) overwhelmingly supported the idea

compared to Republicans (55%). My dependent variables did not measure respondents' feelings towards felon disenfranchisement specifically, but instead measured feelings towards related topics that can be connected to disenfranchisement, like the idea of criminals losing citizen rights. Therefore, a general pattern can be shown across my findings and other quantitative studies, like those from the Pew Research Center.

Table 2 showed that as respondents identified as leaning left on the political spectrum, they were more likely to feel it was important that the government respect democratic rights. This somewhat aligns with findings from the Pew Research Center. A poll conducted in 2020 found that while a significant majority (85%) of Americans believed it was very important that the rights of all people are respected, only 30% of Democrats believed that this occurred in practice, compared to 52% of Republicans. A drawback to my research is that my dependent variable did not ask respondents if they actually believed democratic rights were respected; it only measured how important it was that rights be respected in general. A follow-up question asking respondents if they believed rights were actually respected should be asked to supplement the original data.

My findings show that certain factors such as age, political party identification, class, and religiosity can influence respondents' opinions towards disenfranchisement and protection of democratic rights. Contrary to my hypothesis, I did not find that race was a statistically significant factor in determining these opinions. There were limitations to my study, which could affect the results. I only used one year of data – the 2014 GSS. The two dependent variables used in my analysis were only asked in 2014, confining my study to a small time period. Further studies should examine the effects of time on respondents' opinion, as well as other potential

influences like education, previous incarceration history, geographic region, and immigrant status. Another limitation to my analysis was the two dependent variables I selected did not mention “felon disenfranchisement” or any related terms in their questions to respondents. Since there was no measurement of public opinion towards felon disenfranchisement specifically, I chose two variables that could be related to feelings towards disenfranchisement. If the questions had measured respondents’ feelings towards felon disenfranchisement, instead of general policies related to democratic rights, my results may have turned out differently. The factors I selected might have had different levels of significance had respondents been asked about this particular form of disenfranchisement.

I was also unable to use interaction terms in my study, which may have also changed the results had they been used. I measured race and political party identification separately because I did not have the knowledge of Stata needed to use interaction terms. I was also limited on time to conduct my research, as this analysis was completed as part of an honors undergraduate thesis program. Had I been given more time and the skills needed to run interaction terms, the factors I chose to analyze could have had different levels of significance. Specifically, I believe race may have become statistically significant if it was combined with the political party identification or sex of respondents.

The general picture that my analysis paints is that those who tend to support criminals losing citizen rights tend to be older, lower class, highly religious, and affiliated with the Republican party. This pattern, overall, paints a picture of traditional white conservatives favoring disenfranchisement over progressive non-whites. In the context of recent political activity in the United States, the type of person likely to support disenfranchisement, based on

my analysis, is a strong conservative who supports former president Trump and his political agenda. Although I did not include geographic location as a variable, it is likely that the type of citizen that supports disenfranchisement is from, currently lives in, or has some other ties to the southern United States, where there is a long history of racism intertwined with state and federal policies that disproportionately affect Black Americans.

CONCLUSION

Felon disenfranchisement has been part of the American political process since the nation's inception. With slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction being the driving events behind its expansion, disenfranchisement has disproportionately affected Black Americans. Although race-neutral in its appearance, felon disenfranchisement has been racist in its practice. The revocation of citizenship rights, such as the right to vote, has a profound effect on the elections in this country. The practice affects who can vote, who shows up to vote, what political interests are voted into practice and represented, and what it means to be a citizen. The questions that arise from this discussion are incredibly important, as the right to vote and be represented is fundamental within a democracy.

An extensive body of research suggests that there are important consequences of felon disenfranchisement. Florida's policies alone have disenfranchised more than 1 in 5 of its Black American voters (Uggen et al., 2016). Although shadowed by new changes that implement what some argue to be a modern-day poll tax, the passage of Amendment 4 is a historic moment for the state. The amendment has the opportunity to restore voting rights for over one million voters in the state, with hundreds of thousands of those voters being Black. As recently as March 2021, Governor Ron DeSantis has implemented a series of changes to the clemency process in the state of Florida. The most important change that was approved eliminates the five- and seven-year waiting periods that were first imposed by Republican leaders in 2011, including then-governor Rick Scott (Kam, 2021). However, the current implementation of Amendment 4 still requires that convicted felons pay back all outstanding debts, which include court fees, fines, and victim restitution (Mower, 2021). Felons eligible for voter restoration cannot have their rights restored

until such debt is repaid. Most felons have outstanding debt, which can cost hundreds or thousands of dollars – an amount “that they will never afford to repay” (Mower, 2021).

Felon disenfranchisement has persisted throughout history because of significant public support. As my findings show, there are several factors that can influence one’s opinion, including factors that apply to a majority of Americans, such as being lower- to middle-class, religious, and older. If disenfranchisement policies are to be repealed, then public support must shift away from its current position. Future research should investigate the specific influences on support for disenfranchisement, the extent to which these influences shape opinion, and any potential consequences of repealing disenfranchisement policies that remain in place throughout the country.

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