

Survey Research on the Political and Economic Attitudes of Felony Offenders in North
Carolina

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Researching Felon Political/Economic Attitudes: Gaps in Current Research

Assessing the political and economic leanings of the disenfranchised faces a number of challenges, not least of which is the access, or lack thereof, to data enabling strong assumptions, though a decent starting point is provided, again, by Manza and Uggen:

“Felon disenfranchisement would be almost certain to have a more dramatic electoral impact in the urban legislative districts which the largest share of felon population is drawn. Unfortunately, we do not have reliable data regarding the exact locations and legislative districts in which the largest concentrations of voters are lost. ...disenfranchisement surely plays a role in the election of mayors, city councils, state representatives, and other officials.” (Manza and Uggen 2006)

Despite the findings by Manza, Uggen and Steinmetz, the current state of research into this area suffers several shortcomings. For one, most, if not all, research fails to trace the spatial/geographic significance of their subjects. While reliance on official statistics on regional crime rates and so forth provide a useful indicator as to where this population is active, it does not capture those areas where the disenfranchised initially originate from, and thus it is only a rough estimate of the spatial impact of incidence.¹ Steinmetz does retrieve some geographic information from her respondents; however there is no indication that she pursued further analysis of the spatial significance of her interviewees' answers (i.e. if those interviewed differed from their community peers), and limited the depth of the research items to beliefs about voting and citizenship, as opposed to detailed items on political and economic leanings. While it certainly appreciated to have an idea of the mean social and economic characteristics of those areas where many offenders originate from, there is little reason not to extend analysis by use of methods normally outside the field of social sciences, particularly, in this case, with inclusion of the many advances in geographic analysis in the geographic sciences.

A second, and arguably more essential, factor concerns a lack of available data on the political identities of respondents. Felon populations are generally excluded from social and economic surveys distributed both nationally and sub nationally. Many, if not all, surveys of the population exclude this group from their sampling. Such exclusions are not surprising given the relatively small proportion of felons in the US, at the national level, as a percentage of total voting age population.² Also, there are, as illustrated in this paper, many institutional and methodological issues which impede access to this population of interest, making any effort at inclusion too complicated for consideration by many researchers and their organizational sponsors. Essentially, when it comes to the many surveys, especially those regarding items of interest to social scientists, *including*

¹ That is, these studies do not seek to situate their respondents in their community context, and hence do not attempt to connect participant responses to the geographic areas from where their loss of political rights would be of most importance.

² This population is estimated at 2,266,832 persons as of 31.12.2011, compared to 229.7 million persons of voting age in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011)

prisoners ... would be logistically complicated...[because] many prisoners at any time are in local jails, where turnover rates are high. Surveying prisoners there may result in double-counting some who will be reached after release by other polls (Bialik, 2012)

Despite this, there is valuable information to be gathered from those who are least likely to be represented either in popular surveys or political legislatures: *“the main problem is that there is simply no nationally representative survey or polling data that contains information about both the respondents’ criminal behavior and their political participation and voting behavior”*.

I extend this limitation to include the lack of information about the demands, implicit or explicit, of respondents and their communities. Their interviews as well, though considerably more oriented to uncovering political preferences, do not directly investigate economic and social policy preferences. Political and economic surveys are most useful as policy tools when they can be coordinated with a coherent policy agenda, or in this case a set of policies which combine to form an overarching system. Fortunately, the welfare system provides just such an arrangement of policies both focused on the needs of many respondents and their communities, and policies which are deeply rooted in ideological beliefs. One would not expect to find any strong political ideologies as connected as with, say, municipal upkeep.

As political voice and mobilization of that voice shows a clear effect on the redistribution of income, it is useful to take into account not only which voices are being mobilized and registered, but also those which are excluded or demobilized. There are of course variations in the source of that voice and the degree to which it is mobilized. In the Jim Crow South, for example, the predominant political voice was that of affluent, white, males – reflected in the policies which came to dominate that region and to some degree persist to this day. If the early 20th century US Army manual was accurate in their presumption that democracy was indeed the road to socialism and demagoguery, then we should expect that the greater the extent of democratic participation, and the more effectual that participation was (i.e. not distorted by campaign financing or lobbying), the more socialistic governmental policies will be; a tragic irony given the United States’ pre-occupation with the proliferation of democracy.

