



**Triple-Decker Disenfranchisement:  
First-Person Accounts of  
Losing the Right to Vote among Poor, Homeless  
Americans with a Felony Conviction**

**By Matthew Cardinale**

**November 2004**

This report was written by Matthew Cardinale, a graduate student in sociology at University of California-Irvine. The author thanks his faculty advisor, Professor David Snow; research assistant, Mauricio Mairena; and the staff of the Union Rescue Mission in Los Angeles.

The Sentencing Project is a national non-profit organization engaged in research and advocacy on criminal justice policy issues. Funding for this project was made possible by support from the JEHT Foundation, Open Society Institute, and the Tides Foundation.

The Sentencing Project is a partner in the Right to Vote Campaign, a national campaign to remove barriers to voting faced by people with felony convictions. Further information can be found at [www.righttovote.org](http://www.righttovote.org).

Copyright © 2004 by The Sentencing Project. Reproduction of this document in full or part in print or electronic format only by permission of The Sentencing Project.

For further information:

The Sentencing Project  
514 10th St. NW  
Suite 1000  
Washington, D.C. 20004  
(202) 628-0871  
[www.sentencingproject.org](http://www.sentencingproject.org)

# **TRIPLE-DECKER DISENFRANCHISEMENT: FIRST-PERSON ACCOUNTS OF LOSING THE RIGHT TO VOTE AMONG POOR, HOMELESS AMERICANS WITH A FELONY CONVICTION**

## **Introduction**

An estimated 5 million Americans are currently legally *disenfranchised* from voting because laws in their state take away their eligibility to vote due to a current or prior felony conviction. Each state sets its own laws regarding felony disenfranchisement, with all but two states, Maine and Vermont, having some form of disenfranchisement. State policies range from those which disenfranchise people with a felony conviction for life to those which allow persons who are not incarcerated or have completed probation or parole to vote. California's law prohibits persons in prison or on parole from voting, but allows persons who have completed parole as well as those on probation to vote. Nationwide, the majority (73%) of individuals who are disenfranchised are not currently incarcerated.

The disproportionate racial impact of these laws is staggering. Nearly two million disenfranchised individuals are African American. Approximately 13% of all adult African American men are disenfranchised, a rate seven times that of the national population.

Each state sets its own procedures for regaining the right to vote. In California, individuals who have completed parole or a felony prison sentence simply re-register to vote. However, in a number of states the process is more burdensome and may require a five to ten-year waiting period. In Mississippi, persons seeking to restore their voting rights must secure an executive order from the governor, or convince a state legislator to introduce a bill in the legislature on his or her behalf and obtain a two-thirds vote and the governor's signature (Mauer, 2002). In order to restore one's rights in Florida, many applicants must not only complete the necessary paperwork, but if approved, appear before a panel that includes the governor to answer questions regarding personal suitability to vote.

This study is based on 50 in-depth interviews (n=50) with probationers, parolees, and formerly incarcerated persons in Los Angeles, California, with a current or prior felony conviction. The interviews were conducted during August and September 2004 at the Union Rescue Mission, a homeless shelter in Los Angeles's downtown skid-row area. Participants received \$10 for participating in an approximately 30 minute interview. Interviews were semi-structured, including open-ended and closed/structured questions.

Topics of the interviews included respondents' past and present political behaviors, their experiences in having lost the right to vote, current levels of understanding of voting laws, and political beliefs and party preferences. Interviews were completely confidential and participants were asked to use a fake name or alias so as not to disclose any personal identifying information.

