



DEMOCRACY & POWER
INNOVATION FUND

CREATING POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

DISCOVERING A "LINKED FATE
OF THE EXPERIENCED" AMONG
PEOPLE CONNECTED TO
RETURNING CITIZENS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Much attention has been devoted to exploring the most effective ways to reintegrate people returning from incarceration into their communities and build (or rebuild) their capacities to engage in civic and sociopolitical life.¹ Comparatively less focus has been given to challenges facing the people in the immediate orbit of the returning citizen (RC) — the partners, children, siblings, parents, extended family members, and close friends of those folks returning from incarceration.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, an estimated 113 million Americans have a family member who is currently or formerly incarcerated. People connected to a returning citizen (PCRC) live in every neighborhood of every corner of the country. Building on recent inquiries into this demographic,² this report considers strategies to politically empower PCRCs and to transform their neighborhoods through their political engagement.

The findings of this report are organized around four major themes:

- (1) **building collective community,**
- (2) **building collective pride,**
- (3) **building collective hope,** and
- (4) **building on collective identity and love to inspire action.**

Scholarship on mobilizing members of marginalized communities, including my own, often focuses on the necessity of building up a sense of indignation — getting people *mad as hell* about injustices and propelling them to act based on that anger.³ But this report emphasizes the potent power of positive emotions — *pride*, *hope*, and *love* in moving PCRCs to take political action. Research shows us that calls to political action need not focus on what community members are *against*. The compelling calls are about actions *for* our loved ones, as a show of solidarity, support, and care.

¹ See White (2022); Smith and Kinzel (2021); Smith (2021); Austin (2004)

² See Walker (2014; 2020), Lee, Porter, and Comfort (2014); Weaver, Prowse, and Piston (2020); White (2019)

³ See Phoenix (2019); Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, and Hutchings (2011); Walker and Mann (1987); van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, and Leach (2004)

Building community and belonging

We're in this together

Initially, prioritize restoring familial and community ties that were fundamentally ruptured by the incarceration experience, due to factors such as lost time, stigma, and shame about direct and indirect experiences with the carceral state. PCRCs who do not create strong attachments with a community of people beyond their immediate sphere usually express disillusionment about any politics. In contrast, people in socially-marginalized groups are more likely to be politically active if they feel a sense of belonging.⁴ PCRCs who think their communities are good places to live are *significantly more active in electoral politics* (see Figure 3).

How to build community and belonging?

We can empower PCRCs to build community and belonging by creating support groups PCRCs can join while their loved ones are still incarcerated. Group session leaders should emphasize storytelling and sharing of narratives around PCRCs' indirect carceral experiences that help create shared identity and sense of common fate. Additionally, RC-led forums for PCRCs on the eve of their loved ones' return can guide PCRCs on what they might expect and how they may be helpful resources to their RCs. These measures help PCRCs identify within-community solutions to some of the most pressing and immediate concerns they are facing. Groups and storytelling boost the crucial understanding that PCRCs are not alone; they are each part of a larger group of people persevering through common challenges.

Building collective pride and agency

We got this

Expressions of pride among PCRCs are more mobilizing than those same expressions among non-connected folks. PCRCs who express more *pride during an election season*, more *pride from civic actions*, and more *pride from US symbols* are all *significantly more likely to participate in electoral politics*.

There are two ways to reframe politics to disrupt PCRCs' typical senses of resignation and disillusionment and imbue them with a sense of pride in raising their political voice. We should reframe politics to focus on the local rather than the national. Discourses around local politics often do not evoke the same sense of frustration and futility as discourses around national politics. PCRC concerns and priorities connect more directly with local politics. The political power groups of PCRCs can wield together can be credibly affirmed in local politics, especially when elections are decided by narrow margins with low turnout.

