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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

TO VOTE OR NOT TO VOTE: AN ASSESSMENT
OF HOW FELONY AND INCARCERATION
AFFECTS VOTING PRACTICES

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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Sociology

August 2021

This Thesis by: Tammy Lynn Ortiz

Entitled: *To Vote or Not to Vote: An Assessment of How Felony Convictions and Incarceration Affects Voting Practices*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in College of Humanities and Social Sciences in Department of Sociology.

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ABSTRACT

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Felon disenfranchisement has a long history in the United States, beginning with Jim Crow Laws, continuing with mass incarceration, and increasing with voter suppression policies and laws being created on a daily basis. This paper will include a brief history of voting suppression and how felony convictions and incarceration create further obstacles for individuals choosing to share their voices and elect officials who represent them within the government. Theories involved in this research include labeling, anomie, citizenship, and both social control and social conflict and combined will demonstrate how the criminal justice works to control individuals under supervision, so much so that former offenders struggle to obtain basic necessities and often times do not have the time or energy to become more civically engaged. I conducted a qualitative study with five participants who identified as felons. Findings will demonstrate that offenders within the system are provided minimal access to their voting rights and supervision is maintained at an extremely high level in an attempt to curb recidivism. This research will also show that despite barriers in place, described by the history and examples provided by literature and interviews, individuals choose to vote because of their family and community support and connections. My thesis concludes with a discussion concerning the control that is found within the criminal justice system, how this leads to lack of information and basic necessities being provided, and how this system creates further barriers for persons wishing

to become more civically involved within the election process. I recommend actions that can be taken at local and national levels and how society can better receive and support individuals who have been incarcerated and/or have felony convictions.

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me no matter what. And to my mom, Barbara Emmert, for always seeing me better than society did and for always buying my hygiene, driving me home, and picking me up when I fall down. I would be nothing if you didn't love me as much as you do.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Voting is a fundamental right given to all persons who are given the status as citizens of the United States, but that has not always been the case for our nation. The ability of individuals to choose who will represent them in the government and how they will be advocated for is viewed by some as one of the most important rights that we have (Bauböck 2005). Throughout the years there have been many changes to our election process and many of those changes have affected who is allowed to participate in this process. Many factors have determined a person's eligibility to participate in the voting process including one's gender, race, citizenship, and felony disenfranchisement. When marginalized communities are not adequately represented by their elected officials, there is little power to create substantial change and experience upward social mobility. When adequate representation is elected and visible in public officers, officials (presumably) have the necessary incentive to represent the communities that elected them (Schuit and Rogowski 2017).

The election process can be imagined as a complex machine containing various moving parts. There are multiple issues contained within an election ballot that can determine an individual's wellbeing, their ability to increase their life chances and social standing. The ability of individuals to choose who will represent them in the government and how they will be advocated for is viewed by some as one of the most important rights that we have (Bauböck 2005). For an individual to be able to vote for someone who shares their identity and perhaps their life experiences is vital to authentic representation. Through the process of election, people

are able to select not only presidents and senators but also judges, school board members, county and city commissioner, district attorney, and police chiefs, an aspect of voting that is sometimes overlooked. These individuals play vital roles in our local communities and, if not chosen appropriately, can cause extreme harm. Another important piece of the election process is the raising of taxes to ensure our communities are supplied with the resources necessary to survive and thrive. Communities that do not have access to vital resources such as quality education, adequate emergency services, and strong infrastructures (roads and bridges), all paid for by taxes that are voted in, lose the ability to create upward social mobility.

There are multiple reasons why a person would choose to not participate in the United States election process (López and Flores 2017). For persons who have been convicted of a felony offense, the desire or eligibility to vote is often not present; for some, once they had this basic right taken away, they never have the desire to be involved again but for others, once convicted of a felony crime, they are denied (by their state) the right to vote. What state a person lives in determines if this is a permanent loss or one that is regained upon completion of their sentence (ACLU 2020). Regardless of their legal access, many individuals who have been convicted of a felony crime never felt included or represented in the electoral process to begin with. Lack of civic engagement among these individuals has resulted from generations of social disconnect (Uggen, Manza, and Behrens 2004).

The population of persons who either choose to identify as felons or are identified as felons has grown tremendously over the last fifty years. Currently, there are an estimated 24 million individuals in the United States who have a permanent felony conviction on their record (Eberstadt 2019). When a person is convicted of a felony crime, whether guilty or not, they immediately lose access to necessary means of representation. As of 2016, over six million

Americans that were incarcerated, under parole or probation supervision, or have felony convictions were prohibited from voting because of laws that disenfranchise offenders (Chung 2019). Once a person completes their sentence, they are expected to regain some sort of “normalcy” within their communities and society as a whole. Many of those who are eligible will begin the long process of restoration including family restoration, searching for employment and housing, payment of fines and restitution, and for some the ability to participate in the voting process. Many scholars agree that voting is a practice that demonstrates full participatory membership within a society, traditionally “regarded as the core of democratic citizenship” (Bauböck 2005:683). Therefore, when we deny individuals access to vote or when these same persons are deterred from voting, these people are being excluded from full membership in society (Bauböck 2005).

This current research project examines various obstacles that have impacted former felons and their voting involvement and will explore how social conflict, anomie, labeling, social control, and citizenship theories help explain how former offense navigate the U.S. political process. The purpose of this study was to conduct qualitative interviews to learn about voting practices from persons who identify as felons. Findings in this paper demonstrate the barriers that exist within the voting process for individuals without felony convictions and how persons who have been incarcerated and/or have a felony conviction are further prohibited from participating. Finally, this paper demonstrates that people with felony convictions may still feel strongly connected to participating in the civic duty to vote and they will overcome these obstacles (Harder and Krosnick 2008).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

HISTORY

History of Voter Disenfranchisement and Suppression

In this section I will share with you a brief history of felony disenfranchisement.

Disenfranchisement can be defined as an individual being denied the right or privilege to something, especially voting. Judge Wingate explains, “Disenfranchisement is the harshest civil sanction imposed by a democratic society. When brought beneath its axe, the disenfranchised is severed from the body politic and condemned to the lowest form of citizenship, where voiceless at the ballot box...the disinherited must sit idly by while others elect his civic leaders and while others choose the fiscal and governmental policies which will govern him and his family.” (van den Bergh 2016).

Felony disenfranchisement has a lengthy history with origins beginning in Greece, medieval Europe and Britain (Brooks 2005). In the 1600’s, disenfranchisement laws began to appear in America and were seen as punishments for crimes based on morality (Brooks 2005). For example, persons found to be drunk were seen to be immoral and were punished by being incarcerated and/or disenfranchised from society. These laws were meant as a deterrent, to show other citizens or community members what actions or behaviors were acceptable and what the consequences would be if one went against the status quo or social norm. States were given power to create qualifications for voters within the U.S. Constitution to have “broad powers to determine the conditions under which the right of suffrage may be exercised” (Brooks

2005:103). In other words, states were allowed to use their own discretion when determining how the removal of rights, such as voting, would be decided within their own regions. Some of these conditions that existed include whether a person was a permanent resident or whether they had a criminal history (Brooks 2005).

During the late 1700's and into the early 1800's, 11 states in the union created policies and laws which stripped convicted felons of their right to vote, and 18 more followed by 1868 (Brooks 2005). John Locke, a philosopher and physician, believed that anyone who broke the social contract by committing a crime should not be trusted in the process of creating rules for society (Brooks 2005). Some other validations for felon disenfranchisement were the belief that there was a need to protect the elections from fraud and that the ballot box was to be kept pure and strong (Brooks 2005).

Following the Civil War, many changes were made to both the law and society. These came in the form of Jim Crow laws and voter suppression. More recently, felony disenfranchisement laws and policies have grown and evolved with society's social and political climate, including the beginning of mass incarceration, the ushering in of New Jim Crow laws, and increasingly more creative ways the government has found to ensure all voices are not heard in the United States (Ross and Spencer 2019). Currently, all 50 states in the Union have some sort of felony disenfranchisement within their constitutions, the most restrictive of which are nine states that ban felons from voting ever again to the least restrictive where two states allow offenders to vote while incarcerated (See Table 1).

Table 1 – Voting Rights for Felons in the United States

State	Permanent loss of voting rights after certain felony conviction	Voting rights are restored after completion of prison sentence	Voting rights restored after completion of sentence (including parole and probation)	Voting rights must be reinstated by government intervention	Felons never lose right to vote
Alabama	X				
Alaska			X		
Arizona				X	
Arkansas			X		
California			X		
Colorado		X			
Connecticut			X		
Delaware	X				
Florida	X				
Georgia			X		
Hawaii		X			
Idaho			X		
Illinois		X			
Indiana		X			
Iowa			X	X	
Kansas			X		
Kentucky	X				
Louisiana			X		
Maine					X
Maryland		X			
Massachusetts		X			
Michigan		X			
Minnesota			X		
Mississippi	X				
Missouri			X		
Montana		X			
Nebraska		X			
Nevada		X			
New Hampshire		X			
New Jersey		X			
New Mexico			X		
New York		X			
North Carolina			X		
North Dakota		X			
Ohio		X			
Oklahoma			X		
Oregon		X			
Pennsylvania		X			
Rhode Island		X			
South Carolina			X		
South Dakota			X		
Tennessee	X				
Texas			X		
Utah		X			
Vermont					X
Virginia	X			X	
Washington			X		
West Virginia			X		
Wisconsin			X		
Wyoming	X				

Representation or participation within the political process was never intended for various communities of people and access to voting has not always been allowed to all citizens who live in the United States. Prior to the Civil War, voting in America was limited to white men. The 14th Amendment, ratified in 1868, guaranteed voting rights to all citizens who identified as male (Grofman and Davidson 1992). This amendment included access to voting for Black men, but various laws and policies (subtle and not subtle) were put into place that would work to prohibit their voting access. In order for a Black man to vote, they would have to pass a literacy test, own property, pay poll taxes, and be able to prove their citizenship in some way (Grofman and Davidson 1992), a nearly impossible task as many of these processes had been prohibited for Black individuals to participate in before slavery was abolished. Women were given the right to vote in 1920, and again this was primarily aimed at White women. The same policies and laws in place that had excluded Black men were now also excluding Black women. The Voting Rights Act was finally passed in 1965 and was created in order to enforce the 15th amendment, which guarantees all citizens the right to vote (Grofman and Davidson 1992). Laws were then created that allowed all persons, regardless of race or gender, the opportunity to vote (Behrens, Uggen and Manza 2003). Unfortunately, there are many things that still create barriers for voting to occur for many people.