## **The Individual Impact of Disenfranchisement**

This study was undertaken in order to learn more about how persons with a felony conviction respond to disenfranchisement policies. There has been critical research in the past decade that has provided an understanding of the prevalence of disenfranchisement policies as well as enhancing discussion of the legal philosophy underpinning these laws; however, there remains a void in the literature that quantifies the impact of disenfranchisement from an individual's perspective. Based on in-depth interviews with 50 respondents, this study will provide insight into the way persons with felony convictions view disenfranchisement and electoral politics, and will also allow persons with felony convictions to express, in their own words, how losing the right to vote has impacted their lives.<sup>1</sup>

The key findings in this study include:

- Felony disenfranchisement is a politically alienating experience that undermines political trust and diminishes political involvement;
- Forty percent of persons with a current or previous felony report having voted before their conviction. Yet even though 58% were in fact eligible to vote again by having completed parole, only 3% of those eligible (n=1) did so;
- Over two-thirds of respondents explain that losing the right to vote is personally upsetting and seemingly at odds with their understanding of democratic ideals;
- Less than 10% of respondents report having been educated about their voting rights during their court hearing or from prison or parole staff;
- Persons with felony convictions lean Democratic, with 87% of those with a party preference supporting Democratic candidates in state and local races, and 64% supporting Democratic candidates in Presidential races, although these figures may also reflect the heavy concentration of African Americans in the sample.

---

<sup>1</sup> The status of supervision of the respondent varies from case to case. The sample interviewed included persons who have completed their sentence, as well as persons still on parole or probation.

## Political Participation

One of the enduring mysteries regarding felon disenfranchisement is the degree to which people impacted by this policy were politically engaged before their incarceration. Additionally, there is some question as to whether the experience of imprisonment is an inherently politicizing event that increases the probability that persons returning to society will vote. In order to measure the impact of disenfranchisement, respondents were asked about their past and present political behavior.

### *Prior and Current Voting Behavior*

Despite the assumptions of many political analysts that people with felony convictions would not care to vote and are politically disinterested, this study finds prior voting participation among those interviewed in any single election at a rate of 40%. Prior statistical projections (Uggen and Manza, 2002) estimated persons with a felony conviction would tend to vote about 35% of the time on average in individual Presidential elections, and only 24% in Congressional elections. The present study suggests that the rate of voting might be somewhat higher than previously estimated, with 40% of participants stating they voted before their first felony conviction. It should be kept in mind, though, that the present sample included only homeless men, 70% (n=35) of whom were African American, so this is not representative of the total population of people with a felony conviction.

These figures only address voting in individual elections. No prior estimates existed at the time of the study regarding “voting regularly” among people with a felony conviction.<sup>2</sup> The present study suggests this group would turn out regularly at a rate of 20%. This is based on reported behavior before a first felony conviction, which for many participants occurred at an age between 18 and 21. Since voting participation generally increases with age, we can expect that both of these rates – 40% voting at least once before conviction, and 20% voting “regularly” – would have increased by the time these individuals were older had it not been for the fact that they lost the right to vote (see Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980).

**Table 1-Prior Voting Behavior of Persons with a Felony Conviction**

	<b>Have you EVER voted?</b>	<b>Did You Vote REGULARLY?</b>
<b>YES</b>	<b>40 %</b>	<b>20 %</b>
<b>NO</b>	<b>60 %</b>	<b>80 %</b>

As seen in Table 2, while 58% of these respondents were legally eligible to vote, only 41% of those who were eligible registered, and just 3% of those eligible actually voted.

<sup>2</sup> “Voting regularly” is defined here as two times or more over each four-year period, on average.

**Table 2-Registration and Voting Behavior after Regaining Eligibility**

<b>Eligible?</b>	<b>Registered?</b>	<b>Voted?</b>
<b>58%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>3%</b>

A number of respondents indicated that the process of incarceration was a politicizing event, either creating or renewing a desire to participate in the political process. The barriers to participation due to felony disenfranchisement laws are particularly frustrating to many who seek to have a voice in the direction of local and national policy. One respondent, Jimmy Jo, noted “Now I wish I was able to vote. There’s a lot of things going down in the world today, especially with politicians. You want to contribute. It’s like the politicians seem like they’re criminals but they get away with it.” Johnny expressed frustration towards a policy that seemingly does not provide redemption or forgiveness. “I would like to vote on local issues. It’s like a double whammy, it bothers me. I’m being punished because of my past. I did the time, let’s move on. It’s like I’m not really freed.”

The desire to participate in the electoral process is critical, some respondents indicate, because they fear that the government will not be representative of all of its citizens.

