

Opinion: A voting bloc in need of attention



I recently had a conversation with a political consultant that ended with one of the most shocking statements I've ever had to digest: "The viable politician has learned well how to ignore what can be ignored." She wanted to make sure that I had no confusion from softer statements like "You have to make your voice heard in public policy."

I get it – the difference.

Activists usually understand the value of persistent amplification of sentiments in the hope of moving policy. When that happens (should it happen) it's often a result of amplifying public sentiment enough to compel policymakers that it is time – and now in their best interest – to notice the issues, faces and demands behind it all. That's the point when an issue and the faces representing that issue can no longer be ignored.

A now not-so-new study reveals that nearly half of all American families have an immediate family member who has been jailed or imprisoned. Those same families directly impacted by records of arrest and incarceration could very well be the largest voiceless voter bloc in America.

I don't know how high on the polling charts might "rising crime" rank for this heightening season of political marketing going all the way through 2024. But I'm guessing along with many of you that a heavy dose of "crime-rate fear" is at the top of the calculus. That being yet again the predictable case, the exasperated, the defeated, and increasingly apathetic voter who has a family member or a loved one marked for life with a record of arrest or incarceration, lives at the foundation of that calculus.

Now, don't blow a gasket here -- we're not talking about our incarcerated loved ones' vote. That's another conversation.

We're the family members with no restrictions on our right to vote. We cross faiths, ideologies, communities and ethnicities. Talking heads waste time trying to sift out how our numbers line up within demographics. We are all, commonly, Americans who should be contributing optimally to the magic of democracy. But we don't. Too many of us are fatigued from seeing our quiet stories exploited in the game of politics and we simply give up. We don't vote, or we so significantly underperform as voters that we comfortably fit in the bag to be ignored.

We take to bed every night the same life-limiting anxieties: How safe is my locked-up loved one? Is my locked-up loved one really getting help to overcome whatever led to incarceration? Will my loved one be more damaged from a department of corrections, and like so many, come home more desperate to just survive by any means?

Our barriers and fears result in life-changing physical and emotional distresses, job disruption, and marital and relationship failures. Add to it the too-often unreasonable expense of calls, commissary, emails and video visitation, long and expensive trips to have in-person visits, being handled like suspects as we go through visitation and a slow-cooking anger at a failed system that thrives despite its failures.

Feeling that nobody cares about us or our cries for help turns us into angry, apathetic slackers who don't vote.

This predicament includes the families of staff who work in jails and prisons and the continuing failure to address their urgent needs: career growth, professional development and what should be the meaningful purpose of their work. They too are hidden away as underperforming voters, working in chaotic environments at lower-than-livable wages, many raising children in struggling rural communities under the general public's negative opinion of a "prison guard."

The reason why lawmakers can safely ignore us all is that we are not organized like other voter blocs. Too many politicians do an excellent job pitting enough of "us" against "them". Canceling out each other in the calculation of who can be ignored. We remain numb to the fact that the most efficient way to fix broken systems is through our bloc of issue-driven votes.

What other systems do voters support that sustain a 40% to 65% failure rate? Some people in power don't want some people to wake up and realize that the fix for this failure rate is not in the advertising of crime rates. But rather in the committed focus to improve graduation rates, poverty rates and recidivism rates.

In a democracy, you've got to make the experiences an issue and keep forcing the issue to a vote.

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