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The Effect of Personality on Turnout of Felons

By: Madison Swiney

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Introduction

At the heart of every democratic nation is suffrage, the right to vote. In America, however, there is a portion of the population that is barred from exercising this right in all but two states- incarcerated felons. When a felon is no longer incarcerated, however, their right to vote is not immediately reinstated. The practice of prohibiting felons from voting in varying degrees is called disenfranchisement. Disenfranchisement laws differ depending on the state and released felons face varying restrictions and processes for restoring their right to vote. Many of these processes are strict, overwhelming, and burdensome to ex-felons, and very few are ultimately able and willing to take advantage of the restoration process and exercise their voting rights by turning out (Highton 2004). Public policy as it relates to all crime generates feedback effects that influence how citizens, especially felons, participate in politics (Burch 2007). One such effect lies in that felons have lower registration and turnout rates, decreasing from 29% before incarceration to 14% post-conviction, and while disenfranchisement laws account for most of the decline, other factors must be considered (Burch 2007).

This research design seeks to explore what explains turnout of felons. Disenfranchisement laws explain felon turnout on the surface level by simply determining if felons are allowed to vote or if they are prohibited from the act. This aspect of turnout has been studied and its impact on electoral outcomes has been determined and supported with studies considering legal sources, election studies, and inmate surveys (Uggen and Manza, 2002). Past research on felon disenfranchisement, however, does not explain turnout of felons who could vote but do not, which is the focus of this research design. By explaining what effects felon turnout, there will be a better

understanding of why felons that legally can vote do not do so. This research will benefit the scientific community as a whole by studying a segment of the population that is not well understood and will lend itself to developing public policy and campaign strategies in the future.

Theory

The first aspect of this research question that must be considered is the actual turnout rate for felon populations. A study in North Carolina found that turnout rate drastically decreases after incarceration, though the rate before incarceration is also lower than the national average (Burch 2007). Additionally, estimates based on the Current Population Survey's Voter Supplement Model and the National Election Survey found that felon turnout rates are about 20% less than the national turnout rate (Manza and Uggen 2004). Based on this data, felon turnout rate has been shown to be low in comparison to that of the general population.

When exploring existing literature, there are many explanations for turnout that must be considered, one of which lies in personality. Personality has been the study of a variety of researchers in regards to its influence on political attitudes and behaviors because personality differences affect how people respond to the world around them and the behaviors in which people engage (Gerber et al. 2010). It is formed very early in life and remains stable over time (Caprara et al. 2006; Gerber et al. 2010; Gerber et al. 2011). Because of this stability, personality can be studied in a variety of contexts as a potential influence on political behaviors, including turnout (Hibbing et al. 2011).

Blaise and St-Vincent (2011) note in their study of the affects of personality on the propensity to vote that there is little conclusive research that directly relates

personality to turnout. They turned their research in the direction of the intervening variables of civic duty and political interest and found that these variables mediated the effect of personality to more accurately predict turnout. For the purpose of studying felons, these mediating variables do seem to explain felon turnout because of the legal and informal barriers felons face when reintegrating into society. The barriers prevent felons from reengaging their sense of civic duty and make it difficult for felons to become interested in politics, which explains the low turnout rates (Uggen et al. 2006). While Blaise and St-Vincent studied the mediating variables of civic duty and political interest, public policy that seeks to reintegrate offenders into society has not had much success with increasing felon turnout (Uggen et al. 2006). This is what prompted the consideration of other intervening variables that may have an impact on felon turnout behaviors.

A substantial portion of prior research conducted on personality characteristics focuses on the “Big Five”: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability, and agreeableness (Gerber et al. 2010; John and Srivastava 1999). The “Big Five” is a taxonomy that is used to simplify the way researchers study personality characteristics by offering a way to more easily communicate findings among disciplines with a more universal vocabulary (John and Srivastava 1999). These “Big Five” characteristics have been studied in relation to ideology among other things. The consensus among studies is that the trait of openness is associated with liberal ideology, while conscientiousness, extraversion, and emotional stability are associated with conservative ideology (Gerber et al. 2010). Agreeableness is not positively associated with either (Gerber et al. 2012; Gerber et al. 2010). Of note, is that this research does not

seek to validate a causal relationship between personality characteristics and ideology. Rather, it only associates the two and attributes their association to factors such as genetics (Verhulst et al. 2012).