*Jim Crow Laws, New Jim Crow,
Mass Incarceration, and
Additional Barriers*

This section will introduce Jim Crow Laws, mass incarceration, New Jim Crow, and how the government has worked to create additional barriers to voting, even as old barriers are seemingly dismantled. As mentioned earlier, there have been multiple laws and policies put into place that are meant to disenfranchise these individuals from voting. Jim Crow laws were enacted in the late 1800's and worked to prohibit Black individuals from accessing the same

freedoms as other citizens of the United States (Nittle 2018). These restrictions included curfews, being jailed for unemployment, and attendance at church meetings (Nittle 2018). Any Black person found breaking a Jim Crow law would be convicted of a crime and anyone with a conviction on their record was barred from voting. Felony disenfranchisement, the act of barring felons from voting, began before the Civil War and was believed to be racially motivated (Johansen 2020). Following the Voting Rights Acts in 1965, many believed that these laws and policies would end or found unconstitutional. Unfortunately, mass incarceration and its consequences to those within and working to leave the system has become the New Jim Crow (Forman 2012).

Mass incarceration was first introduced in the form of “tough on crime” policies by conservatives in the 1950’s as a response to the Civil Rights movements occurring at the time and was used as a way to connect activism with criminality (Beckett and Francis 2020). It has evolved into the “war on drugs” and a judicial system put into place that convicts persons who use and sell drugs and implements extremely harsh sentences with these convictions. Mandated minimum sentences have limited judges’ ability to use discretion when imposing sentences; instead, the length of sentence is predetermined based on the drug being used or sold within the accusation (Bennett 2014). For example, crack cocaine, a drug primarily used by the Black community because of its low cost and easy access, receives much harsher penalties than persons convicted of using cocaine, which is more common among White individuals (Alexander 2011). Although there is little difference between the two drugs besides who uses which one and how it is processed or consumed, the sentences or punishments are very different. Due to mass incarceration and unfair drug convictions, Black individuals now makeup the largest portion of the prison population in history with Black men being imprisoned 6.5 times more often than

White men (Forman 2012). Release from incarceration does not end the struggle. Laws and policies in place that prohibit employment, housing, and financial stability once an offender completes their sentence and is released can be overwhelming and impossible to overcome (van den Bergh 2016).

Many persons will advocate that voting rights are being increased across the nation in an effort to give access to so many who have been barred from participation. According to an NPR story, Florida voters approved a measure that would restore voting rights for persons who had felony convictions and had completed their sentence (Kennedy 2019). This measure did not include persons who had been convicted of sexual assault or murder. Immediately following this vote, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, approved a law that required that all fines must be paid before a person identifying as a felon would be able to vote (Kennedy 2019). So even as some opportunities to vote have increased, felony disenfranchisement laws and policies are persistent. Since 2010, 25 states have enacted further voting restrictions with ten of these specifically targeted to persons who have felony convictions (Brennan Center 2019) (See Table 1 above). These voting restrictions combined with racial discrimination and the knowledge that the fastest rising population of incarcerated persons is Black and African Americans (Behrens et al. 2003), and you have voter disenfranchisement and suppression.

MODERN VOTER DISENFRANCHISEMENT AND SUPPRESSION

Non-Citizen Disenfranchisement

There are multiple ways that a person can be disenfranchised when it comes to voting. At the end of 2015, there were an estimated twelve million persons who are undocumented residing in the United States (Baker 2018). Almost one in ten families in the United States has a family member who identifies as a noncitizen (Hayduk 2004). Persons who are not documented

or have citizenship within a nation are not usually eligible to vote. These same individuals generally contribute to the nation's economy and wellbeing but are denied the opportunity to fully participate in the election process. Many of them own businesses, participate in the education system, and have served or are serving time in the military (Hayduk 2004). While many of these individuals desire to become American citizens, it typically takes almost ten years or longer for this to be achieved (Hayduk 2004). Even a person who gains citizenship might choose not to vote simply because previous negative experiences may lead them to feel excluded from the U.S. political system.

Felony Disenfranchisement

Disenfranchisement is also seen among persons who have felony convictions on their permanent records. The population of persons who identify as felons has grown tremendously over the last fifty years. Currently, there are an estimated 24 million individuals in the United States who have a permanent felony conviction on their record (Eberstadt 2019). When a person is convicted of a felony crime, whether guilty or not, they immediately lose access to this necessary means of representation. Once these persons have served their time, paying their proverbial "debt to society," many of those who are eligible will begin the long process of restoration including: family restoration, searching for employment and housing, payment of fines and restitutions, and, for some, participating in the voting process. Persons who engage in the criminal justice system, whether voluntarily or not, often are left with feelings of not being included or the shame that is associated with prison or felony conviction (Uggen et al. 2004).

SUPPRESSION AND BARRIERS (AND HOW IT DISPROPORTIONATELY EFFECTS PEOPLE WITH CONVICTIONS)

Access to Official Forms of Identification

This section will introduce how suppression is designed, through barriers, to exclude individuals within the voting process. One set of barriers put into place are numerous policies, procedures and laws that are ostensibly meant to discourage or prohibit voter fraud, but also contribute to a lack of access to the resources necessary to vote. For example, voter identification is touted as a way to ensure that a person is who they claim to be when they are voting, which is accomplished by requiring a person produce a photo ID in order to vote. Access to photo ID's are often difficult for people in some communities to access, including the elderly, the disabled, women, poor people, and other marginalized individuals (Sobel and Smith 2009). These communities often lack the financial resources and/or transportation necessary to obtain photo ID's (Sobel and Smith 2009). In fact, access to the offices who distribute IDs has recently been reduced. In 2015, the state of Alabama closed almost half of their Department of Motor Vehicles offices due to budget cuts (Lopez and Flores 2017). Requiring voter IDs contributes to lower voter participation, particularly among groups who are already underrepresented in the political system (Sobel and Smith 2009).

Former offenders who have been released from a facility will face additional hurdles in order to obtain a photo ID. Persons who have been released from prison or other type of detention facility often do not have access to their social security cards or birth certificates, they may not have a physical address that is needed to get an ID (sometimes because they do not already have an ID, creating a winless cycle). Sometimes people are released with a Department of Corrections Identification Card, but many places will not accept this as a valid form of ID and

also leads to other stigmatizations attached to being a felon or formerly incarcerated person. According to an article written by Rachel Stine titled “Lack of ID’s an issue for recently released offenders,” almost 80% of individuals released from prison or jail do not have an official form of identification (Stine 2014). This lack of resources necessary to obtain photo ID’s stems from being arrested without it or family members who had possession of these necessary items lost them while offenders were incarcerated (Stine 2014). For an individual just being released from a facility without employment, the high costs of obtaining birth certificates and official IDs create a substantial barrier from active civic participation. They will also not always have housing or accounts in their names, requirements that are necessary in order to obtain a photo ID. In fact, former offenders who have been recently released from incarceration many times do not have access to transportation or even the funds needed for bus fare.

Anomie (Feelings of Disconnect)

Voter identification laws often discourage Black and Latinos from voting more than White communities (Barreto et al. 2019). As a group, Black voters have been targeted by numerous discriminatory practices such as poll taxes, literacy tests, or access to photo identification cards, therefore some Black people may feel disconnected and uninterested in voting (Sobel and Smith 2009). Experiences and stories passed down through generations, where people were not accepted or validated, and other every day microaggressions will lead to anomie (Martin 2000). Anomie describes when individuals feel disconnected from a society, in particular because of experiences that occurred because of structural conditions (Martin 2000). Emile Durkheim first coined this term and defined it as the inability of a person to accept certain values of their role in society (Zeit, Medalie, and Alexander 1969). For example, the feeling of disconnect or anomie might occur when an individual attempts to participate in a societal institution, such as the election process, and is discouraged by a negative experience such as

voter intimidation, lack of a photo ID, or a location in which to vote safely. In this case, these conditions could manifest into feelings of distrust within the voting process or the government itself (Martin 2000). In interviews with participants about why people chose to be active (or not) within their communities, one individual described her experience as “not part of society at all” but the ability to be involved in voting and activism made her feel more accepted within her community (Naples 1992).

Barriers within Polling Places

Lack of access to polling places and voter intimidation at these polling places is another way that individuals are discouraged or prohibited from voting. A polling place is a building where persons can vote in person, often located in churches, community buildings, colleges and universities, and other similar locations. Reuters reported in 2019 that states in the South have closed almost 1,200 polling locations since 2013 (Sullivan 2019). When a person who has limited transportation or resources necessary to travel, removing polling places close to them discourages them from voting. Voter intimidation is threats of some sort near or within a polling place. Although voter intimidation is illegal, it often occurs discreetly. Many times “ballot security” in the form of off duty cops or security guards is present at a polling place and the intention is to deter individuals from committing voter fraud, but in reality discourages individuals from voting. For former offenders or persons with a felony conviction who have had harmful interactions within the criminal justice system, coming in contact with a security type person while attempting to participate in the electoral process at the local community center can be very distressing. Reports of voter intimidation is widespread and extremely effective (Weiser and Gitlin 2016). Some examples of voter intimidation occurred at a polling place in Texas where activists “hovered” over voters as they voted and were disruptive in lines of voters.

Another example happened in 2008 in Michigan as police officers questioned voters in line and searched for outstanding warrants (Weiser and Gitlin 2016). All of these incidences contribute to voter suppression and lead individuals feeling unable or discouraged from voting.

Further Voting Suppression for Felons

Although voting suppression occurs for both individuals who have criminal backgrounds and those who do not, those with felony convictions experience these restrictions on a different level. Life as a person who has a felony on their permanent record, or who have been incarcerated at any level, have experiences different than those who do not share that experience. Being able to vote for a person who represents you personally as a convicted felon or person who has been incarcerated means having someone who understands or empathizes with those life experiences and who is willing to advocate for you within the larger society. Electoral representation within a person's community is vital to the success of policies and laws to support a former offender's pathway to life success. When access to this process is stripped from them, they may come away with feelings of disconnect, disillusion, or anomie. Persons who engage in the criminal justice system, whether voluntarily or not, are often left feeling excluded or the shame that is associated with prison or felony conviction (Uggen et al. 2004). Many times these experiences have been negative and have resulted in that disconnected feeling.

Labeling Theory

Depending on how society views felons can also have a negative effect on how these individuals view themselves and their place within society. When offenders have completed their sentences and are once again allowed to participate through voting, there might be reasons they choose not to. Labeling theory was introduced by Cooley and examines how a person sees themselves based on how others perceive them (Thompson 2014). Beliefs of others' perceptions of oneself may contribute to feelings of shame. When a person is disenfranchised or not allowed

to participate in a basic function of society, they forever see themselves as the “other” (Miller and Agnich 2015). Having these feelings may lead a person to form a sense of apathy towards a process that is no longer meant for them. Being labeled the “other” can lead to having negative feelings about oneself for years and society may do little to encourage felons from seeing themselves differently. Media is full of articles and television stories that depict felons or former offenders as evil individuals who cannot be trusted, creating a reinforcement of these negative feelings and labels. This kind of label may increase the beliefs that one is unwelcome or accepted in their community and, therefore, leads the to feel disconnected from the electoral process.