**Jimmy:** “Now I have an eleven year old daughter and I want to make the world a better place for her. But I missed out and now I feel like I don’t have a say on anything that goes on in this world.”

**Clear Vision:** “It’s not democratic. It’s rule by the few and powerful. Isn’t that more like an oligarchy?”

**John:** “Look at all the ways California taxes and laws affect parolees, and them not even having the right to say anything about it, to even be heard. Some laws are too harsh like the ‘Three Strikes Law,’ which is cruel and unusual. By having a voice in showing the other side of that would educate the public about racial discrimination. Lots of inmates do research in law libraries, have knowledge and experience. But they can’t change the laws, they can only defend themselves.”

**JJ:** “I can’t cast my vote to what I wanna participate in. What if I wanna say no on a proposition? Especially for President. There’s a lot of us out there, but the other people out there are for other candidates and they get to vote. People in jail and the courts are giving us the wrong information. It makes you feel like you still are locked up because you don’t have a choice.”

**Henry:** “My views have changed. Because I believe a vote is worth something, but a multiple of votes? People believing in the same thing, has significance. And there are issues I’d like to vote on. I don’t want that right taken away. It’s a way of controlling. If an issue is going to be on the ballot related to felons and parolees, but they’re not allowed to vote on it, they wouldn’t have a say so.”

These remarks indicate a politically interested and concerned group of citizens who are both worried and frustrated over the impact of disenfranchisement in their lives, as well as on the community in which they live.

### Other Political Behavior

Losing the right to vote does not prevent persons with a felony conviction from participating in other forms of civic engagement like lobbying or protesting, but it appears to have this effect anyway, presumably through the political alienation and distrust that it fosters in disenfranchised individuals.

More than one-third (38%) of the persons in this study reported that they were involved in political activities other than voting prior to their felony conviction; that declined to 30% after losing the right to vote<sup>3</sup>. This decline in civic involvement is even more notable when we consider that Americans overall tend to increase political activity as they get older. The present sample included a majority of men around age 40, many of whom had been locked up multiple times since their first felony conviction. Given that two or three decades of their individual life-courses had elapsed, the rate of participation ordinarily would have gone up, not down (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980).

**Table 3-The Impact of a Felony Conviction on Political Activity**

Active Before Conviction	Active After Conviction
38%	30%

A closer look at the data reveals that the decline in participation actually masks two countervailing trends. First, of the 38% of all respondents who were politically active, over two-thirds (68%) ceased being active following their loss of voting rights (see Table 4). Second, of the 62% of all respondents who were not previously active, nearly one-third (29%) subsequently became active (see Table 5).

**Table 4- Formerly Politically Active by Current Activity**

**Among the formerly politically active  
(38% of all respondents)...**

Currently Active	Not Active
32%	68%

<sup>3</sup> Respondents were asked whether they had participated, either before or after their felony conviction, in any activities among the following list, and were classified as active if they answered yes on one of the items or more: Campaigning for an issue, campaigning for a political candidate, collecting petition signatures, contacting a policymaker to express a political viewpoint, doing volunteer work for a political organization, giving money to a political organization, handing out flyers or leaflets, being a leader of a political organization, being a member of a political organization, organizing a protest, participating in a protest, traveling across a state border for a political function, visiting with a policymaker to express a political viewpoint, and/or writing a letter to the editor.

**Table 5- Formerly Politically Inactive by Current Activity**

**Among formerly politically inactive  
(62% of all respondents)...**

<b>Currently Active</b>	<b>Not Active</b>
<b>29%</b>	<b>71%</b>

These findings appear to indicate that a felony conviction and prison can operate in distinct ways depending on the individual. For many, there is a decline in civic involvement likely due to the anger and alienation which frequently surfaced in our interviews. But for others, prison may have been a politicizing experience, resulting in an interest in civic engagement where there had been none previously. An additional explanation for the increase in political activity is that the aging process may have affected this group's civic participation interest as well.



## The Experience of Being Disenfranchised for a Felony Conviction

One of the most significant contributions of this report is the qualitative, in-depth interview section in which respondents were asked, “What was your reaction when you first learned you had lost the right to vote. Did you have feelings about it?”