Working with What is Available

The issues outlined below are strategies used to overcome sampling, response and logistic issues. This survey benefited enormously from advice from the Odom Institute at the University of Chapel Hill, the National Centre for Social Research (UK), and the Community Success Initiative of Raleigh (without whom this research would not have been possible).

Felon populations represent a unique population of investigation, even within the category of hard-to-reach populations. Unlike the general population of the surveys used to create the combined survey for this study, felon populations are uniquely complicated set of individuals to contact and entice to participate using the methods available. As opposed to other populations, such as the homeless and children, working with felon populations is further complicated by their legal status. Research with felons in the US, and elsewhere, comes with considerable obstacles. First, because of past abuses, supervised populations are considered a protected population under the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulation 45 CFR 46.301 – 306 – Subpart C – Additional Protections for Prisoners. Permission to access potential respondents requires significantly longer and more in depth considerations regarding the composition and

delivery of research materials; these strategies are detailed further in the description of subsamples. Second, the population under study is not fully incarcerated; while some felony convictions carry a sentence of incarceration, many convicted felons receive community supervised sentences. Thus, for a study which seeks to gather the attitudes of individuals politically disenfranchised because of felony convictions, both facility based and community supervised populations must be targeted.

At mid-year 2011, the number of felons supervised by the Division of Prisons (DOP) and the Division of Community Corrections (DCC) in North Carolina was 36,707 and 39,670 respectively.³ Males account for roughly 93% of the DOP supervised felon population, compared to approximately 80% of the DCC supervised felon population. DOP respondents (DOP-S), while easy to locate on account of their incarceration and monitoring, are difficult to reach with a limited amount of time and resources afforded to a study of this size. Every personal contact with an incarcerated respondent requires a re-allocation of prison staff from their normal duties for supervision of both the researcher and the respondent. This proved to be a significant barrier to access approval from the DOC for obvious reasons. Further to this, it is questionable whether or not the presence of staff during a survey interview would encourage response bias. Additionally, in order to facilitate such face-to-face interviews, the size and costs of the research team would be considerably larger, thus making such a short study of felon populations both temporally and financially prohibitive. This concern is also reflected for the study of the Division of Community Corrections (DCC) subsample (DCC-S). Finally, incentivization of survey participation was prohibited under DOC guidelines. This meant that all participation was entirely un-coerced, much less so in the case of DCC-S.

With the restrictions mentioned in mind, a self-complete, mail survey design was chosen as the most pragmatic option for this study. This method is not without drawbacks. For one, mail-in, self-complete designs have lower response rates than other, more involved approaches. This consideration was incorporated into the physical design of the questionnaire, with a final questionnaire created available in two versions for DOP-S and DCC-S respondents.

The division of the study population into subsamples also required separate sampling approaches, outlined in the individual descriptions below. As a result of events outside the control of the research agenda, an additional subsample was organized with the assistance of non-governmental, re-entry groups across the state; notably the Community Success Initiative (CSI) based in Raleigh, NC. This subsample, as with the others, necessitated its own strategy, however using the same questionnaires as delivered to the DCC-S. The full description is below. The three sub-samples cover the largest Metropolitan Statistical Areas of North Carolina: Wilmington MSA, Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill MSA, Greensboro-Winston Salem-High Point MSA, Fayetteville MSA, Charlotte-Gastonia-Rock Hill MSA, and Asheville MSA. CSI-S, with a more limited reach, covers only the cities of Charlotte, Raleigh, Wilmington, Asheville, and Tarboro.⁴

³ DOP: 34,224 males/ 2,483 females; DCC: 31,508 males/ 8,162 females. This excludes supervised individuals who are non-felons (DOP: 2,141 males/ 321 females; DCC: 47,434 males/ 17,740 females), not citizens of the US (DOP: 1,745 males/ 37 females; DCC: 2,214 males/ 122 females), and persons below the age of 18 (DOP: 140 males/ 4 females; DCC: 1,352 male/ 262 female), as this study was interested in the attitudes of those who would otherwise be able to vote

⁴ Tarboro is not associated with any of the MSAs in the main sample and is a rural setting.