Research shows that persons who have felony convictions and have served time have less interest in voting (Gerber et al. 2017). These people often distrust the political system and feel disconnected from civic engagement and the election process. Data gathered from over thirty thousand individuals who have been incarcerated in Pennsylvania shows that voting participation decreases a small amount after release (Gerber et al. 2017). Although the results did not show a vast decrease from one election to the next, data gathered within the survey showed that many of these individuals had been in contact with the criminal justice system numerous times before. These interactions were believed to have contributed to the general disinterest in voting even prior to incarceration (Gerber et al. 2017).

While former offenders may feel distant from the electoral process, their family members may also be wary of the system (Hedwig, Porter, and Comfort 2014). In a study known as “The Relate Project,” researchers interviewed 172 couples in which the male identifying partner had been recently released from prison. These individuals were asked about their various experiences involving both the criminal justice and political systems. These individuals voiced

that they often faced daily struggles while their loved ones are incarcerated, and this led to a decrease in their interest in anything to do with the political system. Families often share their interest in voting and when a parent or loved one is removed from the household, those conversations may not be present (Hedwig et al. 2014).

Impact of Voter Disenfranchisement and Suppression

Voter disenfranchisement and suppression not only affects the individuals who are targeted but also the communities they reside in. Society is made up of the collection of individuals and all who contribute to the greater good of the community by shopping, working, living, serving, and interacting with each other. Voter disenfranchisement and suppression limits the voices heard within these communities and does not allow them to decide for themselves how they want to live and interact with each other. These individuals lose the representation they need and the experiences and identities that each one of them hold to make their community stronger. Everyone loses when one person feel unaccepted, unheard, or that they do not belong.

For many persons who have been convicted of a felony, voting is something they will never be able to participate in again, even if they felt inclined to participate. Barring a person from voting is used as a deterrence within the criminal justice system in the hopes that it will discourage persons from committing crimes (van den Bergh 2016). To bar a person permanently from voting, even after they have served their time, sends an extreme message--society expects you to contribute, but your voice is never heard again. This notion of a “civil death destroys the legal capacity of the individual forcing them into permanent exclusion from the civic order” (Miller and Spillane 2012:407). Although these individuals face barriers meant to deter them from voting and becoming more civically engaged, many choose to overcome these obstacles (Drucker and Barreras 2005). Data collected from 138 persons who had been involved with the

criminal justice system in New York and 78 individuals from Ohio showed that while over two thirds of participants had lost many years of their voting lives to incarceration or felony conviction, many still had an interest in voting and political issues (Drucker and Barreras 2005).

THEORY

Citizenship Theory and Civic Engagement

One theory that is used to defend the practice of disenfranchisement is the republicanism aspect of citizenship theory. T.H. Marshall introduced the concept of citizenship theory in his essay *Citizenship and Social Class* in 1950 (Turner 2009). He was interested in social citizenship and how rights and obligations of members of society allow them access to resources and privileges (Turner 2009). This theory holds that persons who have been convicted of committing a crime have broken the social bond they hold with society, and they can no longer be trusted to participate within the voting system (Schall 2006). Persons who support felon disenfranchisement not only believe former offenders do not have the moral capability to vote, but they also believe they are sending a clear deterrent to society as a whole (Schall 2006). The message seems to be: if you are not convicted of a crime, you are valued and trusted to participate in society, but if you have committed a crime, you will be punished forever, and this will serve as a reminder for others to not commit crimes. Although this theory has many critics, for persons who have felony convictions on their records it is unfortunately still a reality they must come to terms with. For individuals within the criminal justice system who have felt this disconnect, whether permanent or temporary, their ability or desire to participate within society or their civic engagement is severely affected.

Civic engagement can come in various forms and is essential to a productive society. For some, civic engagement is defined as a community service, a way for individuals to give back to

their communities in a voluntary fashion (Adler and Goggin 2005). Being involved through civic engagement within a person's communities greatly contributes to their view of citizenship and sense of belonging, including volunteering as a coach or teacher's aide in a child's school. For others, civic engagement can be described as an action taken collectively in order to make improvements to society, where individuals volunteer in collaboration with each other in order to better a community (Adler and Goggin 2005). For example, donating time or labor for a community or neighborhood clean-up. One other form of civic engagement can be seen through involvement in politics and includes a public leadership component (Adler and Goggin 2005). School board members, county commissioners, town trustees or city board members are all examples of individuals participating in civic engagement. Voting can also be viewed as a major indicator of civic engagement. Researchers created a survey in 2001 that listed nineteen "core indicators of engagement" and surveyed over 3,200 Americans to evaluate their own civic engagement (Adler and Goggin 2005). The list included regular voting, campaign contributions, contacting of officials, and canvassing for local elections. More than half of those surveyed viewed themselves as engaged within society because they were involved in the electoral process at some level (Adler and Goggin 2005).

Social Conflict Theory

As more persons of color are convicted of felonies, the less representation they see within their communities. Social conflict theory is defined by Lewis Coser as "a struggle over values or claims to status, power, and scarce resources" (Oberschall 1978:291). Karl Marx created the theory with the concept that society is forever in a state of conflict. Social conflict theory can be applied in connection with disenfranchisement and voter intimidation because of the struggle that can be found within the government and who is elected. Persons are elected by the people; not being able to participate in elections due to disenfranchisement, individuals are not able to vote

to elect officials who will best represent their communities and identities. Voter intimidation directly affects those persons attempting to gain access to power, status, and resources found within the election process because they are deterred from voting at all.

The struggle ensues as former offenders are restricted access to representation through the electoral process. By not being able to participate in elections, individuals are not able to vote to elect officials who will best represent their communities and identities. These same individuals will not be able to vote into place important tax laws which allow for funding for schools, fire departments, parks, and other community types of services. Many times, these individuals are already in lower income areas and access to these vital resources is already limited. For many persons of color who reside in lower income neighborhoods, their voice has never felt heard within the political process (Ademiluyi 2010). Advocates for persons within these communities argue that removing this basic right of representation, even if only temporarily, causes extreme harm (van den Bergh 2016). Individuals with felony convictions who struggle to regain a position within society feel more alienated and possibilities of recidivism increase (van den Bergh 2016).

Another important aspect of voting involves the ability to vote into office judges, police chiefs, and district attorneys. These elected officials have a direct impact on communities affected by incarceration and felony conviction. As noted above, there are numerous barriers a person who has been convicted of a felony crime must overcome in order vote (e.g., struggles to find employment, housing, and maintaining connections with family). Many times, these obstacles are hidden but enforced by policies and laws that allow employers and landlords the power to discriminate against a person based on their criminal history (Thompson 2004). In order to achieve these basic requirements to survive, a person has to constantly be working and

thinking about their every action. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, persons have basic needs they require to be motivated to participate within society (Cherry 2020). Food, shelter, employment, and connection with family and friends are the foundation of all human requirements and if these are not met, prioritization of voting will not occur.

Social Control Theory

Another barrier found within the criminal justice system that impacts individuals and their decisions on whether to participate in the voting process is social control. Many times officers within the system who are supervising individuals will be more concerned with maintaining control over offenders than encouraging them to become more active within society. This could come in the form of over-policing from parole or probation officers, limiting access to a former offenders' family members and friends, and constant contact leaving little time for a felon to get reacquainted back into society.

Social control theory was introduced in 1969 by theorist Travis Hirschi. Hirschi believed that there were four key points that decided whether a person could have the capacity to commit a crime. These would be attachment, commitments, involvement, and belief (Hirschi 1986/2017). Hirschi stated that a person's attachments or connections to a person or institution, or lack thereof, would determine whether they would be a criminal (Hirschi 1986/2017). The theory also states that an individual's commitment to maintaining conventional status quo or social norms would also keep them from committing a crime (Hirschi 1986/2017). How this transfers from the parole or probation office to the person being supervised comes in the form of enlisting offenders in cognitive thinking classes, maintaining their sobriety, and alienating them from family and community connections that might be perceived as criminally motivated.

Philosopher Michel Foucault discussed the social control found within the carceral system (Foucault 1977). Foucault's theory examines how the criminal justice system creates a

sense of self supervision within the facility walls and outside the prison walls within society (Foucault 1977). While incarcerated, individuals are under constant surveillance by correctional officers and surveillance cameras. Bentham's (Britannica n.d.) metaphor of the panopticon is introduced and described as a circular building in the center of the cell or pod where inmates can be constantly under supervision but cannot necessarily see who is watching them (Foucault 1977). This type of supervision leaves offenders feeling as if they are always being watched and it becomes an almost second nature to be supervised and to eventually supervise oneself.

When an offender paroled or a person convicted of an offense enters parole or probation, they are also subject to constant supervision. Since the cameras and correctional officers are not constantly present, parole and probation officers and case managers instill a sense of fear and constant reminding of consequences if an offender does something that is "against the rules." Devices like ankle monitors, location checks, and other GPS devices allow offenders' locations to be known at all times and that feeling of being supervised. Even when an offender completes their sentence, it can take many years before this feeling of being watched or constantly watching oneself will cease to exist. Foucault (1977) discusses how society also instills this same kind of self-supervision into individuals in a way for social norms to be maintained. This type of social control found within the judicial system just sets up the policing that these individuals do for the remainder of their lives sometimes.

While many times these actions may seem productive, they add to the growing list of activities a former incarcerated person must achieve in order to be "successful" on their parole or probation. When one is constantly being policed, it is difficult to be involved in anything outside of the system, which is the ultimate goal. More beneficial ways to implement this form of social control would be to take the four elements of social control theory and reconstruct them to allow

felons to be more productive within their own communities and belief systems. Connections or attachments to previous family members and communities may provide an ex-offender a social network that could enable them to better find employment and housing, some of the hardest things for these individuals to accomplish. When these commitments are developed from the offenders' viewpoint instead of society's social norms, it is likely to create a social system in which people are more comfortable and able to create their own life. Involvement should include more acceptance within society, such as the encouragement of voting and looking for representation within the government that ultimately has control over your life.

There are so many ways the criminal justice can be revisited in order to fully allow a person to integrate back into society and to be successful in their own way. Voting is an important part of this integration and should be more encouraged to felons within the criminal justice system and society as a whole. This research will show that there are multiple social structures in place that inhibit individuals from fully participating in the electoral process in the United States and that these structures are intentional about the harm they are causing.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

In order to answer the question of how experiences that former offenders have within the criminal justice system affects their desire or ability to participate in the voting process, I have conducted five interviews with persons involved within the criminal justice system at some level. One major reason a researcher chooses to do qualitative over quantitative research is the ability to capture participant experiences. Interviews allow the participants' voices to be present and give the researcher the opportunity to observe the entirety of a situation (Ochieng 2009). When doing qualitative research, interviews and focus groups are the most common practice in gathering data. This type of data gathering requires ample time and participants. Gathering qualitative data allows for the individuals experiences to contribute to the research being done. Because of stigmas surrounding persons with felony convictions, finding persons interested in being interviewed could prove to be difficult. Some ways to counter this include knowing the system, establishing contacts within the criminal justice system, and creating mutual goals with all persons involved in the research project (Apa et al. 2012).

