

Summary

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS FELON DISFRANCHISEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

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How do ordinary Americans feel about state laws that prevent felons and ex-felons from voting? In a new national telephone survey of 1,000 Americans, conducted by Harris Interactive, sociologists Jeff Manza of Northwestern University, Clem Brooks of Indiana University, and Christopher Uggen of the University of Minnesota posed a series of questions designed to explore Americans attitudes towards these voting restrictions.

The authors find very high levels of public support for restoring voting rights to most, but not all, categories of felons and ex-felons. 80% of respondents to the survey believe that all *ex-felons*, individuals who have served their entire sentence and are now living in their communities, should have the right to vote. We also asked subsamples of the survey about their views about voting rights for various specific categories of ex-felons who might be viewed as especially unpopular. These questions yielded lower levels of support. 66% of respondents supported allowing *violent* ex-felons the right to vote, 63% supported allowing ex-felons convicted of illegal trading of stocks to vote, while just 52% supported allowing ex-felons who had been convicted of a sex crime. In short, while support for generic ex-felons is higher than for more specific groups of unpopular ex-felons, in no case is less than a majority in favor of allowing ex-felons to vote. Only by adding very unpopular offenses to the description of an ex-felon does support fall.

What about individuals who are currently serving a felony conviction? There are three distinct categories of current felons: those on probation, those who have completed a prison sentence and are now out on parole, and those who are currently in prison. The first two categories are individuals who are living in their communities and expected to pay taxes and abide by laws decided on by the government. When asked about voting rights for these different categories of felons, the researchers found that majorities (64% and 62% respectively) supported allowing probationers and parolees to vote. However, only one-third of respondents (33%) supported allowing currently imprisoned felons to vote.

These results suggest that Americans' views about the importance of maintaining the right to vote for all citizens is substantially greater than their desire to extend punishment to restrict voting rights, at least for those not currently in prison. These results are especially important in view of the fact that only about one-quarter (26%) of

all currently disfranchised felons are actually in prison, according to other research conducted by the authors. It appears clear that the public would support restoring voting rights for most of those currently denied them under existing state laws.

Survey Details

In July 2002, as part of its regular monthly telephone survey, Harris Interactive asked a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults 18 years of age or older a battery of questions regarding attitudes towards crime, punishment, and the civil liberties of criminals and ex-offenders. The telephone numbers were generated using a random-digit-dialing (RDD) selection procedure to maximize the representation of persons in households that are listed (as well as those that are not listed) in telephone directories within the 48 continental United States and the District of Columbia. The survey has a 4% margin of error.