DOC Approval Process

First, an application for research is submitted to a purpose review, laying out the specifics of the study and benefits to the prospective respondents. Following approval, a second review of the merit and methods to be used is undertaken. Following this, information is sent to each institution for which access is requested. For the state of North Carolina, a survey of all inmates in state correctional facilities (i.e. prisons) would require approval from each of the 66 correctional locations. Even after excluding those facilities for which access is restricted (i.e. Close/ Maximum Security prisons), the time needed for approval proved temporally incompatible. On advice from officials, this research study selected 15 sites for inclusion. Parallel to this, an official IRB of record must be in place for research to be conducted within the state of North Carolina, as with all states. As such, affiliation with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was acquired and necessary steps taken.⁵ Taking these factors into account, an abbreviated list of facilities was chosen with guidance; these facilities are discussed further in the sections related to each sub-sample.

Material Issues

Conducting surveys with self administered questionnaires with felon populations under the supervision has additional, though ultimately slight, stipulations not normally required of other survey projects. The survey itself needed to be free of any security issues itself, while still maintaining the features needed for functionality. The design of the survey booklets themselves was tailored to the target populations for this project. In consultation with CSI and other community actors dealing with current and former felony offenders, booklets were designed to be easy to read and follow for potential respondents who might have difficulty with literacy or concentration. This process was slightly constrained by the fact that only a few items were self created, with the vast majority of items coming from established survey tools. Thus, respondents are actually answering the same questions, at the same reading level, as the general population. Through a series of cognitive interviews with former inmates, as well as with survey professionals both in and outside the state, a final design was approved which resembled as little as possible an official, government format, while maintaining a professional feel. Booklets contained an opening description of the study and the reason for conducting the research. Since incentivization was forbidden, it was necessary to entice those sampled to participate with appeals to an intended sense of activism and opportunity to have their opinions heard. Institutional booklets contained a single insert sheet which laid out the exact process to follow in clear, easy to understand terms, using graphics and minimal text. This insert also relayed information to respondents on where and when surveys were to be collected. Additionally, since respondents would not be able to return their booklets via post, drop-boxes were placed at each facility where the survey was conducted. These drop-boxes were non-transparent, 10-gallon poly-urethane tubs with insertion openings removed from the tops. Lids were securely sealed using non-reusable security ties and were fastened by the researchers at the time of delivery to the respective locations. All drop-boxes were unsealed by the researcher at the time of collection to ensure confidentiality.

⁵ In addition, this project was underwritten by the Ethical Ombudsman of Jacobs University and the Bremen International Graduate School of Social Science, Germany.

Sub-samples

Division of Prisons (DOP-S)

This sub-sample was chosen using a stratified random sample approach. As mentioned before, incarcerated populations, while exceptionally easy to ‘find’, come with their own set of requirements. Some of these are dictated by official concerns, and others by practical issues. In accordance with concerns from the NCDOC, DOP-S respondents were restricted to minimum and medium security facilities. Close facilities, housing heightened security offenders, were excluded from the sampling process. Jails and other facilities holding inmates not considered correctional institutes or centers were also excluded from this sub-sample, not least due to the high rate of turnover in these facilities. Additionally, due to time constraints attached to the study period, the number of facilities in total which could be sampled was limited to suggested number of 15.

Facilities were chosen so as to maximize the number of potential respondents from each of the six MSAs. As the NCDOC does not keep track of the exact residences of origin of offenders in their supervision, or at least does not make this information publicly available, targeting was conducted by selecting the offender’s county of residence at the time of their conviction. While not ideal for limiting the sample frame to urban populations only, this was the best known option at the time to draw a sample of respondents who would represent the disenfranchised urban populations. Respondents were then further narrowed to those with sentences of three months or more remaining to ensure likelihood of contact. The restrictions for this sub-sample was men and women, serving sentences in medium and minimum security facilities, between the ages of 18-65, from the urban counties of residence noted above, with at least three months of sentence left to complete. Out of the fifteen facilities chosen, one facility (NC CI Women) was further excluded because of a combined supervision operating system; female offenders were thus excluded from this sub-sample.⁶