Of 50 respondents, the majority, 74%, expressed that losing the right to vote affected them negatively, and made a number of poignant statements about how they felt about the experience of losing the right to vote. One of every seven (14%) said they did not care about losing the right to vote because they had given up on the democratic system altogether because they thought it was corrupt and untrustworthy. An additional 12% (n=6) of respondents stated they had no reaction or feelings about losing the right to vote.

Below are excerpts from interviews with 34 respondents who were upset by losing the right to vote. The responses were excerpted from the answers to four questions:

- What was your reaction to learning you lost the right to vote?
- Did it affect your views of democracy?
- Did it affect your trust in the democratic system?
- Was there any aspect of losing the right to vote that was particularly troublesome or bothersome to you? If so, what?

Some respondents began answering the first question by saying that losing the right to vote did not bother them at first. However, after asking a range of questions about their experience in order to approach the issue from a variety of angles, each participant expressed that it came to bother them over time even if it did not invoke a strong reaction when they first learned they had lost the right to vote.

### Feelings About Citizenship

A number of respondents expressed a feeling that, as a result of being disenfranchised, they were somehow only a fraction of a citizen. The consistency with which the respondents refer to feeling like outsiders or rejected from society is noteworthy and a crucial point in broadening our understanding of how disenfranchisement influences people’s views of themselves and the legitimacy of politics in general.

**Roger:** “You’re losing your rights mainly. You’re not who you were, like you’re missing something. I’d like to vote for City Council.”

**Alex:** “You want to vote. You still have the right to pay taxes. You’re still living in this country. Everyone once had the right to vote. How can you lose rights when you’re in a free country? You should have the right to vote so you don’t have to just talk about politics. You think, well how come you didn’t even tell me? There should be more information about politics and voting for people trying to live a straight life. Policy still affects you.”

**Felix:** “We need to vote or else we’re going in the wrong direction. Because laws are changing and it affects us individually. And we need the benefit of voting because it gives us a chance to deal with something regarding your livelihood and your freedom. Maybe the government or companies are trying to take over and the backbone of the country needs the right to vote. The U.S. is supposed to stand for freedom and it shows how they can take it away in an instant. It’s not a good example to show other countries, making people here less free. People should decide, not let the government decide for them.”

**Bear:** “I thought it was unfair and unjust.”

**UC:** “It makes me feel like I’m not part of the U.S. Most of my life I’ve never felt like part of the U.S. Now I feel like I don’t have a country either.”

**Bob:** “You feel like you are pushed out, why me? When you have rights you feel confident, but when you lose rights you don’t feel so good. You think politicians have all the power. It feels like a rip-off or something.”

**Al:** “It invokes a sense of kind of like your country turning its back on you. You feel like you’re not a citizen of the country. So voting is not a right, but a privilege that can be revoked.”

**Scott:** “It makes you feel, even though you’re in a country, you don’t have the right to vote. You’re not a citizen. I think that’s wrong. Look at Enron; they’re getting away with it. Why don’t they take away their rights to vote? I don’t believe this is what our country is built upon. Because you did wrong, they’re gonna punish you more than one time. Now they’re gonna punish you again? To me that’s not a democracy, that’s saying we control you. I have to be good in order to vote? What are they gonna say, no bad people are allowed to vote? How do they choose who can vote or not? Lower income people are losing the right to vote, that’s why we have disenfranchisement.”

**Miles:** “Voting is the American way. Once it’s taken, you become a third-class citizen, and can’t participate in what this country’s all about and what wars were fought for. We have people who do break the law because of circumstances, like crime happens because there’s not enough to go around. Some people steal because they’re hungry. Once you feel disenfranchised, you go do what you did before even after you do your time, because of the feeling of separation and that no one cares for you. No one loves you. Sometimes I feel the system is rigged because the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.”

**Julius:** “Just the word bothers me, disenfranchisement. It’s like, ‘As a matter of fact, you’re nobody, you don’t count. We don’t respect your opinion.’ It’s somewhat of a guilty feeling.”