For PCRCs, a result is unchangeable but a process is motivational. So, we need to reframe politics to focus on the process as much as – or more than – the results. It helps to emphasize that politics is about much more than which side wins or loses an election, and whether or not a bill passes; politics is about how many community members – specifically PCRCs – raised their voice about what matters. And how they did so, whether through voting, attending meetings, contacting public officials, etc. Emphasizing the importance of the process gives PCRCs an opportunity to be proud of their efforts regardless of conventional political outcomes. That pride is an important sustainer of action in the face of otherwise-dispiriting political developments.

⁴ See Ocampo, Dana, and Barreto (2018)

Specific actions help foster a sense of common identity and cultivate communal pride, as PCRCs look out for one another and collectively identify the political matters they prioritize. *Mutual aid directories* run and populated by PCRCs allow them to provide support resources for one another, fostering a sense of interdependence. *Listening sessions* exclusively for PCRCs and RCs ahead of elections allow them to express their concerns and identify the issues they prioritize. *Online platforms* like email listservs, Slack channels, WhatsApp groups, and/or printed directories facilitate community-building and continuous narrative- and resource-sharing among local area PCRCs.

Building collective hope and combating despair

We believe

Among PCRCs, hope is more motivating than anger. PCRCs who express more *hope during an election season*, more *hope about the state of the economy*, and more *hope about the state of race relations* are all *significantly more likely to participate in electoral politics* (see Figures 8-10).

How do we cultivate hope? We make faith-based appeals, empower PCRCs through narrative sharing to reinforce that they are not alone, and communicate that PCRCs wield electoral strength in numbers, especially locally.

We build hope by intentionally structuring PCRC gatherings around sharing good news and testimonials. Good news should be shared across the PCRC directories as well. PCRCs can build hope from informal gatherings after key milestones (e.g. elections, the conclusions of state legislative sessions, the end of the school year, etc.) where they reflect on the gains made and the lessons learned throughout the process.

Making space for good news can disrupt the tide of dispiriting political developments that

seem to dominate traditional political discourses. Creating spaces for PCRCs to experience and process the ups and downs of the local political cycle together fosters their capacity to be mutually encouraging of one another and helps keep their spirits up, which propels participation.