Questionnaires were mailed via UNC-CH mailing services to the respective respondents in individually addressed envelopes with directions and information on the rights of the respondent to refuse participation and other requirements in the consent waiver. Questionnaire booklets were unbound and with no return envelopes supplied.⁷ Instead, secure drop-boxes were supplied at a secure location at the respective facilities with the appropriate location indicated in personalized directions to the respondents. Sealed boxes were retrieved after 90 days by the primary researcher to coincide with the DCC-S. DOP-S respondents represent another unique issue in the survey of hard-to-reach populations, in that there is a detailed record of each individual’s known criminal history by which to analyze biographical data. This is slightly less reliable for those who have only provided basic information such as age, race, and current offence; however there were only a few instances where matching was not satisfactorily possible. With nearly all DOP-S respondents indicating their identity, background meta-data was possible to compile. Such data includes the conviction and supervision history of DOP-S respondents, including the length of time each has served for current and past offences. The data

⁶ This is not a significant issue as the female population made up only 6.8% (2,470) of all felons otherwise able to participate in an election, and 6% (891) of the felon population from urban counties. Two more facilities (Durham CC and Charlotte CC), both minimum security facilities, were later excluded due to planned closures and therefore uncertainty of ability to contact respondents and retrieve materials as necessary. Details available on request.

⁷ Because of security concerns, binding booklets by staple was prohibited. Return envelopes were not provided as providing postage for return, stamps, was also prohibited and metering was unavailable for this study.

gained from this is used in an analysis of the relationship between contact with the DOC and patterns in attitudes in the various items.⁸

Division of Community Corrections (DCC-S)

The community correction sub-sample was selected using a purposive sampling method suited to the dynamics of this population. The DCC-S sub-sample was selected from nine districts covering the MSAs in the corresponding DOP-S sub-sample, with an estimated 9,400 persons eligible for participation as of June 30, 2011. DCC districts are divided into units at which supervised offenders are required to report in 30, 60 and 90 day intervals dependent on their sentences. In contrast to DOP-S respondents, it was not viable to sample respondents based on supplied information from the DOC.⁹ It was impossible to perform the same sampling method as for the DOP-S. As such, a separate approach was designed in which respondents were solicited via a posted study advertisement placed in the waiting area for the respective districts and units. Units were restricted, as much as possible, to the top five units by supervised felons, above the age of 18. Survey booklets, self-addressed envelopes and writing materials were left for 6 weeks, accompanied with a secured drop-box, retrieved by the primary researcher. Respondents were offered an alternative web-based method for reply which, in the end, was not utilized by any respondents. The selected method provided contact with all 30-day reporters and a random sampling of 60- and 90-day reportees. Informational flyers were used to solicit participation from respondents within the waiting areas of reporting units. Taken together, the nine districts selected supervise approximately 42% of the state's entire DCC felon population. In contrast to DOP-S, there is no way to assess the background information of DCC-S respondents.

While some units are based at separate locations, many units are housed in the same locations as other units, and a few locations house all units in a given district. Locations were selected with the assistance of DCC senior staff to optimize responses and coverage. In total, 15 locations were used for this sub-sample. 40% of DCC-S respondents were female. While the use of sampling technique for this sub-sample may be considered statistically suspect, especially compared to the DOP-S, the exclusion of this sub-sample from the study would only hinder research objectives. The benefits of inclusion greatly outweighed the costs against incorporation of this sub-sample into the study, despite its shortcomings.

Community Success Initiative (CSI-S)

During the course of pursuing authorization to access felon populations under the supervision of the DOC, circumstances outside the tolerance of the research agenda arose which necessitated the design of a second option to gather data from felon populations. This sub-sample (CSI-S) became a parallel project to the main survey sample and provided access to persons outside the responsibility of the DOC. There are important differences between the strategies used for this sub-population and the sampled populations in the original survey design. For one, no IRB or other formal institutional approvals were needed as individuals were independent of the DOC's responsibility. Also, respondents answered questionnaires in groups rather than in independent settings. Meetings with CSI-S were arranged via local, non-governmental, re-entry organizations across the state; part of a larger network of organizations in connection with CSI.

⁸ Importantly, for this research, it is possible to gain insight into any bias across the stratification and sampling process. All DOP-S respondents were male.

⁹ There is one primary reason for this. The DOC does not allow the distribution of contact information for offenders supervised in the general population to research interests that are outside the direction the DOC itself, for obvious reasons.