*Alienation and Distrust*

This feeling of alienation from electoral politics can also manifest itself as animosity towards the entire process of voting. This can exacerbate an already growing mistrust of the government that is evident in some of the remarks by the respondents.

**Fausto:** “I was mad because everyone else was voting and I felt left out. I think we should all have the right to vote.”

**Allen:** “I felt left out, disconnected. But it was set up by design. The majority of men and women in the penal institutions are poor and from poverty stricken backgrounds. They didn’t have a voice because of their background. The government says we’re going to take away your right to vote, even though it was difficult for them to vote anyway. Some politicians would actually appeal to the poor, but this way when the election comes around we’ll only worry about those one-third rich folks who do vote.”

**Jim:** “You lost your right to vote. I didn’t think it was right, but they don’t care what you think.”

**Jeremiah:** “Because you can’t vote means somebody else is gonna slide into that spot. It’s wicked in some ways, I look at it negatively.”

**Red:** “African Americans not being able to vote, it makes a difference overall. Often I’ve wondered whether the votes were counted in the right way anyway.”

**T-Lee:** “Now more than before it means a lot to me. I’m more aware of the problems. You have no voice, it doesn’t count. You have no vote, but everyone should be able to vote. I thought this was supposed to be one nation under God indivisible, but now they’re trying to divide us.”

**BJ:** “It makes me mad, upset. If you can’t vote, you can’t get no change in office. It’s frustrating. I might as well just stay in jail. I know it’s wrong. I pray every day things change.”

**Big Red:** “What would justify taking away my right to vote? As I see the world now, voting doesn’t mean nothing because the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Just in messing with my right to vote, that’s what angers me. To be a citizen, you should never lose your right to vote. Once they mess with your rights, what do you have left?”

**Steve:** “Losing the right to vote affects my views of those in power. I believe in democracy, but not in the way they’re trying to use it.”

Anger and Apathy

In addition to the alienation and mistrust that has been expressed by the respondents, there was a measurable thread of anger about disenfranchisement policies that masked itself as apathy towards the whole system of electoral politics.

**Louie:** “It’s something I never really looked into because of the corruption of money in the U.S. The poor will get poorer and the richer are getting richer and the homeless will be even more homeless. It didn’t phase me that I couldn’t vote, but it should’ve because I probably could’ve been the one to make a difference.”

**Hardtime:** “Sometimes it bothers me when the wrong people get in there, into office, and politicians not keeping their promises. But a lot of people who can still vote, do vote, and they get heartbroken.”

**Ed-Dog:** “Considering what Black people had to go through to get the right to vote, it makes me feel kind of guilty, like I should have the right. It’s unfair. A handful of people in power do what they want to do. If somebody gets into office they don’t like they will get assassinated.”

**Country:** “I don’t care who votes because whoever the rich are will get elected.”

**Hollywood:** “Ah well, if you can’t vote you can’t vote. I learned not to fight from the prison system.”

**Bob 2:** “It didn’t bother me because politicians are going to do what they want to do.”

**Joe:** “To be honest, I didn’t trust politicians anyway. I’m against politics. I don’t believe they’ll do what they say. They don’t help the homeless or the poor or the handicapped. I thought my vote wouldn’t count. There’s a lot of people who have been to prison for small things or who think they don’t have the right to vote when they actually do.”

**Alex:** “People don’t care about voting because, then, they’d not get what they want, and then where would they be?”

**Seaweed:** “If I was the President, I’d make some changes. But I’m not. I have other things to worry about like parole and money.”

**B-Long:** “One thing regarding the United States, it don’t matter what percent vote, they’re gonna put in power who they want anyway. I just worry about paying my bills. It’s like screw you, now all of a sudden I can vote again?”

It is evident from the responses that the policy of disenfranchisement does not go unnoticed by those who experience it personally. Expressions of frustration, alienation,

confusion, and anger have all been shared by those in this study, indicating that there are individual level impacts of this policy that require additional study if we are to have a better grasp on the implications of the loss of voting rights.