Because research has already shown that there is a link between personality characteristics and political ideology, theories regarding the relationship between the strength of personality characteristics and intensity of ideology can be explored. Gerber et al. (2012) found that personality characteristics, while also related to the party with which one affiliates and the ideology one holds, affect whether individuals choose to affiliate with any party and the strength of that affiliation. Their study, which used the TIPI measure and CCAP, found that there is a positive association between the characteristics of extraversion and agreeableness and the intensity of ideology. They attribute these associations to the affective social benefits of affiliating with a political party that aligns with the personality characteristics of extraversion and agreeableness. They argue that because one is more extraverted, one's ideology will be more intense based on the fact that having a strong affiliation with a party is cohesive with aspects of an extraverted personality. Similarly, a more agreeable person will have a more intense ideology because although they join a party based on varying degrees of agreement with the party's ideology, an agreeable person will have a stronger ideology as they shift their personal ideology to be more in line with that of the party (Gerber et al. 2012).

Research has furthered theories regarding ideology by relating ideological intensity to turnout. Ideological extremism is positively related to likelihood to vote; the more intense one's ideology is, the more likely one is to vote (Palfrey and Poole 1987). A similar principle can be seen when considering congressional voting behavior. The

more intense a congressperson's personal ideology is for an issue, the more likely he or she is to vote in alliance with their own ideology rather than for the ideology of their constituents (Kau and Ruben 1993). Just like a congressperson voting on legislation, the more intense one's ideological position is, the more likely one is to act on that intensity and vote. Besides the fact that ideology is one of the strongest predictors of political preferences and behavior, it is a very complex social psychological occurrence (Jost et al. 2009). Ideological left-right divides show tendencies for those identifying with a certain ideology to be more likely to adopt policy positions in line with that ideology and then vote in accordance with that position, and the tendency increases as the intensity of ideology does as well (Jost et al. 2009). Additionally, beginning in the early 2000's there has been a resurgence of partisanship based on a clarification of each party's ideological positions. This clarification has been linked to an increase in political interest and participation because as people are becoming more familiar with a party's ideology, they begin to hold a more intense ideological view and are becoming more active in politics (Hetherington 2001).

The research reviewed thus far was done in regards to the general population, and therefore, attention must be paid to literature that discusses felon turnout to gain a comprehensive understanding of the implications of non-felon-based research when it is applied to felon populations. While to my knowledge no studies have been done on personality as it applies to felon turnout, research has been conducted to determine patterns of felon turnout in that felon turnout is typically lower than that of the general population. A review of the prior research leads to a potential explanation for the turnout of non-incarcerated felons that will be studied in this research design. Personality

characteristics are related to ideologies (Blaise and St-Vincent 2011; Gerber et al. 2010). Openness is associated with liberal ideologies while conscientiousness, extraversion, and emotional stability are associated with conservative ideologies (Gerber et al. 2010; Gerber et al. 2011). As strength of certain characteristics increases, the intensity of the ideology increases (Gerber et al. 2012). Stronger extraversion and agreeableness leads to a more intense ideology (Gerber et al. 2012). As the ideology becomes more intense, so does the propensity to turnout (Palfrey and Poole 1987; Kau and Ruben 1993; Jost et al. 2009). This explanation applies to felon turnout as well, because although felons are a distinct segment of the population, their political behaviors are still affected by their personality characteristics in similar ways as the population as a whole.

Hypothesis

Personality explains turnout of felons in that as the “Big Five” personality characteristic of extraversion increase in strength, the intensity of ideology increases, and as ideology becomes more intense, turnout is more likely. This design will study the relationship between extraversion, the independent variable, and turnout, the dependent variable, with an intervening variable of ideology.

Measurement

This research design will collect its data from a random sample of 1,000 non-incarcerated felons in Indiana. Indiana disenfranchisement laws only prohibit voting for felons in prison, so all non-incarcerated felons, whether they are on probation, parole, or have completed their sentence, will have an equal chance to be chosen for participation (Manza and Uggen 2004). Offender records will be used to compile a list of non-incarcerated felons in Indiana, then a sample of 1,000 individuals will be chosen from

that compilation for participation in the study. The data will be collected in the form of a survey and will incorporate tests for strength of personality characteristics, intensity of ideology, and turnout.