Additionally, and in contrast to DOP-S and DCC-S respondents, CSI-S respondents were given incentives of 10 USD for completion of surveys. CSI-S respondents were also solicited for participation in 1-hour, face-to-face interviews covering the themes of the questionnaire. 33 of the 52 respondents indicated a desire to participate in an interview. 15 interviews were arranged, however only six interviews were achieved due to a variety of reasons.^{10 11} Participants in interviews were given 20 USD for their participation. 21% of CSI-S respondents were female.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire used for this study is a combination of items from the American National Election Study (ANES), the International Social Survey Project 2006 Role of Government (ISSP 06) and 1999 Social Inequality series (ISSP 99), and the International Survey of Economic Attitudes (ISEA). Wording of items remained in their original formats so as to maintain comparability with previously surveyed populations. Items were chosen for their relevance to political and economic issues useful in deciphering the placement of respondents' views in relation to welfare state policies.¹²

In total, the questionnaire for this study consisted of 44 questions, excluding filter items, consisting of 126 items.¹³ Of these questions, 12 came from the ANES, 16 from the ISSP 06, 6 from the ISEA, 4 from ISSP 99, and 6 which were created by the primary researcher. Self created items included items addressing community of origin¹⁴, gender, religious background, education, most recent income, current employment status, and feelings towards housing policy. Items from the ISSP 06 centered primarily on respondents' attitudes towards the government and policies related to social protection/welfare. Items from the ISSP 99 were used to measure respondents' attitudes regarding intergroup conflict and taxation. Items from the ISEA were used to measure respondents' views regarding explicit welfare state policies, including old age pensions, unemployment, childcare, and healthcare. Included in these items are specific benefit level questions which measure the specific amount of government help or appropriate. Items from the ANES were used to measure respondents' political participation and engagement.

Results

Stratifying Stages

As discussed previously, this project required extensive stratifying in order to reach the population of interest, especially for the DOP-S. Thus, it is possible that bias has been introduced along the way into the final random sample. First, urban areas are the main

¹⁰ Many participants had little time to meet because of transportation issues, childcare arrangements, job seeking appointments and other issues.

¹¹ While this number is quite small for an in depth qualitative analysis of its own, the findings do provide a useful insight into the motivation behind some of the answers given to the survey items and corroborate similar qualitative interviews conducted by Uggen and Manza (Manza & Uggen, 2006). Additionally, I have added the qualitative data from my findings to those of Manza and Uggen; as many of the questions asked in the interviews were taken directly from their own interview script. The results build on the findings of their research and indicate that attitudes towards the government and politics are similar across time and region in the United States – even from a relatively liberal northern state as Minnesota and a conservative southern state such as North Carolina. A report on this data is forthcoming.

¹² The ANES, ISSP 06, and ISSP 99 are nationally representative for the United States and the US South, however not for individual states; making comparison to the specific population of North Carolina tenuous. The ISEA has not been run in the US, however its battery of items specifically targeting attitudes on welfare state policies was chosen as the most suitable and tested items for this study.

¹³ Opening items were used to filter out non-felons and those under 18 years of age.

¹⁴ This item was included to trace respondents to their particular voting districts, as the information on the exact locations where the politically disenfranchised originate is not known at the micro level. This information was analyzed in Arc GIS and manipulated to indicate the districts which respondents originate from.

geographic variable under consideration. As such, those respondents who are reported to have a county of residence at time of conviction within the main Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA) were selected out of the sample frame (N = 5163) supplied by the DOC of the final 13 facilities used for this survey. This resulted in 2437 persons who were resident at one of the 13 facilities under study, had at least 3 months remaining on their sentence, and had a county of residence belonging to one of the 6 major MSAs of North Carolina.¹⁵ Overall, there is little difference between respondents and the general prison population at least in terms of education and race. Respondents are slightly more educated than the entire DOP population, 32.84% having at least a 12th grade education compared to 27.32% of all DOP supervised individuals; respondents are also more likely to be black than with the DOP population, 61.94% compared to 57.69%.¹⁶ The racial ratios first change noticeably at the second stage, with the exclusion by county of residence to narrow down the focus to urban communities. What is particularly interesting given the data gathered on educational attainment is the disparity between what level DOP-S respondents said they had achieved and what their DOC provided biographical data reports. A full 22% of respondents indicated they had completed some college or university, compared with approximately 2.1% reported higher than 12th grade (high school or GED) by the DOC for the same respondents. Variation is also seen in the racial variables, but disappear after confirming each respondent's race from file.