## Knowledge of Voting Eligibility

Three questions were asked to determine current level of understanding regarding a variety of aspects of voting laws<sup>4</sup>:

- Are you aware of your current eligibility status?
- Are you aware of the laws regarding the restoration of voting rights in California if you have a felony conviction?
- Are you aware of the steps or procedures necessary to register to vote upon becoming again eligible?

Only one in seven (14%) respondents understood all of the requirements for eligibility in California (personal status, state law, and process of restoration). A strikingly high 86% of respondents had some confusion about their right to vote.

**Table 6-Awareness of Eligibility Requirements**

Aware of . . .

<b>Current Eligibility Status?</b>	<b>State Laws on Regaining the Vote?</b>	<b>Process of Regaining the Vote?</b>	<b>All Aspects of Eligibility?</b>
<b>50%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>14%</b>

People with a felony conviction have troublingly low levels of knowledge about how state voting rights policies affect them. High rates of persons on probation and formerly incarcerated persons, who in California are legally eligible to vote, are not aware of their status. Low levels of education about voting rights throughout the criminal justice system are evident in that 90% of respondents stated that they were not informed during their legal process about the prospect of losing the right to vote, while 96% stated they were neither informed by prison nor parole staff regarding their voting rights status. Therefore, although close to five million Americans are legally prohibited from voting, the number of Americans who *think* they do not have the right to vote – *de facto* disenfranchisement – may be much higher.

---

<sup>4</sup> Respondents were asked to imagine a scenario in which they were explaining their voting rights to a “new peer at the Union Rescue Mission.” This emphasis on each respondent’s general role as an expert of their own setting and context allowed the respondents to be less self-conscious about explaining their current understandings of voting laws, many of which in fact turned out to be incorrect understandings. Using this technique prevented respondents from simply saying, “You’re the researcher, so you tell me what my voting rights are.”

**Table 7- Education Regarding Voting Rights  
Legal, Prison, and Parole Officials**

<b><u>Educated about Voting Rights</u></b>		
	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>During Legal Process</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>90%</b>
<b>While in Prison or Parole</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>96%</b>

## Political Concerns and Party Preferences

To assess political preferences, we asked multiple questions about:

- What political concerns are important to you;
- Party preference and/or identification;
- Will you vote for Bush, Kerry, Nader, or someone else in the 2004 Presidential Election?

### Political Issues

In open-ended interviews, the vast majority of respondents indicated that they supported policies that address the priorities of domestic and working class families. This should come as no surprise considering the social and economic background of many of the respondents. Issues that garnered repeated support included: increasing social services, especially for the poor and homeless, protecting Social Security and Medicare, implementing a program of universal health care, raising the minimum wage, and reform in the criminal justice system.

### Party Preference

This study finds people with a felony conviction would tend to support Democratic Party candidates 66% of the time, while *likely voters* among this group would tend to support Democratic Party candidates 80% of the time. These figures already indicate high support for Democrats, but what is also notable is that the other 20% of likely voters were among the undecided category, meaning that there was no support for Republican Party candidates among likely voters. When looking at all respondents, 66% of voters were Democratic, but only 8% were Republicans, along with 2% Libertarians and 24% undecided. These findings generally support previous statistical estimates by Uggen and Manza (2002) – that people with felony convictions would generally support Democrats in Congressional races at an estimated rate of 93% (14 times out of 15).

A caveat is in order regarding the generalizability of the data. All respondents were homeless and 70% (n=35) were African American — characteristics typically associated with leaning Democratic in the U.S. — so the present sample could conceivably be more supportive of Democrats than the overall population of persons with a felony conviction. Due to the sample size in this study, it is not possible to determine if party preference is more associated with a respondent's criminal history or race.



**Table 8-Party Preference of Respondents**

	All Respondents	Those With a Party Preference	Likely Voters
<b>Democratic</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>87%</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Libertarian</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Republican</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>No Party</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>20%</b>

*Presidential Vote*

This study finds that 42% of those individuals with a prior felony conviction would tend to vote for Kerry if they in fact voted, followed by 22% who would tend to vote for Bush, and 2% who would tend to vote for Nader. A significant proportion, 34% of respondents, had no candidate preference.