Building on collective identity and love to inspire action

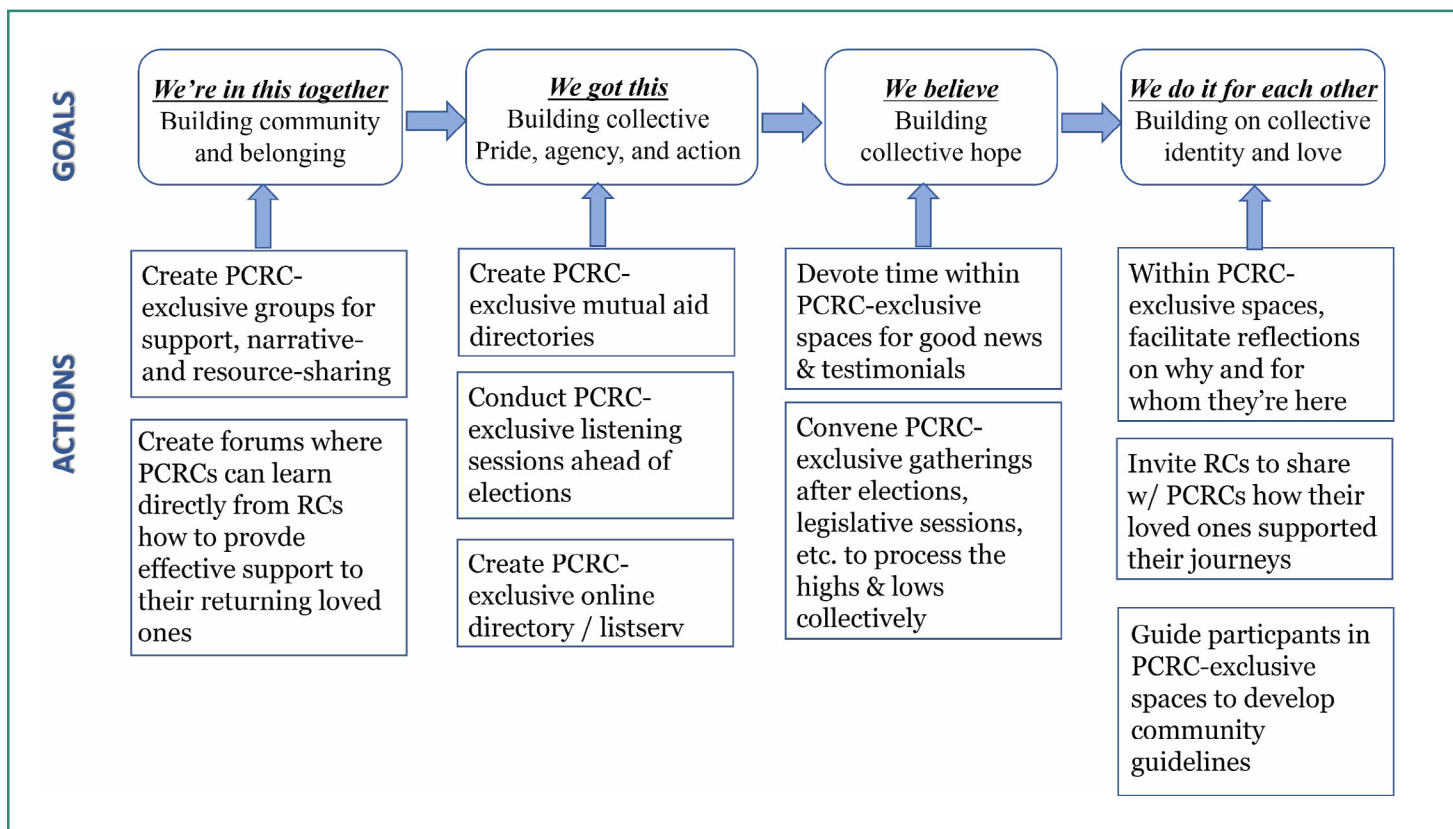
We do this for each other

A common thread motivating people working to build power among communities of RCs and PCRCs is love—for their children, rooted in faith, for their community, etc. Calls to action that activate PCRCs' connection to their returning loved one, as well as fellow PCRCs to which they feel attached, can inspire action. Framing political actions as expressions of PCRCs' advocacy for the people they care about can elicit action, even in the face of the political resignation that PCRCs typically feel.

We can build collective identity rooted in love across the gatherings of PCRCs and the PCRC-exclusive directory by encouraging intensive reflections on *why* and *for whom* PCRCs are making these efforts. RCs should be encouraged to share reflections on how the care and support of their loved ones was instrumental in their journeys post-incarceration. When PCRCs develop *community agreements/guidelines* for their gatherings, they become the owners of these spaces, which fosters their sense of responsibility to engage in ways that benefit their fellow PCRCs.

Figure 1 is a visual model of the four overarching themes, the concrete steps that can be taken to help achieve these themes, and questions to ask to engender best practices for implementation of the actions. Read on after the figure for a deeper dive into how advocates' narratives and perspectives shape the central themes and the actions recommended to achieve them.

Figure 1: Visualizing the 4 interrelated themes and recommended actions to achieve them



INTRODUCTION

Everybody wants to belong ... We all want a home. We all want to feel included, you know? (Jackson, 3/13/2023)

This observation from Marcus, a returning citizen (RC) who recently started the Kentucky-based nonprofit organization [Advocacy Based on Lived Experience \(ABLE\)](#), focused on building political power among justice-involved individuals, highlights both a simple truth and a paradox at the heart of this research project. Feeling that you belong somewhere, viewing yourself as part of a collective instead of going it alone, having a place you can call home. These feelings are all associated with greater political participation.⁵ And yet, for formerly incarcerated folks and

their networks of family, friends, and loved ones, the incarceration period drastically severs the concepts of home and belonging. Incarceration rips people away from their families and robs them of time they would otherwise spend shepherding their children as they grow, or witnessing their parents age. And once people return from an incarceration period, they are expected to seamlessly reinsert themselves into a world that has fundamentally changed.