Response Rates

Response rates differed widely over units. There was an average response rate of approximately 12% for the entire DOC sample. The average for all DOP facilities was 14.69%, with approximately 11% for Medium security facilities and 17.32% for Minimum security. DCC units had an average response rate of just fewer than 10% (9.88%). One unit in particular, in District 21, stands out with approximately 27% response rate. This higher response rate is most likely due to the higher than normal cooperation of this unit compared with others in the study. This does not in any way suggest that any of the remaining units were not helpful, as is certainly not the case; however, due to the relatively small size of this unit's facilities and the layout of personnel locations, there appeared to be more of a responsive atmosphere at this unit. It may also be the case that particular officials at this unit were more suggestive about the study to their reportees. Regardless, there is an overall low response rate for the survey across both sub-samples. Of those who returned surveys, only *most recent entry date* ($r = -.117$, $p < .01$) and *highest grade level reported* ($r = .069$, $p < .05$) had a significant relationship with survey response.¹⁷ The variables *years left on current sentence*, *projected release date*, *total sentence count*, *total entries to probation*, *total prison entries*, and *prison facility* all had statistically insignificant relationships with survey response. *Total sentence count* (the amount of times a respondent has been sentenced for crimes) is the only other variable available for the entire sample that nears significance ($r = .06$, $p = .057$).

The finding of a positive correlation between education and response is not surprising. The fact that better educated would participate in a voluntary, relatively lengthy survey is

¹⁵ No women were recorded in the DOP-S due to the exclusion of the one woman's prison which was requested due to security status. This is not a significant issue given the relative small size of this loss (N=144). Detailed tables available on request.

¹⁶ Disparities in these rates seem to be a function of the stratifying process, with education ratios changing at the first and 3rd stage of sampling. The selection of specific institutions based on county of residence first shifts the highest education received upwards, followed thereafter by the random sampling from the adjusted sample frame.

¹⁷ Two-Tailed, Bivariate correlations using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation

hardly surprising.¹⁸ The finding of a negative correlation between survey participation and recent entry, however, is interesting. It would seem to suggest that those who have spent more time incarcerated at the time of survey distribution are more likely to participate than those who have recently entered an institution. As the institution variable had no significance, indicating a non-finding on institutional culture at least in terms of survey participation, future researchers may want to further segregate their focus to explore options on encouraging responses from those who have recently entered institutions and/or confirming or refuting the evidence from these findings. If confirmed, this could entail that events at the beginning of one's sentence have some impact on participatory behavior, not only for surveys, but perhaps for other non-essential events. This, however, is tentative at this point.

Geographic Exclusiveness

As noted, a central issue of concern for this research is the localized effect of felon disenfranchisement, adversely impacting urban communities of lower economic and political resources, and, as shall be shown, political preferences. In order to assess this, and additionally to confirm that the sample chosen for this survey was not bias spatially, at least no more than the multi-stage sampling design introduced purposefully, Geographic Information Science (GIS) technology was employed to analyze locations of prison entries and match these data with information from survey respondents.

Data for Spatial Analysis

The North Carolina Department of Correction, as with many state departments across the US, collects data on offenders' previous location of residence before entering DOP. Where it does have information for DCC supervised offenders, this data cannot (a) be ascertained as whether it is accurate and (b) was not available for this research. One of the key insights for this research is the focus on where offenders originate from. Gathering the political and economic attitudes of offenders solves only part of the puzzle previously set out by Uggen and Manza (2006). The other major obstacle to overcome is addressing the exact electoral districts where lost votes originate from.

Statewide Prison Entry Data

To deal with this issue, data was solicited from the Justice Mapping Center (JMC) for the state of North Carolina for the year 2008. The JMC maintains a set of spatial data on crime and imprisonment rates across the United States. Particularly valuable was a recent initiative which the JMC participated in with the NCDOC to map prison entries across the state. Using data from the JMC in the form of prison entry counts per census tract area, information was compiled using ArcGIS to map prison entry locations. Rates are calculated as rates per 100,000.

