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DISENFRANCHISED VOTERS

“Punishment and Democracy:
Disenfranchisement of Nonincarcerated Felons in the United States”

As levels of criminal punishment have risen in the United States, more and more citizens have been disenfranchised because of a felony conviction. In their contribution to a *Perspectives* symposium on U.S. elections, Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen consider the political affects of the country’s ongoing disenfranchisement of large numbers of nonincarcerated felons—those who have served their entire sentences and those living in their home communities while completing a term of probation or parole. The authors discuss the historical and legal origins of felon disenfranchisement, analyze its practical political impact on recent elections, and begin to disentangle the racial dynamics of felon disenfranchisement in the United States.

They show that felon disenfranchisement laws have been at least partly driven by racial politics, that 4.7 million felons (about half of whom are African Americans) are currently not allowed to vote, and that only about one-quarter of them are in prison. They estimate that about 35 percent of these felons would vote in a presidential election if given the chance, and 73 percent of them would vote Democratic. (The impact of these results for Florida in 2000 would have been a net Democratic gain of 63,079 votes and a final Gore victory margin of 62,542.)

The variety of empirical evidence Manza and Uggen present provides a distinctive view of the disenfranchisement issue. Three points stand out in relation to the broader questions of democracy, citizenship, and race. First, their investigation into the origins of felon disenfranchisement and its significant impact on the African American community suggests both a causal role for race and an important set of race-related effects. Second, their evidence raises vital issues for the American practice of democracy today. Finally, their evidence supports the view that the right to vote can be meaningfully connected to the civic reintegration of individual offenders. In sum, the authors suggest a strong case for rethinking the current practice of disenfranchisement.

The case of felon disenfranchisement is a powerful reminder that even the most basic elements of democratic governance, such as a universal right to vote, can still be threatened in a polity otherwise asserting its democratic credentials. It exemplifies how “waves of democracy” do not necessarily move in unilinear fashion towards greater inclusiveness. Yet, the emergence of a civil rights campaign to remove the most extreme state restrictions on the voting rights of nonincarcerated felons, and the strength of public support for voting rights for nonincarcerated felons, demonstrate the enduring motivational force of the ideal of democracy and the goal of an inclusive polity.

Ultimately, of course, the question of whether felons should be allowed to vote comes down to values, and felon disenfranchisement laws in many states appear to be out of step with both international practices and U.S. public opinion. Manza and Uggen suggest that, at least for felons not in prison, there is public support in many states for allowing them to vote.

Perspectives on Politics, a new flagship journal of the American Political Science Association, was conceived as a counterpart to the long-established *American Political Science Review*. With a circulation of more than 15,000, *Perspectives* publishes the best articles that integrate work across subfields, that show how various research agendas coalesce into new insights, or that bring political science research directly to bear on major political phenomena or policy problems.