RECRUITMENT AND SAMPLING

As a person who has been involved in the criminal justice system, I felt confident in being able to gain participants and their cooperation. Insider status is a term used with research to describe the relationship between the researcher and the participant involved. There are three factors when discussing insider status and they include power, knowledge, and understanding of history and culture of the persons being studied (Rabe 2003). Power looks at the dimensions of

the identities involved and allows for trust to be built. Knowledge of the system or institution involved allows for common understanding that typically occurs when persons have familiarity (Rabe 2003). Understanding of the culture and history involved with the research being conducted allows for “casual explanation” (Rabe 2003), something that is desired with social research (Rabe 2003).

I contacted connections I obtained via social media and organizations I acquainted myself with since my involvement within the criminal justice system. I understand that being a person who has been incarcerated and having a felony conviction might prove to be an obstacle, and I used social connections I have within the system to move forward with my research. While working with these organizations, I was able to establish additional contacts, recruit participants, and create mutual goals. I was also able to obtain IRB approval and began conducting interviews during the Spring of 2021. Appendix A shows the flyer that was sent out to various social media pages and emailed to contacts I had within the system.

The sample population I included were from a diverse population including race, gender, age, and employment status. I left the survey questions about race open, with the option for individuals to self-identify, ensuring the respondents felt their voice was heard, and they were being accurately represented. One respondent identifies as Black, one as African American, one as Puerto Rican, one as Hispanic, and the last one as White. Their ages range from 28 to 62 years old and include two men and three women. Four of the five participants are employed, and one is retired. They live in various areas of the country; some reside in smaller towns while others live in bigger cities. They all have varying levels of education, some with college degrees and others without. All five persons interviewed have been involved with the criminal justice system at some level, with different amounts of time served, and varying types of supervision

and facilities incarcerated in. I have also included their voting activity and some of the reasons why they chose to vote in the most previous election. I feel this sample pool is a reflection of individuals who have been involved in the criminal justice system. Their various identities also provided me with varying degrees of experience and gave voice to their individual communities and lived experiences. Table 2 below includes demographics and participants anonymous names.

Table 2 – Demographics of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Employment Status	Current Living Situation	Felony Conviction	Facility Incarcerated	Voted in Previous Election
Joelle	28	Woman	Black / African American	Self Employed	Single / Roommates	No	Jail	Yes
Julio	52	Man	Puerto Rican	Full Time	Married	Yes	Community Corrections	Yes
Arnold	39	Man	Black	Full Time	Living alone	Yes	Prison/Work Release	Yes
Sasha	53	Woman	White	Part Time	Living with family	Yes	Jail/Prison/Community Corrections	Yes
Betty	62	Woman	Hispanic	Retired	Living alone	Yes	Prison/Community Corrections	Yes

Interviewing

I constructed a short survey for participants to complete, consisting of basic demographics, family and community involvement and support, voting preferences and involvement, open-ended questions concerning why they did or didn't vote in the most recent election, and a request to participate in a follow-up interview. This survey was conducted via Qualtrics and distributed online and through email. I also contacted Greeley probation, Weld County parole, and Community Corrections to inquire on distribution of this survey. Appendix B shows the questions asked on the survey prior to the interview being conducted.

I conducted interviews with these five persons. Because of Covid 19 and safety precautions, these interviews were conducted via Zoom and over the phone. Interviews were

recorded and transcribed in full; participants' names were changed to protect their confidentiality. Participants were asked to give their consent to the interview and were informed of their confidentiality and right to refuse any portion of the interview at any time. Appendix C shows the consent form that was read and accepted by all persons being interviewed. Questions asked were similar to survey but more in-depth. The questions explored the extent to which participants voted in elections prior to their conviction, their access to electoral participation while in the system, as well as their experiences and beliefs about participating in elections upon completion of their sentence.

Studies show that individuals are influenced to vote or not vote by family and community members (White 2018). Therefore, I also asked questions about family participation within the voting process, including whether their family members voted, were they encouraged to vote by family members, access of family members to vote, and overall discussions or concerns from family members about voting and elections. Questions about feelings of their ancestors not being allowed to vote were also asked and if this affected their involvement in the electoral process.

Some of the other questions I asked involved the participants' feelings of being supported by any certain political party and if they felt they had the resources and information necessary to vote. I inquired if they felt supported from the criminal justice system to vote or regain their access to voting once their sentences was completed (e.g., information from parole and probation officers, case managers, or any other person in a position of authority within the system). I also asked what other aspects of their reentry into society proved difficult and made voting more unattainable or undesirable. See Appendix E for full interview guide.

ANALYSIS

Once my data were gathered, I collected the data from the survey using qualitative data analysis software in order to create a demographics table. I then transcribed all five interviews and coded for themes including: feeling not represented or heard, lack of access, lack of support within the criminal justice system, other priorities coming before voting, lack of support or interest from family members and community, and disinterest. I identified four common themes throughout all five interviews – experiences of social control within the criminal justice system, necessity of prioritizing basic needs while under supervision, lack of representation, support, or resources from any particular political official or party, and overcoming of these obstacles by individuals in order to regain their right to vote.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Four findings were consistent throughout the five interviews conducted: 1) experiences of social control within the criminal justice system; 2) the necessity of prioritizing basic needs while in the criminal justice system; 3) the lack of representation, resources, or support from political parties or participants, and 4) community and family support in order to overcome barriers.

SOCIAL CONTROL WITHIN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

The first finding I will discuss concerns the social control displayed by parole and probation officers and case managers within the criminal justice system. As explained previously, social control is used within the system as an explanation for why offenders commit crimes (Hirschi 1986/2017). Officials believe if they can maintain control of an individual, they will have little time for anything that is considered detrimental to their success upon release. Participants revealed that once they were released from incarceration and maintaining visits with parole and/or probation officers, they experience feelings of being controlled while under supervision. This often times came in the form of multiple meetings and reminders about completing classes, submitting to weekly and sometimes daily breathalyzers, and urine analysis, threats of association, home visits, and making sure their location is known at all times. The social control from within the supervision in the criminal justice system produces a barrier and leaves little time for things considered productive for a member of society, including voting. Social control during meetings and other interactions pose additional barriers as officials are not

aware of resources available or fail to offer assistance to the necessary information needed for an offender to vote once they have completed their sentence. For many persons who have felony convictions and/or have been incarcerated, simply obtaining the right to vote again is not always an option. Others are not even aware that their conviction may result in them permanently losing their right to vote. In the experiences of the five persons interviewed, maintaining social control was the ultimate objective of supervising officials, and no one working within the criminal justice system offered any information about their voting options. Only one individual (Sasha), was given the information needed to regain her right to vote after she asked for it.

In one participant's experience, agents of the criminal justice system were not able to or were uninterested in providing information needed about voting rights. Even when the information was requested, the participant's parole officer seemed more interested in policing her actions rather than supporting her future goals. These experiences are important to include because it shows that many times the criminal justice system and the officers involved are more interested in maintaining social control of an individual than they are in providing them access to resources to help them integrate better into society. Sasha (White, woman, 53) remembers conversations she had with her case manager while serving out a sentence in community corrections. She explains,

I thought I should be eligible to vote once I had finished my sentence, but when asking my case manager she didn't know what I would have to do. She knew a lot about making sure I filed my taxes, kept my room clean, and stayed employed but nothing about when I could vote again. And she didn't seem interested in finding out for me (Sasha, White, woman, 53).

Sasha also remembered speaking to her parole officer about voting once she completed her sentence and began parole, and he didn't offer much more support. She notes,

He was kind of like the halfway house, make sure you keep a job, do your BA's¹ and UA's², and go to meetings but nothing about voting. He just said he would give me more information as my time got closer and I never heard anything else, and honestly I quit asking (Sasha, White, woman, 53).

These quotes demonstrate the social control that both Sasha's case manager and parole officers were displaying in an effort to keep her occupied and "under control". Social control theory is based on the belief that an individual will be more inclined to participate within social norms if they have a connection or involvement within society (Hirschi 1986/2017). Attending meetings and maintaining employment was key to Sasha's success, according to her parole officer. Sasha also displayed a feeling of disinterest from her parole officer which could lead to the feeling of powerlessness and anomie which is explained earlier (Zeitl et al. 1969).

Julio (Puerto Rican, man, 52) had a very similar experience. When asked if his probation officer or case managers showed interest in him retaining his right to vote he said,

I had so many case managers and probation officers, none of them ever said anything about my right to vote when I got out. They just wanted my money for restitution and rent. Make sure you keep current on your child support was all I ever heard (Julio, Puerto Rican, man, 52).

Julio had been in and out the system most of his young adult life and so voting was something that he had not been exposed to nor something anyone in the system took the time to explain.

During his time within community corrections and jail he was able to take numerous classes that helped him maintain his sobriety, worked on cognitive thinking skills, and anger

¹ Breathalyzer

² Urine Analysis

management but nothing that worked on reentering society on a level that was expected to regain some normalcy. When asked what he did during his time in the form of rehabilitation, Julio replied,

I mainly took classes to keep me from using drugs, updating my resume, or to help me make better choices. It would have maybe been helpful to have a class that showed me the benefits of voting and what I could do about it once I did my time (Julio, Puerto Rican, man, 52).

Again, Julio's case manager was displaying the practiced rule of social control theory in an attempt to keep Julio from using drugs again, maintaining employment, or using the cognitive thinking skills he was receiving in the numerous classes he attended weekly. Julio's case manager in these instances was also implementing the supervision technique that Foucault (1977) explained as a way for society to self-supervise themselves, beginning with the constant connection to supervision while finishing out an offender's sentence. By installing the feeling of always being watched, or attending meetings, an individual automatically begins to police themselves and others around them; Foucault (1977) believed this was also a way for society to maintain various social norms.

For Arnold (Black, man, 39) working full time, support could not be found during incarceration nor following his release. When asked how his access to voting was addressed during his reentry into society he stated, "I served six years in prison and never heard anything about my voting rights. My parole officer just wanted to make sure I had a job, that I stayed out of trouble, and that I came to meetings." Arnold's experience is far from isolated and only shows the necessity for supervisors, probation and parole officers, within the criminal justice system to maintain social control of the persons they are helping to integrate back into society.

Arnold's parole officer was also implementing social control theory, primarily because of the amount of time served and the belief that connection and involvement was key to his ability to remain a productive member of society (Hirschi 1986/2017).

For Joelle (Black/African American, woman, 28), just beginning her journey within the criminal justice system, social control was displayed immediately after arrest and during her short stay in jail. Joelle explains,

I had never been to jail before that point, but I didn't get any information. I wasn't given any medication or anything. Anytime I would ask questions about what I was being charged for they would say they didn't know, or I would find out soon. I had two calls while I was there, and I had to beg for them (Joelle, Black/African American, woman, 28).