However, when counting only likely voters, 50% of respondents would tend to vote for Kerry and 40% would have no candidate preference, while 10% would support Bush.

**Table 9-Presidential Preference of Respondents**

	All Respondents	Those With a Preference	Likely Voters
<b>Bush</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Kerry</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>50%</b>
<b>Nader</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Undecided</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>40%</b>

Data from the present study on likely voters supports previous estimates (Uggen and Manza, 2002) that people with a felony conviction would tend to support a Democratic presidential candidate at considerably high rates. Uggen and Manza predicted that people with a current or previous felony conviction would vote for a Democratic candidate 70% of the time on average, whereas our findings were somewhat less in favor of Democratic candidates, at 50% among likely voters and 42% among all respondents. However, it is notable that 4 out of 5 non-Democratic likely voters were “undecided,” while only 10% supported Bush. Among all respondents, while 42% supported Kerry, 34% were “undecided, 22% were Bush supporters, and 2% supported Nader. As noted in the above section, comparisons with the Uggen and Manza statistical projection (2002) should keep in mind that there were a high proportion of Black participants in the study, and all participants were homeless persons.

## Policy Recommendations

This study provides valuable insight into the manner in which disenfranchisement policies affect the community. A high number of votes are being lost, with only 3% of people voting after they have regained their rights, compared to 40% prior to getting a felony conviction. Second, there is a decline in political involvement other than voting, with 38% participating in other forms of political activity prior to losing the right to vote, but only 30% doing so after. Third, personal comments have shown that losing the right to vote is an alienating experience. This study raises additional concerns that an even higher number of voters may be kept away from the polls than are legally disenfranchised—as many as the 13 million Americans who once had a felony conviction—because of low levels of education regarding voting rights.

This study makes the recommends the following policy changes:

- State legislatures should reinstate voting rights of all voting-age citizens and end the practice of disenfranchising persons with felony convictions.
- Until policies change, intensive efforts should be conducted to educate people with felony convictions about the voting policies affecting them, including their current status, how to regain voting eligibility, and how to register to vote.

There is no compelling state interest for continuing to deprive people with a felony conviction of the right to vote. Rather, it appears to cause significant psychological harm, which is detrimental to the fabric of democratic engagement, especially among minority and low-income communities. The participants in this study were mostly older African American men with a prior felony conviction living in a homeless shelter. The majority of their prior convictions were for theft or minor drug crimes, not for serious offenses. Many expressed a vigorous attempt to reintegrate into society after being released from prison.

It was also remarkable how many of the respondents in this study shared a number of political priorities directly related to their day-to-day experience, such as an interest in criminal justice reform as well as support for social services such as housing, education, and health care. By removing millions of their voices from the national political discourse, mass disenfranchisement has the consequence of muting the political will of those individuals with substantial knowledge and experience regarding issues affecting them directly. This feeds into a self-perpetuating cycle that limits the scope of public debate. Consequentially, many public policies are shaped with limited public input, further alienating disadvantaged groups from democratic politics.

## Resources

- Mauer, Marc. 2002. "Mass Imprisonment and the Disappearing Voters." Pp. 50-58 in *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*, edited by Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind.
- Manza, Jeff, and Christopher Uggen. Forthcoming. *Locked Out: Felon Disenfranchisement and American Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). 2004a. "Reenfranchisement: American justice allows people to return to society. Why can't they vote?"
- 2004b. "Disenfranchisement. American justice allows people to return to society. Why can't they vote?"
- Sentencing Project. 2003a. "Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States." Online at <http://www.sentencingproject.org/pdfs/1046.pdf>
- 2003b. "Legislative Changes On Felony Disenfranchisement." Online at <http://www.sentencingproject.org/pdfs/legchanges-report.pdf>
- Uggen, Christopher, and Jeff Manza. 2002. "Democratic Contraction? Political Consequences of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States." *American Sociological Review* 67, pp. 777-803.
- Wolfinger, Raymond E., and Stephen Rosenstone. 1980. *Who Votes?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.