The Civically Engaged Inmate:

Participation in Prison Programs in the United States

Abstract

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In this paper I seek to expand upon Verba, Brady, and Scholzman’s widely accepted classification of political participation and to explain political participation and civic engagement within an unconventional group, prisoners in state and federal penitentiaries. Additionally, I examine the propensity of inmates to participate in what I would define as political and civic actions. Verba, Brady, and Scholzman define political participation as an activity that: “...affords citizens in a democracy an opportunity to communicate information to government officials about their concerns and preferences and to put pressure on them to respond.”¹ I adapt their definition of political and civic participation to include the intent or effect to challenge or bolster current power dynamics. Individuals who take part in such actions are “…seeking to bridge the growing gap between them and their political processes and institutions through substantive political participation that goes beyond voting and engaging with political parties.”² This definition broadens the range of activities considered as political participation and is not limited solely to members of the American electorate. To categorize political participation based mainly on an individual’s ability to vote is to fail to see the larger scope of political and civic engagement.

According to theoretical analysis, inmates in state and federal penitentiaries are generally not classified as individuals who take part in politics. Traditionally, scholars have not viewed prisoners as political actors, yet they

possess a strong political will that is carried out through their participation in prison programs. Due to their circumstances these individuals take up political actions, at least some of the time, with non-governmental actors. By viewing accepted political science theory through the unconventional lens of the prison participation model a fresh observation of political participation occurs. This research examines why some inmates in federal and state penitentiaries may possess political and civic power through their participation in prison programs. Despite the fact that in some states prisoners have lost their right to vote, participation is possible because organizations that enable political action are not only found outside prison walls.

Verba, Brady and Scholzman outline three necessary factors for participation to occur: access to resources, mobilization and motivation. Limiting these factors can inhibit participation and exclude some individuals. Though I recognize the accuracy of their interpretation, I believe it fails to take into account the larger causes that shape an individual’s determination to participate. Once incarcerated the playing field is somewhat leveled; participation no longer relies so resolutely on an individual’s own resources since barriers such as time and social capital are rendered somewhat obsolete by the prison environment. According to Craig Rimmerman; “...Three elements must be present if meaningful and effective citizen participation is to be achieved: (1) a sense of community identity; (2) education and the development of citizenship; and (3) self-determination by those participating.”

Rimmerman’s presentation of political participation identifies community and education as essentials for participation to occur.

Prison can offer inmates access to both.

Through the use of empirical research and data analysis this thesis examines the potential for political engagement by inmates involved in prison programs and the capacity these programs have to alter the social and political status for individuals both in and out of prison. When seen in this way, some prison activities become important political actions. Understanding the factors behind political participation offers the prospect of improving a prisoner’s civic and political involvement after release. To prove this, the theoretical information is organized to reflect Verba, Brady and Scholzman’s model of resources, mobilization and motivation. Applying these principals I contextualize the role of inmates in prison programs within the framework of American political participation practices. Secondly, I present a brief history and an analysis of the sources that influence an individual’s ability to participate. Using numerical data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics I ran regressions. Both the independent and dependent variables included in my regression analysis work to show the correlation between different activities, programs and demographic signifiers. In my study the dependent variables are correlated with the background of the inmate as established by the independent variables. The purpose of these comparisons is to indicate if there are relationships between pre-incarceration stage and incarceration with regards to participation in political and civic activities. Regressions however, do not provide definitive proof of a relationship between the independent and dependent variables. While the numbers themselves do not constitute indisputable proof a compelling argument is indicated when the economic evidence is coupled with the empirical data.
The Bureau of Justice Statistics study data suggests a series of explanations for why inmates take part in these programs. The statistics indicate that an inmate’s relationship with their children may play a significant role in defining a prisoner’s participation. There is a strong correlation (27%) suggesting that education is a tool used by inmates who are in contact with their children. This involvement is political for the opportunities it affords prisoners for self-betterment as well as the empowerment to alter their current standards of living. I believe, that in the context of incarceration, education is a powerful tool for political advocacy. Two programs stand out as vital examples of education’s role in political advocacy. The prison lawyering program and inmate advisory committees represent the effectiveness of education as a political instrument. These programs and others discussed within the thesis are effective political tools, which have led to prison reform and alterations in prison policy.

The research conducted is relevant because of how strongly the data suggests correlation. Education introduces and encourages practices that are often essential aspects of political participation. Individuals who take part in these activities have a greater tendency to participate politically. Education empowers individuals by enhancing their ability to succeed. As Lockner and Moretti point out education has a two-fold impact on society. Individuals who become educated are less likely to commit crimes. This can reduce costs for incarceration. In the case of inmates, education provides tools that may enable individuals to rejoin society and reshape their lives after prison. Similarly, involvement in religious organizations seems to provide incentives and opportunities for political engagement. The reason for this is that they introduce and encourage political participation practices.
If we accept the correlations between an inmate’s relationship to their children and educational participation then it is possible for a series of new post-release programs to be established. Correctional facilities may aid in ensuring that relationships with families are maintained throughout an inmate’s incarceration by mandating that prisoners with families be held at the nearest facility to family members and be given priority for visitation by expanding visiting hours and providing free or inexpensive transportation to the facility if local transport does not exist. After an inmate has satisfied their mandated sentence, programs can be set up that reach out to inmates and encourage further education or vocational training as well as political and civic involvement within their communities. Rehabilitation programs that incorporate families and community members into the process could perhaps see the same results of increased participation levels evident in the incarceration study. Further research would be necessary to determine if there are long-term impacts of communication with families, but barring those results I think it fair to suggest that inmates who have relationships with their children do feel some level of responsibility to participate. The integration of children and families in this continued process of rehabilitation may help to reduce rates of recidivism and crime. These concepts, which rely on the coordination between correctional facilities, post-release and probation programs as well as the families themselves, takes the information gleaned from this research and uses it to have a positive impact on high risk communities.