This quote shows that control of an individual's entire position within the criminal justice system is based on the belief of connection and involvement. The officers involved during Joelle's booking experience show control of her medication for anxiety, phone calls, and any information given to her. Officers believe breaking the former connection and involvement is needed in order to maintain new practices in an offenders, or even an accused, individual's life.

Eventually Joelle was able to contact someone to bail her out. She explains how her release went,

Upon my release, the last room I went to, they finally shared what my charges were. They released me and gave me a public defender and a court date. I called her the very next day and she explained to me that that is no longer my court date. I was supposed to get a new one and I am still waiting my court date. But I don't have any updates. I have called (my public defender) five times and she doesn't have anything new (Joelle, Black/African American, woman, 28).

This quote demonstrates the social control involved within the criminal justice system—Joelle was unable to receive any answers upon release and then fewer from her assigned public defender. The lack of resources or answers contributes to the feeling of being powerless and the

absence of a court date only reinforces the self-supervision Foucault (1977) describes within the criminal justice system. Similarly, although Joelle was just entering the criminal justice system, she was aware of the implications already. She explains,

I know more people than not that have been involved with the criminal justice system. Both of my brothers have been involved, I have two uncles that have been involved. My mother even was accused of child abuse when my brother was in high school and she was prosecuted. More than half of my family has been involved along with the law and it's been overwhelmingly negative (Joelle, Black/African American, woman, 28).

This quote shows how social control is maintained within communities and how the self-supervision Foucault (1977) describes can be passed on to further generations. Joelle grew up in a household that had been involved in the criminal justice system, and she had already begun to be aware of how they would, and were, affecting her life.

Maintaining control is key to success within the criminal justice system. As displayed with the above findings, the participants shared interactions with their parole officers or case managers that contained instances of social control in an effort to keep them involved and connected. These findings show that control is instilled by authorities from the beginning and first contact with police or other criminal justice agent and continues until an individual is released after serving their time. Social control theory is based on the belief that if an individual or offender can maintain connection and involvement and find meaning or something to believe in, they will be successful in their reentry to society (Hirschi 1986/2017). Many times though, this leaves individuals with little time to perform civic duties, such as voting. The constant supervision and control also contributes to the self-supervision that Foucault introduced in the theory of the panopticon and maintaining of social norms (Foucault 1977). These findings demonstrate how social control and self-supervision can become barriers to an individual's ability to become involved in the election process.

PRIORITIZING BASIC NEEDS

For many within society, obtaining employment, housing, and financial stability is a struggle but something that is normally simple to obtain. For persons who have been convicted of a felony offense and/or have been incarcerated, these tasks are sometimes impossible and very overwhelming. Many businesses refuse to hire felons and those that do, offer lower paid positions and make felons feel like they are doing them a favor in employing them. These lower paid positions hinder financial stability and require an offender to sometimes work two or three jobs. Housing is not available to many persons with a felony conviction and with the lack of employment and financial stability, is something that is not always even accomplished. In order to maintain success within the criminal justice, and even avoid being regressed or being placed back into a facility, offenders must prioritize their basic needs over anything else considered productive within a society. Social conflict theory demonstrates that the basic need to survive will supersede other societal requirements (Oberschall 1978). Food and shelter are required to survive, and employment and housing are ways to fulfill these requirements. These needs could also include maintaining court appointments, supervised child visits, numerous meetings with case managers and parole officers, and simply learning how to navigate a society that a person might have not been involved in for a certain amount of time. These requirements take up the majority of a person's time and leave little room for voting or even an interest in the election process.

For many persons participating within the criminal justice system, maintaining employment and finding somewhere to live takes up the majority of their time already. Voting will often be the last thing they think about and supervisors and officials within the system seem to not be ready to offer assistance. Sasha (White, woman, 53) voiced her feelings by saying, "I hoped I would be able to vote again, but I had so many other things to think about. I had lost so

much already, and I had so much to try to get back.” This quote exemplifies the hierarchy of needs, introduced by Abraham Maslow in 1943, and how so many other things become more priority than voting. The hierarchy of needs is a five-level tier that includes basic needs such as food, water, warmth, and rest and how these needs must be met before an individual can successfully move on to the next level (McLeod 2018). Progress found within this structure can also be disrupted by occurrences of loss of job, divorce, or a felony conviction (McLeod 2018). Social conflict theory incorporates this model and show how achieving basic necessities in order to access power and resources times take precedent over other aspects of life and (Oberschall 1978). It was more important for Sasha (White, woman, 53) to regain other parts of her life, and voting seemed to be one more thing that did not have priority over other aspects of her life. Without support from the supervising officers in her life, who were working to maintain social control, it was one of the last things she had time to think about.

For one individual who was just beginning her journey within the criminal justice system, Joelle (Black/African American, woman, 28) found it hard to even get basic questions answered, let alone how a conviction could potentially affect her entire life. Joelle describes her first experiences after being arrested extremely traumatic. She states,

I went to jail on February 8th, and I was released a week later. I was kept in a holding cell and I expressed to the intake folks my anxiety levels and told them I take this anxiety medication and asked if there was any way I could get something. I was put on suicide watch and so during the time that I was there I wasn't really made aware of nothing (Joelle, Black/African American, woman, 28).

This quote from Joelle demonstrates the basic need to survive, explained by Karl Marx and social theory (Oberschall, 1978). She was aware of her anxiety and was not allowed to obtain medication to control it or information on how to obtain it. Officers within the system took this need that she had and placed her under extreme supervision without any explanation.

When asked if voting was something she had thought about previously, before her arrest, she stated,

I do have to think about it. I have siblings who have to think about it, cause when it is close to home you think about it more different. I have to process my privilege because it is now a privilege for me. Because someone has a decision or makes a decision we all make mistakes we all do things but now because they do a certain thing they have been completely damned or eternally punished for mistakes (Joelle, Black/African American, woman, 28).

This quote shows the processing that Joelle is doing within herself and how the one mistake that was made could affect her entire life. She is also beginning to understand her privilege within the system without a felony conviction and how this could change. Social conflict theory addresses power, access to resources, and how this is power is used to maintain the status quo (Oberschall 1978). Even though Joelle understands how a felony conviction could impact her access to necessary resources, based on her brothers' experiences, she had to think about it differently based on her own life.

For another individual no support was initially offered and only after asking was she able to get information from her parole officer about voting. Betty, a Hispanic retired woman in her 60's, asked her parole officer during one of their meetings when she could begin to vote again. She shared the reaction she received from him, initially showing surprise that she was even interested. According to Betty (Hispanic, woman, 62), "Once I got out that was one of my first questions to my parole officer. I asked him and he said, 'Wow a lot of people they don't care. That's wonderful, let me get you all the information.'" Betty's experience in this instance and her parole officer's response reveal a few things—many parolees have never thought about voting once they are released, which could happen for many reasons, including needing employment and housing before voting. Also, some individuals face a lack of interest prior to incarceration which will be explained within the next finding.

Betty (Hispanic, woman, 62) understood that her parole officer was there to help her integrate back into society. According to her,

Your parole officer is there to ask and answer questions. Mine was fantastic but he also saw in me that I wanted to resume and not repeat what I had did to be in prison. That I wanted a normal life. It was my given right and I wanted it (Betty, Hispanic, woman, 62).

Betty participated in the election process before incarceration and her felony conviction. When asked why she was persistent in getting information from her parole officer about voting she replied, “Well I knew how to do that (vote), I just had to ask if I could, because I thought with a felony maybe I never could.” These quotes show that Betty was aware of her position in society, which likely stems from community and family support, which will be discussed in further findings. Although Betty understood her rights, she also was not positive on how voting would be allowed for her in the future.

In summary of this finding of prioritizing needs, four of the five participants revealed they were concerned about meeting their basic needs and regaining a place within society over voting. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs begins by addressing the needs of shelter, food, and warmth and moves up to include feelings of safety, and feelings of accomplishment (McLeod 2018). This model also includes the need for individuals to feel included and a sense of prestige or power over one’s own life (McLeod 2018). When an offender lacks access to resources in order to gain employment and housing, basic necessities, they will not “move up” the ladder with the final goal of achieving their full potential which includes the desire to participate within society and be civically engaged.

LACK OF REPRESENTATION OR SUPPORT FROM POLITICAL PARTIES

The third finding in my research involves lack of representation or support from political parties. Of the five persons interviewed, none of them felt they were really represented or supported by any person running for office. None of them felt a deep connection with any particular party or their platform. This feeling is not unusual for many persons in the United States, even those who haven't been involved in the criminal justice system. In an article written by Lisa Hill in 2006 titled "Low Voter Turnout in the United States, Is Compulsory Voting a Viable Solution?", the author states that most elections in the United States have only thirty to fifty percent voter turnout (Hill 2006). Hill goes on to explain that low voter turnout could occur for various reasons including cynicism about politicians and politics in general (Hill 2006). The individuals I interviewed seemed to share similar feelings as those that are described in the above article, a distrust in the system and the persons involved.

However, all these participants seemed to understand the importance of the process even if it didn't always make sense or serve a purpose for them. Often individuals choose not to participate in the electoral process because of lack of representation and resource within their communities or failure of any political candidate when addressing an individual's particular needs or struggles (Bauböck 2005). For many persons living in the United States, participating in the election process can feel disconnected. Many times resources, such as information about candidates or bills being proposed, are confusing and hard to come by. More national elections will provide details about the major players being elected but little is said about the more local elections, the ones that seem to really make a difference in a person's life or community.

Julio (Puerto Rican, man, 52) has lived in the United States his entire life. He voiced that until meeting his wife later in life he never had a desire to vote. When asked why he didn't vote

he simply stated “I honestly never thought about it. I really didn’t care.” Upon further questioning some of the reasons became more apparent. Julio was born in the United States and had family who was still struggling in Puerto Rico following the devastation of hurricanes in recent years. When I inquired what he would want to hear from a political leader or party to feel like his vote or voice meant something, he said “If they showed they believed in my values and showed they supported Puerto Rican persons.” When asked what this would look like he replied, “Like rebuilding Puerto Rico after the hurricane, they are too busy taking care of the rest of the world.” Julio also voiced that most politicians did not seem to care much about them or their lives, stating “Just their lack of interest. They really seem like they could care less about me, my life, or my problems.” And even though Julio didn’t feel a large amount of support from any certain party or individual, he realized the process still served a purpose, and he still felt frustration. According to Julio, “I have noticed that voting doesn’t really change anything, nothing is happening. I just know it’s my right as an American. But not sure about anything else. “ When asked how he decides to vote he replied, “I read the books they send in the mail. I guess just go with the other persons, and my gut feeling.”