DOP-S Previous Residence Data

For this survey, a specific item was included which requested the previous address or approximate address. Item text: *First, I would like to ask if you could tell me where you are from. Please fill in as much information as you remember.* Fields: *"Your last street address: [or nearest intersection, example: Main Street and Corner Street]"; "City & Zip code"*. Of the 134 respondents, 121 gave their last address or approximate address.¹⁹

¹⁸ Even though items are used verbatim from previous studies from the respective projects, and with additional cognitive testing with felon participants, it is highly likely that the items included may have not sufficiently enticed participation from the sample population.

¹⁹ Approximate addresses included partial street addresses, intersections and colloquial names of housing estates and/or neighborhoods.

Addresses were confirmed and then geocoded using ArcGIS geocoding software. This makes it possible to isolate those areas of concern with a larger degree of justification for the exclusion of surrounding areas based on relevant data as opposed to conjectural variables, such as associated income and unemployment data which are often highly correlated with crime incidence.

Using this geographic information, it is possible to select areas at the micro-level (census tract level) to survey further respondents in the communities of origin to assess to what degree attitudes of felon respondents match those of their neighbors.²⁰

Attitudes of Disenfranchised Felons in North Carolina

The findings of this research are the first and only, to the knowledge of the researcher, data reporting the political and economic views of felons using survey items which have been used for the general population in the United States. Results are unweighted and confined to the exclusions mentioned previously regarding the sampling process utilized. They provide the first evidence of which views have, at least in the state of North Carolina, been excluded from the franchise. The following is a brief description of those findings which are, for the sake of brevity and relevance, not included here in detail.

Comparisons of felon respondents are presented against items used in the ISSP 2006 Role of government (RoG) and 1999 Social Inequality (SI) surveys. Both the RoG and SI respondents have been limited to the region “South” (RoG N = 348, SI N = 330). Comparisons of political variables taken from the American National Election Study are presented between the two felon sub-samples, except for party affiliation and interest in politics which are also asked in the RoG and SI. Particularly interesting is the amount of similarity between felons and the general population, as opposed to the differences. Those items where felon respondents do differ noticeably from the RoG and SI respondents are items measuring those areas it is believed that respondents have greater experience with.

That is, for instance, respondents had stronger attitudes towards items such as government success with areas of policy that would be expectedly more relevant to those with felony convictions, such as unemployment and crime, compared to items that measured respondents’ attitudes towards policy areas which do not necessarily affect the respondents directly, such as environmental regulation or national security. For the latter areas, respondents are not significantly different than the population at large. Thus, as many felon disenfranchisement opponents profess, felons do not differ from the general population and thus enfranchisement of this class of citizen would not advantage any particular interest more than the other adversely. Simply put, the felon voting bloc thesis would be refuted on the grounds that felons do not have attitudes out of line with those of other Americans. However, contrary to such assumptions, and more in line with theoretical assumptions, including the author’s, that the population of disenfranchised citizens across the nation are not neutral actors, but in fact do represent identifiable interests and as such their exclusion represents a dilution of political attitudes in favor of policies addressing those needs. Specifically, the disenfranchised are not neutral and do not mirror general population attitudes towards welfare state functions.

²⁰ Such information enables further research to assess whether the systematic political disenfranchisement of citizens in the United States, and elsewhere, represents a case of political demobilization (i.e. the siphoning away of political preferences) or preference deletion (i.e. the removal of distinctly different political preferences from communities).

Data from items chosen from the International Survey of Economic Attitudes further demarcate the attitudes of felon respondents. The ISEA measures attitudes policy areas such as pension, childcare, unemployment, and housing benefits. It is, unfortunately, not possible to compare the answers directly to a sample from the originating survey instrument as the ISEA survey has not been administered in the United States at this time. In brief, respondents are quite generous to the unemployed who are victims of circumstance, and particularly unsympathetic to those who are able bodied but reluctant to work. Regarding pensions, NCF respondents appear to be quite egalitarian, preferring a universal pension scheme to one provided only for contributors or for the poor. They are also particularly favorable to government provided housing as opposed to cash benefits, and supportive of governmental childcare. Respondents are not particularly fond of childcare benefits for families or single mothers.

These findings are encouraging for the researcher of democratic participation and redistributive policies, especially for those pursuing this complex interplay within various welfare system regimes.