The first portion of the survey will measure strength of the “Big Five” personality characteristic of extraversion. The test used will be the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI). It was developed by Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann (2003). This inventory uses a seven-point scale, ordered from Disagree Strongly to Agree Strongly, and asks respondents to report how they “see themselves” on a series of 10 pairs of traits. Each “Big Five” characteristic is measured with two trait pairs, one being reverse scored. The 10 questions included on the inventory can be seen in Appendix 1. While the hypothesis proposes extraversion to be a link between personality and intensity of ideology, the TIPI test will allow data in regards to strength of all of the “Big Five” personality characteristics to be collected.

The second portion of the survey will measure intensity of ideology. This portion is made up of three measures, each of which is an adaptation of the measures used by Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, and Ha (2010). First is a two-part measure of self-reported intensity of ideology. The first part asks respondents to place themselves on a scale of one to seven from very liberal to very conservative. Similar self-reporting scales use a five-point scale, but by adding two more points, a more accurate report can be given in regards to where the respondent sees himself or herself in regards to intensity. The closer a response is to one or seven, the more intense the ideology. The second part of self-reported ideology will ask respondents to place themselves on a scale of one to seven

from “very weak ideology” to “very strong ideology”. For the purposes of this research design, the ideology does not matter as much as the intensity of that ideology.

The second measure is one for economic policy opinions. While this measure was originally used to gauge economic ideology, it is being adapted for use in this design to gauge intensity of ideology. This measure uses a scale made up by two items, one asking about the role of government in healthcare, the other asking about support for raising taxes on those earning \$200,000 or more per year. Respondents will answer each item on a seven-point scale where, for each item, a response closer to seven indicates a more intense ideology while a response closer to one indicates a less intense ideology. The exact wording for this measure and the scale for responses can be seen in Appendix 2.

The third measure is one for social policy opinions, and is similar to the second measure in that while it was originally used to gauge ideology, it is being adapted to gauge intensity of ideology. This measure is also made up of two items, one of which asks about abortion attitudes, and the other of which asks about support for civil unions. Responses will be given on a seven-point scale, as they will be in the second measure of ideological intensity. A response closer to seven indicates a more intense ideology while a response closer to one indicates a less intense ideology. The exact wording for this measure and the scale for responses can be seen in Appendix 3.

The third portion of the survey will measure turnout. It will utilize a single item self-reported response of if the respondent voted in the most recent election, whether that was a local, state, or national election. Responses offered will be “Yes, I voted”, “No, I did not vote but I was able to”, and “No, I did not vote because I was incarcerated at the

time”. Responses of “No, I did not vote because I was incarcerated at the time” will be thrown out because this research design is focusing on turnout of felons who are able to vote but do not do so. Additionally, there is a trend of over reporting when it comes to turnout (Highton 2005; Highton 2004) so turnout responses will be validated using public records such as voter registration, censuses, and offender records.

Discussion

By conducting this research, I expect to find support for my hypothesis. I hypothesized that as the personality characteristic of extraversion increased in strength, ideology would become more intense, and as intensity of ideology increased, felon turnout would be more likely. This design seeks to explain turnout of felons, which prior studies have shown is low compared to that of the general population (Burch 2007; Manza and Uggen 2004). Therefore, my hypothesis, which relates the personality characteristic of extraversion to ideological intensity and turnout of felons, seeks to explain why felon turnout is lower than that of the general population.

Felons are disproportionately of lower sociodemographic status, have lower education levels, and are also disproportionately African American, which leads to the expectation that felons have high levels of Democratic partisanship and therefore hold liberal ideologies. This expectation has been supported by research done in many studies (Manza and Uggen 2004; Uggen and Manza 2002; Uggen et al. 2008). By linking the tendency of a liberal ideology among felons to research on personality characteristics and ideology, the first facet of my hypothesis is supported. Conservative ideologies are linked to extraversion, the characteristic of focus in my hypothesis, and liberal ideologies are not, instead being linked to openness to experience. This means that felons, who are

most likely liberal in their ideology, probably will not have strongly extraverted personalities, in favor of strongly open personalities.