Julio’s (Puerto Rican, man, 52) responses above reflect the disconnect that many marginalized individuals feel from the election process and the officials attempting to obtain a political office. Martin (2000) discusses four aspects of anomie which includes biology, social, psychological, and transpersonal degrees (Wilber 1998). He referenced Ken Wilber who introduced the theory, connected to anomie, that an individual can sometimes become disconnected from society (Martin 2000). Julio’s responses perfectly reflect the feeling of elected officials or political parties not showing value in things that were important to him, the rebuilding of Puerto Rico for example. This theory of the four aspects of anomie and the

disconnectedness also connect well with Maslow's hierarchy and how when individuals feel their basic necessities are not being met, they are unable to proceed "upward" (McLeod 2018).

Joelle (Black/African American, woman, 28) also shared that she never felt any support from any particular political party. When questioned what she, as a Black woman, would need to hear to feel supported she responded,

What I know is when people are convincing you to vote for them and they are targeting black communities, 1 or 2 % actually are addressing what the black population needs overwhelmingly and the only thing I haven't heard was reparations. History is then so brutally detrimental to this population (Black communities), I think Joe Biden was probably the first person in a while who is talking about reparations (Joelle, Black/African American, woman, 28).

This quote addresses how individuals within a community feel lack of support from the political system. Joelle (Black/African American, woman, 28) felt her community was being targeted because of the power within their vote, but political leaders were really not addressing the issues found within these same communities. Having found some words from one candidate gave Joelle some encouragement she hadn't seen from anyone else. Joelle also went on to explain more on what she looked for in a political representative. Joelle's (Black/African American, woman, 28) response is also similar to Julio's (Puerto Rican, man, 52) in this section as it shows a disconnect from society because of her Black communities voice not being heard or valued until more recently. Her mention of reparations connects back to Maslow and the need to have basic necessities met in order to fully function within society. Similarly, Joelle explains,

As a politician, you step up and you give your target audience, you start to repair the damage that has been done. That is the only way, and that is not happening when it comes to most politicians. You're not trying to heal what has been done. You're trying to put a band aid over a bullet hole (Joelle, Black/African American, woman, 28).

Again, these feelings of lack of support are found from the individuals interviewed.

Joelle had only started her journey within the criminal justice system but already felt the

electoral system was not showing the support she needed to participate. Lack of support from political parties comes in many forms and greatly contributes to feelings of disconnect from society from many individuals.

One other way is the resources that are available to educate an individual when they vote. Joelle (Black/African American, woman, 28), who is also a college graduate with a masters degree also spoke on the difficulty of finding resources from any certain political leader or party surrounding the election process within her community. The following quote addresses the lack of resources that have been traditionally not available to Joelle's community and how even with her access to post-secondary education, she still struggled to make what she felt were informed decisions. When prompted to provide more information on how Joelle felt concerning information she received while attending college, somewhere she felt she should have been more adequately prepared to participate an election at. She explains,

I don't believe the resources that are provided in the community, particularly mine, have been sufficient and are not equitable. I have voted since the Obama election and I believe the presidential election you get a little more resources for more people. I was also at a university and had more access for presidential but it's the local that becomes more complicated in terms of accessibility because you often don't really know how to. I struggled as an individual who has a higher level of education and I even took about two hours to process through what it was to vote on a local level because I don't have an education to know what that looked like from a micro level and how the discussions were happening. (Joelle Black/African American, woman, 28)

Joelle's response is again an example of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, referring to the third and fourth levels, belongness and prestige (McLeod 2018). Joelle achieved a Masters degree, typically a sign of prestige or the ability to acquire more power or access to resources, but because basic needs were not being met within her community barriers to this were in place.

Joelle's (Black/African American, woman, 28) experiences also connect to social conflict theory because of the desire to acquire education in order to obtain resources to be successful and thrive in our society. Joelle also went on to explain the difference in communities as she had moved from a smaller rural college town to a bigger urban city.

I did my research for this past local election, and it took time and understanding of who the person is you are about to vote in and where do you go. What laws are the about to put in place? I feel there is a major disconnect in providing the proper resources, transportation, information about what needs to happen, and it looks very different from presidential to local. Presidential people are out, they are providing transportation for you to get to the polls where there still is discrepancy depending on where you live. But for local there is none of that. There are no rides, there is no door knocking, just have to be aware. (Joelle, Black/African American, woman, 28)

Joelle's feelings are also connected to offenders' feelings of struggling to prioritize voting among all the other things they must accomplish while they are in the system, which falls within the scope of Maslow's hierarchy model (McLeod 2018). For Joelle, she was trying to make sure she kept her court date and voting was one more thing she might not be able to find time to do and when information was so hard to come by, it might not happen. As explained in the previous finding, persons who have been recently released from incarceration must find housing and employment in a system who continues to place obstacles in their way. Voting is often the lack thing on their list of things to accomplish. When connecting these barriers in place to prevent individuals from voting to feelings of not being heard, supported, or represented anyway many would question the need or desire to participate. These feelings of disconnect can be directly attributed to anomie and how intertwined this is with the hierarchy of needs.

Another participant revealed that she also didn't feel supported by either party. Betty (Hispanic, woman, 62) shared that she felt the entire system was a game and described it like this,

I think both sides are being more strategic as far as I don't feel that the people are the first concern. I feel like we've been in a game where we are the pawns you know, and we get as much information as they deem necessary. (Betty, Hispanic, woman, 62)

Betty also described how she first decided what party she would vote with and how this process changed as she grew older,

I was born into the Democrats party so that's where I go with the way I've always gone. As I got older I got more discerning about what was going on in each party. I would have not hesitated to vote for the other party or parties if they were gonna be more helpful. So, I didn't stick to a party just because. (Betty, Hispanic, woman, 62)

Betty's responses above show a disconnect from politics because of their lack of empathy for her community. This sentiment is similar to the feelings Joelle and Julio voiced in this section, the lack of support from elected officials for their individual communities. Anomie can be attributed as these feelings when social structures in place fail to provide necessary resources to marginalized communities. And Betty's reference to "being pawns" demonstrates her feelings of not feeling included or important which can be placed on the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs as something that is necessary in order for an individual to feel valued in a society (McLeod 2018).

For Sasha (White, woman, 53), voting had always been part of her life, but her choices had changed as she grew older. In Sasha's words,

I was raised in a super Conservative household and you just voted Republican. I don't even remember talking about it with my family, it just was. I know it never felt like there was enough information out there to make decisions about more local things. (Sasha, White, woman, 53)

Her journey through the criminal justice system and time in prison helped her to find more progressive views. When asked how these changes occurred, she replied,

When I went to prison my whole life changed. I was exposed to people who were so different than me and so many ideas that were different than mine. I had always believed that people in prison were horrible and they were just like me, trying to survive in a bad situation. (Sasha, White, woman, 53)

Sasha's response shows an example of resources being scarce for her to fully reach her potential, only voting along with what her family did in order to seem to be participating. The sense of belonging is vital to the hierarchy of needs and social conflict theory and combined with the four aspects of anomie explain her feelings of disconnect. We can also see how when Sasha was introduced to a community, she felt more connected to, those who were incarcerated, she was able to grow more and become more empathetic towards individuals who had different life experiences than she had. Her feelings of community support will be more apparent in the following finding.

In summary, these responses combine together perfectly to show how feelings of disconnect or anomie can occur when an individual's basic needs are not met. They also show how social conflict theory is demonstrated as these individuals know they should have more access to power in order to receive the resources they need to survive and the barriers that are present, lack of information within the criminal justice system and political parties, only contribute to these resources being harder to obtain. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is also present as a basic foundation of what an individual is required to have within their lives in order to feel connected to society and to thrive (McLeod 2018).

COMMUNITY AND FAMILY SUPPORT

The final finding I saw within my five interviews was that these individuals did not find the desire or support to vote from the criminal justice system or politics in general. Instead, they found the drive and support for voting within their families and their communities. Their communities made up for what the institutions they had been involved in failed to do for them. They also felt compelled to vote because of their communities - to make things better for them and to participate when so many in their lives had been unable to. Out of all five interviews, four

of the individuals identified family members and friends who encouraged them vote. This was either in daily conversations and life growing up or by specific support that led them to the ballot box.

Betty (Hispanic, woman, 62) credited a large part of her interest in voting to her parents' commitment to having their voices be heard through the electoral process. When asked if voting was something her family did Betty described her experience growing up and how voting participation was displayed in their household, "Oh yes, my mother did our dinner was around voting. My mom and my dad would vote together. And so my mom would say, we are gonna go and vote as soon as your dad gets home and washes up" (Betty, Hispanic, woman, 62). Betty also remembers times when her brother Charlie was incarcerated and how important it was to him to vote once he got out. She explains, "He never lost the desire to vote, I think mostly because of how important my parents showed us it was" (Betty, Hispanic, woman, 62). Betty shared how she felt while she was under direct supervision and unable to vote stating, "Not being able to vote during my incarceration broke my heart" (Betty, Hispanic, woman, 62). She attributed this disappointment directly to the family support that was shown while she was growing up and how important it was that her parents made sure their voices were heard and that they were represented. Betty also shared how she received the information needed to vote was through family and community support. When asked how she researched who to vote for, where to vote, and what issues were relevant to her life she answered,

Usually through reading or the news but I also get together with women (in her community) who are very conscientious about voting who truly know what's going on and understand. This last time I went to Diane (her sister) because Diane has always been very politically minded, so I do ask for information. (Betty, Hispanic, woman, 62)

Betty's responses show the resiliency that marginalized communities have and how even though society and the system seem to be against them prospering, they choose to overcome

whatever obstacles that are in place in order to have their voices heard. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, belonging and sense of community are necessary in order for an individual to be successful and find their true purpose in life (McLeod 2018). Betty found this through her family and community she was close to.

As seen by other participants, community support for voting was in conversations had within family and friend units. However for some individuals, these conversations never occurred. Joelle's (Black/African American, woman, 28) mother didn't necessarily talk about voting, she just did it. Joelle felt her mother led by example and she felt a need to carry on a legacy of sorts.

She always voted, she didn't talk about it, but she voted. I had always done well in school, but it wasn't because I was forced to. We didn't talk about homework, we didn't talk about those things because I am first gen. It wasn't a conversation she knew how to have. My grandma graduated from high school, but I knew my great grandparents didn't. These were new conversations. My grandmothers' generation were fighting to vote. These conversations have never been had. My reason for voting is not because I want to make the world a better place, I am voting because I didn't have the right to vote 70 years ago. (Joelle, Black/African American, woman, 28)

Joelle's response about watching her mother vote but not really talking about it because "they were new conversations" connects with lack of resources to marginalized communities and how society fails to prepare them for important aspects of life such as politics, or as Joelle mentions later in the same quote, education. Joelle was a first generation student and obtaining her Master's degree was a huge accomplishment in her family, and she still felt she didn't have the resources she needed because the lack of resources her family and community had. Maslow's hierarchy of needs shows that safety and security is right above food and housing and Joelle stating she "didn't have the right to vote 70 years ago" shows that safety and security was

not often found within her Black community. She is also showing how her community overcomes these obstacles and still chooses to find a way forward. When asked if Joelle planned on voting again, she responded,

I do plan on voting because I haven't been sentenced yet and so I feel obligated to vote now because my ancestors died for it. I believe that voting is overwhelmingly positive and affects the community that I come from. And I know the community that I come, that my siblings and my uncles, they don't have the right to vote. (Joelle, Black/African American, woman, 28)

This response once again demonstrates social conflict theory as voting gives individuals access to the power and resources needed to survive and prosper and how her community did not have this access in generations previous to her own.