Discussion

Indicative Findings

The results presented here are a brief exploration of selected finding thus far and have some distance to travel to say the least. Despite this, the initial results point in a direction which both confirms and challenges commonly held positions on the disenfranchised felon voter. While respondents do vary on a few key issues, their general attitudes towards items such as national defense, the economy, and taxes are not radical. There does not seem to be, at least from the observations at this level, a strong indication that the Democratic Party would benefit greatly from a retraction on the ban on felon voting. While it has not been fully explored here, it seems likely that the party which would benefit would be that which catered to the needs of lower income individuals who believe the mitigation of income loss because of loss of work is the primary goal of government. Given the answers to questions of the role of government, it does not seem likely that individuals would favor a libertarian party or any party which scales back the size of government. Given the answers to items regarding childcare benefits and pensions, it would seem that, in fact, the disenfranchised would gravitate towards policies which maintained the traditional breadwinner model of government intervention. This may explain the trend in universal pension responses, lack of strong support for child benefits for families or single mothers, and surprisingly high percentage of respondents who view taxes on the rich as too high, compared with ISSP06 respondents.

Unfortunately, at this point, it is not possible to say with any certainty as the collection of data is in its infancy. Further exploration of the final dataset will allow for clearer results than is possible at this point. That said, while it does not seem that felon respondents are card carrying socialists, nor ardent libertarians, there are divergent patterns in their attitudes towards trust in government, the role of government, and politics. While many of the initial findings seem intuitive, they present the first actual known attempt to collect such information from this growing group of citizens.

Insights: Approaching Felon Populations for Study

This research, it must be noted, has proceeded first with a goal of gathering data hitherto uncollected. Important lessons, particularly through trial and error, have been learned with promising results for future research with offenders. First, any future projects should

devote substantial time to build professional relationships with the supervisory authorities in the research areas of study. The study presented here took place over the course of 9 months, approximately, and in relative terms was extremely short and expansive given the time and resources allocated to it. Institutional cooperation was paramount to the success of the project.

Secondly, this project benefited enormously from the help of local and statewide non-profit organizations in the field of offender care. These organizations devoted their staff time and facility resources at no cost to the researcher for the sole purpose of promotion of research on a segment of the US population they have found themselves in. The findings do not do justice to the amount of time and energy these organizations have and currently devote to each of their respective missions. Cognitive testing of survey items, identification of urban areas, advice on where to find information on offender populations and a rapid response to potential project shortfall in the form of the third sub-sample (not reported here) were almost entirely thanks to a few key individuals and their networks across the state. In addition, the innovation of incorporating GIS methods into the study design also originated from work with these individuals. Future researchers who are interested in research with this population would do well to immerse themselves into the culture and networks of those institutions which interact with them if they wish to maximize their results.

Cross Discipline Adaptations

The work here has presented a brief illustration of the use of GIS technology to the social sciences. While still in its infancy as a methodological approach, its use does nothing to detract from our understanding of the social phenomenon we wish to uncover. Areas with exceptionally high concentrations of prison entrants, used as a proxy for felon disenfranchisement rates, share other features in common across geographic space. Once micro-level data on housing and zoning regulations, for instance, is overlaid with layers on prison rates, we see what a corral is in essence of economically and politically deprived groups – or what is commonly referred to as the urban ghetto.

Mapping deprived neighborhoods is not new, however incorporating this to include variables which contribute to poverty and inequality is vastly under-utilized. As a tool for understanding hard to reach populations, GIS methods enable the researcher to better track and record variations not only temporally, but also spatially. For the political sciences, this is especially important when considering redistricting and other spatial processes which can have enormous impacts on representation of interests.

As a survey tool, GIS is useful to locate those areas down to the most disaggregated level and assist targeting of potential participants. It is conceivable, for instance, for a researcher to geocode areas known to host transient or homeless individuals and develop predictive models to better randomize their sampling techniques. For felon populations, especially prisoners, GIS makes it possible to retrieve pre- and post-residential locations and coordinate survey administration to those areas. This research, for example, intends to enlarge the research area to include a nationally representative sample of the United States' felon population using items presented here and adapted items to create a spatial and longitudinal dataset of excluded preferences. The lessons learned from this and future research is instrumental in developing reliable and robust estimates.