This leads to the first part of my hypothesis, that strength of extraversion, as a “Big Five” personality characteristic, is positively associated with intensity of ideology. Because felons will most likely have weak characteristics of extraversion, they will have weaker ideologies, as the research done by Gerber et al. (2012) suggests. Their research found a positive association between extraversion and intensity of ideology. As extraversion increased, so did ideological intensity. Therefore, because felons have weaker extraversion, their ideologies will be less intense. Of note, is that this research also found a link between low levels of openness and increased ideological intensity. If felons are more liberal, the data should show an increased strength of openness to experience, which is negatively associated with ideological intensity. If felons are more open, their ideological intensity will be less according to the association found in this research. This supports the first part of my hypothesis.

The second part of my hypothesis is that as intensity of ideology increases, likelihood to turnout also increases. This association is supported by studies done in prior research (Jost et al. 2009; Kau and Ruben 1993; Palfrey and Poole 1987). Because of this relationship, I expect to find support for the second part of my hypothesis when studying felon turnout. While the hypothesis proposes that more intense ideologies are associated with increased likelihood to turnout, data collected on the felon population should support this. The data I expect to collect will show the ideology of felons as generally less intense, and because research has shown felon turnout rate is low, I also expect to collect data that shows a low likelihood for felons to vote.

By considering the high proportion of liberal ideologies found in felon populations and the personality characteristics related to such ideology, as well as prior research done concerning my hypothesis and the associations between the variables, I expect to find support for my hypothesis through this research design. These findings, which relate personality to turnout through the intervening variable of intensity of ideology, have implications for society as well as the scientific community. First, public policy impacting felon-voting rights should take into consideration the personality of felons and how that personality impacts their participation in politics. Second, future research should be done to further determine what explains felon turnout. While personality as it relates to intensity of ideology offers one explanation, this is not a comprehensive explanation and other factors undoubtedly play a part in explaining why felons who can vote do not do so. Further study is needed to more fully explain felon turnout, but personality as it is related to turnout through ideological intensity offers one likely account.

Appendix

Appendix 1

Ten-Item Personality Inventory (10 trait pairs)

Here are a number of personality traits that may or may not apply to you. Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with this statement. You should rate the extent to which the pair of traits applies to you, even if one characteristic applies more strongly than the other.

Extraversion: Extraverted, enthusiastic; reserved, quiet (reverse coded)

Agreeableness: Sympathetic, warm; critical, quarrelsome (reverse coded)

Conscientiousness: Dependable, self-disciplined; disorganized, careless (reverse coded)

Emotional Stability: Calm, emotionally stable; anxious, easily upset (reverse coded)

Openness: Open to new experiences, complex; conventional, uncreative (reverse coded)

Scale – 1 = disagree strongly, 2 = disagree moderately, 3 = disagree a little, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = agree a little, 6 = agree moderately, 7 = agree strongly

Appendix 2

Social Policy

Indicate the extent to which your opinion on the policy is mild or intense.

1. Abortion: Circumstances under which should abortion be legal

Scale – 1 = very mild, 2 = moderately mild, 3 = a little mild, 4 = neither mild nor intense, 5 = a little intense, 6 = moderately intense, 7 = very intense

2. Civil Unions: Allowing civil unions for gay and lesbian couples, which would give them the same rights as married couples

Scale – 1 = very mild, 2 = moderately mild, 3 = a little mild, 4 = neither mild nor intense,
5 = a little intense, 6 = moderately intense, 7 = very intense

Appendix 3

Economic Policy

Indicate the extent to which your opinion on the policy is mild or intense.

1. Government Healthcare: Providing healthcare in the United States

Scale – 1 = very mild, 2 = moderately mild, 3 = a little mild, 4 = neither mild nor intense,
5 = a little intense, 6 = moderately intense, 7 = very intense

2. Taxing \$200,000+: Do you favor raising federal taxes on families earning more than
\$200,000 per year?

Scale - 1 = very mild, 2 = moderately mild, 3 = a little mild, 4 = neither mild nor intense,
5 = a little intense, 6 = moderately intense, 7 = very intense

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