For Julio (Puerto Rican, man, 52), the experience was similar. He never really saw his mom vote, but he knew she did.

What really changed for me was when I got married. My wife was like, we are voting tomorrow so be ready to go after work. We went to the church that was our polling place and we voted. She had shown me the ballots when the information came out and tried to explain to me what everything meant. It was really intimidating but it was what she wanted. That was almost ten years ago and when I voted this year I went to the same church and just dropped off my ballot. (Julio, Puerto Rican, man, 52)

Julio's response demonstrates that when an individual's basic needs for safety and security have been met, they can move up to embrace intimate friendships and love (McLeod 2018). Julio's wife demonstrated her desire for Julio to become more involved and to share his voice within the electoral process and this changed his thinking about elections. The feelings of anomie soon begin to fade away as an individual becomes more connected to society and Julio demonstrates this as he is compelled to vote independently and drops of his ballot without his wife's urging.

Sasha's (White, woman, 53) life experience was different as she didn't really have support directly from her family but more from the community in general. She explains, "When

I was younger I voted because that is just what you did. I don't know if I really made any wise decisions about my voting, I mostly voted along the party line." For many persons voting becomes something that is done for the community, a way to try and create change within the system. When asked about her political views as she got older, Sasha (White, woman, 53) replied,

As I met more people and learned more about how politics works, I became more liberal. I am more progressive now and would almost believe I was leaning towards socialism but am trying to understand that better. I vote now because it works for the community and I want my kids to grow up knowing how to make decisions and vote. (Sasha, White, woman, 53)

Sasha's response is similar to Julio's as she was able to get basic necessities met through safety and security and so "moved up" and found community and intimacy within that. Her response also demonstrates how anomie is found when individuals are not able to connect within aspects of society and when this connect is found they are able to be more productive members of society. Her feelings of wanting to share these values with her children demonstrate that desire to want to be connected, despite her past failures.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION

One of the best ways I found to describe what my research found was to incorporate steps and demonstrated in the following two figures. The first set of steps (Figure 1) show a “typical” progression towards community involvement, which would lead to an individual to decide to vote in the electoral process. This figure includes basic needs such as housing, employment, rest, safety, and security. These are the foundational pieces found within Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of need and are required in order for an individual to “step up” into the desire to become involved in the community, voting, and develop feelings of pride or accomplishment. The final step shows an individual finding fulfillment in their lives when all their needs have been met.

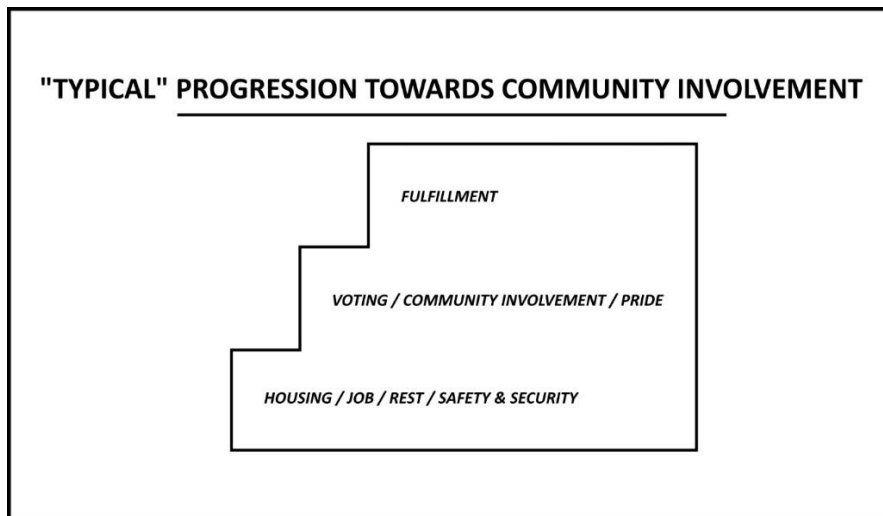


Figure 1: “Typical” Progression Towards Community Involvement

The second set of steps (Figure 2) describes progression towards community involvement within the criminal justice system and includes the same step of basic needs which include housing, employment, rest, safety, and security being a foundational part, but this is preceded by an additional step. The first step describes barriers that are put into place by the criminal justice system and society that restrict access to housing and employment for individuals who have been convicted of a felony offense. Lack of these basic resources also lead to inadequate feelings of safety and security and inhibit an individual from moving or progressing to the next step. All five of the participants interviewed for this research shared prioritizing basic necessities being a key part of their experiences within the criminal justice system and took up most of their time, leaving little room for community involvement.

The third step describes social control theory and anomie or feelings of disconnect from society. Social control theory is used within the criminal justice system to ensure former offenders are under constant supervision in an effort to reduce recidivism, which is returning to a facility or committing a new crime. This type of control leads offenders to feel anomie, or disconnected from society, because they are expected to have minimal contact with former community and family members and their time is spent attending meetings and fulfilling other requirements of their parole or probation. Social control also leads to parole and probations officers having limited time to provide information to offenders about community involvement and voting. All five participants being interviewed shared feelings of being controlled by their parole and probations officers or case managers. Again, this is one more step that has been added for an individual to progress towards community involvement within the criminal justice system and leads to the fourth step.

The fourth step in this figure describes lack of resources and access within the electoral process and barriers that are put into place to further discourage individuals from becoming more involved. This comes in the form of lack of education, voter suppression, and disenfranchisement and involves many members of the community, whether they have felony convictions or not. While discriminatory voter ID's laws and lack of access to voting were found to be barriers within society, for persons with felony convictions, these barriers were shown to be more detrimental to their involvement. Jim Crow laws and mass incarceration have also been shown to decrease voter participation and voter suppression. All five of persons being interviewed showed experiences of their communities not being included in the electoral process and elected officials not representing their voices or interests.

The final two steps show voting, community involvement, and pride or feelings of accomplishment. When an individual is able to find their basic needs being met, they are able to progress to the next levels to become more active members of society and their communities. While social control theory works to maintain an offender's employment and housing as part of their sentence, their approach leads to feelings of anomie and disconnect. And while housing and employment lead to an individual desiring to become more involved in community and the electoral process, lack of resources and access within that system provide more barriers. Four of the five individuals interviewed shared experiences of family and community support that allowed them to feel more connected and enabled them to become more active in their communities by participating in the electoral process.

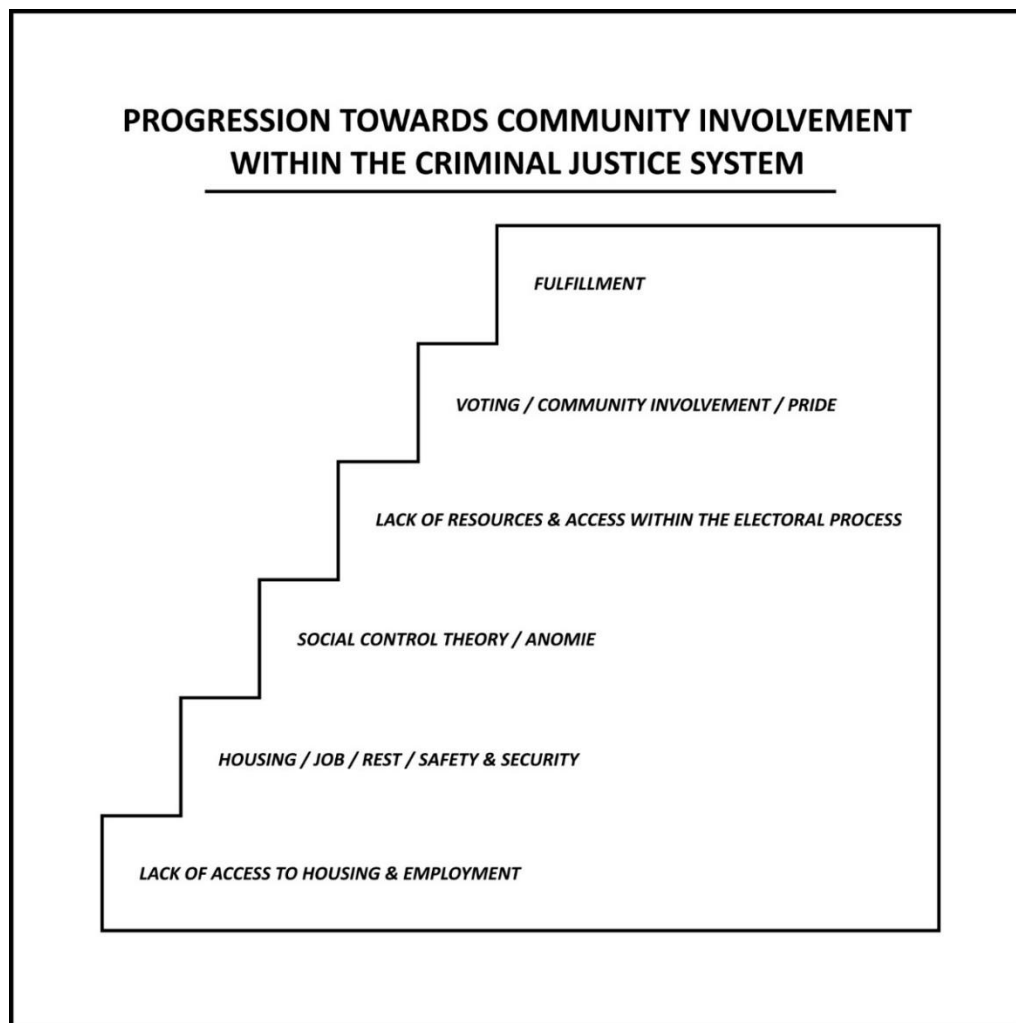


Figure 2: Progression Towards Community Involvement within the Criminal Justice System

CONCLUSION

In doing this research I found some limitations. One of them was a small sample size. The more participants and experiences you can have in your research the more data that is collected and the more voices that are heard. There could be many reasons for the smaller sample size, one of them being the shame that is involved in discussing a person's criminal background. Many times, during my own personal experience within the criminal justice system, I struggled with feelings of disconnect, shame, lack of voice, and so many negative emotions. I anticipated that the persons I attempted to gather data from would have these same

feelings and many that I cannot identify with also and would not be interested in sharing these experiences. Also, I was attempting to reach individuals that I didn't already have a relationship with, and trust can be another large barrier. Another reason for a smaller sample size could also be access to resources that were needed to complete my survey and also the time and ability to complete the survey and be open to an interview.

Another limitation I found was the lack of individuals who never voted again after their experience within the criminal justice system. All five persons I interviewed were interested in voting and despite their experiences within the criminal justice system, they looked for ways to regain their vote once they completed their sentences. This shows the strength and resiliency needed to overcome so many barriers. These individuals also looked to their families and communities in order to have their voices be heard within the election process. Many persons don't have access to individuals once they are released so hearing their voice would have been extremely beneficial to my research. A larger sample size could potentially find more individuals who had either lost their right to vote permanently or never wanted to vote ever again. These limitations show why this research is so vital to felons' success. Many times the only information collected from former offenders is if they are employed and if they were ever sent back to prison. In order to have all voices be heard, we need to show these persons that we truly value them as individuals and their contributions to society and their communities.

When doing further research regarding this subject some recommendations I have would be to expand the sample size, include research on other forms of civic engagement, asking questions more specific to participants voting tendencies prior to incarceration and/or felony conviction, and working more directly with parole and probation offices within various communities. Expanding the sample size would offer more experiences and possibly give more

insight on how both the criminal justice and election systems could better improve their outreach and resources to more populations. On a local level a beneficial way to gain a larger sample size would be to work more directly with parole and probation in order to have better access to individuals currently under supervision and also increase awareness to these offices. I also believe working directly with the criminal justice supervisory offices within local communities would increase the need for former offenders to be more involved within their towns and cities and also recognize the barriers in place that don't always allow them to do this.

Including research that inquired about other forms of civic engagement former offenders are involved in besides voting would allow communities involved to recognize the need to remove barriers in place that prohibit persons with felony convictions from participating within their neighborhoods. The majority of public offices held within towns and cities ban persons with felony convictions from being elected to government offices. A person identifying as a felon cannot be fully represented within their communities and neighborhoods and have access to resources necessary to be successful within society unless they can participate as elected officials. My research has shown that representation is vital to success and access to the basic necessities required to acquire social upward mobility. Volunteering is another aspect of civic engagement necessary for a community to thrive. Persons with felony convictions are often banned from volunteering within their children's schools and sporting events. Requiring a background check to be performed prior to volunteering is commonplace within many organizations. Not only are you shaming the individual wishing to serve you are also enabling the stigmatism that allows society to look down on former offenders. Limiting a former offender's civic engagement only causes harm to them and the communities they wish to serve and participate within.

Asking more questions pertaining to an individual's voting tendencies prior to incarceration and following would allow researchers to increase awareness around these persons. Many times society feels these individuals were never interested in the first place, and less interested following a sentence completion. This research would show the barriers in place for those not able or allowed to vote and would also increase awareness for offenders in general. Current research on offenders typically revolves around basic demographics, whether an offender committed another crime, and whether they were able to be employed. The negativity surrounding persons with felony convictions only increases when society focuses on the criminal acts of an individual and not on the other positive activities they engage in.

As far as policy changes, on a local and nation level the increasing of access to basic necessities should also be addressed. For individuals without felony convictions, access to basic necessities such as jobs and housing can sometimes be a struggle. Once a person has this conviction on their record, it sometimes proves impossible. Many businesses have instituted policies that "ban the box" or restrict companies from asking if a person has a felony conviction on their record. Sometimes this can cause more discrimination and fails to address the real problem. In order for society to be more accepting of persons who identify as felons, they must learn more about them. With any type of change needed, education and awareness are key. When a person has to hide who they are in order to get a job or find somewhere to live, society is unable to recognize the positive in the individual and only focuses on the negative. Embracing a person's full identity and life experiences only work to decrease the stigmatism surrounding felony convictions and would allow more access to basic necessities, such as employment and housing.

Another policy change within the system to affect change and encourage more voting would be for offenders to never lose their right to vote. When we stigmatize these individuals and describe them as somehow disrupting the purity of the voting process, we label them permanently. These individuals still have a voice and should be able to use their voices in regard to politicians representing them and the policies and laws that affect their own lives and communities. Voting should be encouraged more within facilities and automatic registration should happen which would aide in voter suppression overall. More access to voting in general should be increased and all persons living in the US should be eligible to vote.

One final recommendation would be access to education. Currently we live within a society that places extreme value on a person's education and former offenders often times do not have access to necessary post-secondary education. Barriers in places such as finances, lack of access to financial aid, and felony convictions place these individuals within a system that does not allow them to be successful. One way to increase this access would be to place resources within colleges and universities that focus on persons who have felony convictions and/or have been incarcerated. A resource center would give former offenders a place to gather and be in community with each other and would also allow persons who might have negative feelings towards them to become more aware of them and their life experiences. They would also allow persons who have family or friends who have felony convictions a space to share their experiences and find community. These types of programs would allow for former offenders to participate and be successful in college and also increase awareness within the college campus of the needs surrounding these individuals. This awareness would then extend to students' communities and to society in general. Studies show that a person's college experience outside

of the classroom is just as vital to their experience within a classroom. Having a community you can relate to while attending college is one of the most necessary things needed to succeed and graduate.

Lack of participation in the voting process is more complex than individuals simply choosing not to vote. Voter suppression comes in many forms and should be addressed more than it is currently within our society. In order for our nation to fully represent the persons who inhabit it, we must allow all voices to be heard. As far as felons and/or persons that have been incarcerated, this is a small population of persons disenfranchised from voting and more research is needed in order for change to be made and for society to realize the wrongs that are being done within this community.

In conclusion, my research did show that the experiences of individuals who have been incarcerated and/or have felony convictions influenced their interest or lack of interest in participating within our nation's electoral process. These five participants used their experiences and overcame the typical barriers found after felony convictions and/or incarceration and worked hard to achieve, regain, or retain their right to vote. This is an accomplishment that should never be taken for granted. My research also provided some needed insight into how the criminal justice system works to maintain control over former offenders, how acquiring basic needs become a priority over most other things, how many participants felt they weren't given resources from the politicians striving to become elected, and how their communities supported them in order to have their voices be heard. Overall I think that normalizing and accepting the experiences of persons that have been incarcerated or have felony experiences by society would be the most beneficial for these individuals until more radical changes can be made to the

criminal justice system. So many persons have been involved in the system or have family or friends within the system that society as a whole needs to adjust how they view former offenders and become more aware of who is being incarcerated, convicted, and why.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT FLYER



Are you a person that identifies as a felon and / or
have been incarcerated?
Would you like to participate in research about your
voting tendencies?

I am a student at the University of Northern Colorado seeking persons who identify as felons
and / or have been previously incarcerated for a survey about your voting experiences.
Participation is confidential and voluntary. The survey should take 10 minutes or less.



https://unco.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eXQjKC7m2TFjxMV

APPENDIX B
QUALTRICS SURVEY QUESTIONS

Qualtrics survey questions

How old are you

How do you identify on the gender spectrum

Woman

Man

Non-Binary

Prefer to fill in

Prefer not to answer

How do identify racially?

What is your current employment status?

Part time

Full time

Not

What is your living situation?

Living with family

Living with friends

Living alone

Do you have a felony conviction on your record?

Yes

No

Have you spent time in a correctional facility?

Yes

No

If yes

Which kind?

Are you currently on parole or probation?

Yes

No

Did you vote in the most recent election (November 2020)

Yes

No

Can you share why you did or didn't vote in the most previous election (November 2020)

Would you be interested in participating in an interview with the researcher concerning your past voting participation?

Yes

No

Please provide the easiest way to contact you, email or phone number

Thank you

APPENDIX C
INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION
IN RESEARCH



Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

Title of Research Study: To Vote or Not To Vote: An Assessment of How Felony Convictions and Incarceration Affects Voting Practices

Researcher(s): Tammy Ortiz, University of Northern Colorado, Student Sociology Department
Phone Number: (970) 381-1590 email: orti2815@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Cliff Leek, Sociology Department Faculty at University of Northern Colorado
Phone Number: (123) 456-0987 email: cliff.leek@unco.edu

Procedures: We would like to ask you to participate in a research study. If you participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a survey that will take about 10 minutes to complete. Included in the survey is the option to be interviewed by researcher. This interview will take about 30 to 45 minutes, will be audio recorded on the phone and video and audio recorded for Zoom for transcription purposes. Data collected will be basic demographic information (gender, race, employment situation, living situation, voting habits) felony status, incarceration experiences, and experiences within the voting system. All responses will be kept confidential and will be destroyed upon completion of research.

Questions: If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Tammy Ortiz at 970-381-1590 and orti2815@bears.unco.edu

If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Research Compliance Manager, University of Northern Colorado at nicole.morse@unco.edu or 970-351-1910.

Voluntary Participation: Please understand that your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Use this section if signed consent will NOT be obtained and delete the box above.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you decide to participate, your completion of the research procedures indicates your consent. Please keep this form for your records.

APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD EXEMPT DETERMINATION



UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

Date: 02/05/2021

Principal Investigator: Tammy Ortiz

Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**

Action Date: 02/05/2021

Protocol Number: [2012017540](#)

Protocol Title: To vote or not to vote: an assessment of how Felony convictions and incarceration affects voting practices

Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(702) for research involving

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:



Institutional Review Board

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).
- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. *You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Compliance Manager, Nicole Morse, at 970-351-1910 or via e-mail at nicole.morse@unco.edu. Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/> and <https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/>.

Sincerely,



Nicole Morse
Research Compliance Manager

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

APPENDIX E
ORTIZ INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Ortiz Interview Questions

Demographics

First, can we get some basic information from you?

Can I get your name?

Can you share with me your gender identity?

Can you share with me your racial identity?

Are you employed?

Now, I would like some basic information on your previous experience with the criminal justice system?

Do you have a felony conviction on your permanent record and if so how long ago did you receive this?

Are you currently on parole or probation?

Voting Participation

Do you plan on voting in upcoming elections?

Do you have access to vote? For instance, an ID, transportation, information?

Can you share with me your previous participation within the voting process?

If answer is “I don’t vote” – Can you share with me reasons why you don’t vote?

If answer is “I just don’t think it’s important. - Have you always felt this way?

If answer is “I’m not allowed to vote” – Can you tell me how you feel about this?

If answer is “I used to vote but not now” – Can you share with me why you don’t vote?

Do you feel supported by any particular party (democrat, republican, independent, green)

What is it about this particular party that has made you feel more supported?

Is there anything about the other parties that make you not feel supported?

If you do vote, do you research your votes before you participate or how do you decide who to vote for?

Is there anything that would change your mind about voting?

Community Support

Was voting something that was talked about while you were growing up, did your family or community support groups vote or discuss voting?

Can you tell me if your parole or probation officer or case manager supported you or gave you information about the voting process once you were eligible?

Was this something they brought up or did you have to ask about this?

Are you aware of your voting rights as a felon and / or incarcerated person?

If not, is there a reason why?

Are you interested in finding out more about voting in Colorado as a felon?