The ACLU estimates that, every year, about 650,000 people return home from incarceration. This report focuses on PCRCs, the parents, children, siblings, husbands, wives, partners, extended families, and friends of those RCs. Across race, gender, religion, class, and region, the diverse patchwork of PCRCs, whose numbers are estimated to be about 113 million in the US,

⁵ Ocampo, Dana, and Barreto, 2018; Phoenix & Chan, 2022

share common experiences of lost time, strained resources, feelings of political impotence, and the mental and emotional toll of trying to recreate a concept of home that has been ravaged by the carceral state. These experiences interact with the formal and informal barriers erected by state governments to inhibit the political participation of RCs and PCRCs.⁶

Amazingly, **activists are transforming this problem into a solution.** The common experiences that often bind PCRCs in political stagnation can form the basis of empowered and sustained localized political action. Years of research and practice illuminate the power of collective identity in mobilizing action, especially among socially-marginalized groups. What helps transform this sense of group identity into an imperative to take up political action to advance the collective interests of the group? A sense that the group is united by shared circumstances and disadvantages and that the members' fates are tied together. This sense of **linked fate** motivates people to step up their involvement in political affairs, because any advance made on behalf of the group potentially benefits everyone in the group.⁷

FOCUS: How to Establish a "Linked Fate of the Experienced" among PCRCs

Linked fate shifts the political playing field. No longer do people perceive themselves as fighting alone. Linked fate means we fight together. We resist together. We lose and we win together. So, how can the distinct experiences that connect PCRCs be translated into a particular kind of linked fate — a linked fate of the experienced? That is the primary focus of this report.

⁶ Burch, 2013

⁷ See Dawson (1995) for definitive examination of linked fate. And see Chong and Roger (2005) and Chan and Jasso (2021) for examinations of how linked fate shapes political participation among socially marginalized groups

FRAMEWORK OF FOUR "WE" THEMES

From my research, I identified four interrelated themes that highlight the importance of community, collective identity, and cultivating mutually-supportive networks for mobilizing PCRCs for political involvement within their communities. Each theme is tied to a specific "we" statement, namely:

Building community and belonging:

We're in this together.

Building collective pride and agency:

We got this.

Building collective hope:

We believe.

Building on collective identity and love:

We do this for each other.

PURPOSE: PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Individually and collectively, these themes revolve around the core idea that building a linked fate of the experienced among PCRCs is essential to solving the paradox of wanting to belong, yet feeling isolated. It is crucial to provide PCRCs with tools and opportunities to help them see they are connected by shared disadvantage and hardship, but also by a shared commitment to advancing the well-being of RCs. Additionally, PCRCs are connected through a shared narrative, which can be misconstrued as stigmatizing, but can ultimately be liberating and provide the foundation for collective mobilization to advance their rights and RCs' rights. So, throughout this report, I identify concrete interventions that can build this unique sense of linked fate of the experienced and create a politically-relevant sense of collective identity and belonging among PCRCs.

METHODS AND APPROACH

The insights derived from this project come primarily from a combination of interviews and informal conversations conducted in person, by phone, or via video conference with leaders, members, and affiliates of three regionally-based community organizations focused specifically on rights restoration for formerly incarcerated people or on building power among racially, socially, and economically marginalized groups.⁸ My interactions with these organizations occurred between summer 2021 and winter 2023. Here I provide brief descriptions of the organizations and my interactions with them.

Faith in Florida:

Part of the national Faith in Action network, Faith in Florida provides services to racially and economically marginalized communities, while mobilizing them toward political action in their local communities. Faith in Florida identified two areas as major issues: voter suppression and mass incarceration. Accordingly, Faith in Florida interfaces often with RCs and their loved ones.

Between June 2021 and November 2022, I had about a dozen in-person and virtual conversations with Faith in Florida's Executive Director and Deputy Director, lead organizers, and affiliated individuals who do community organizing work. In May 2022, I visited the Faith in Florida Palm Beach chapter, spoke with chapter leaders and activists they collaborate with, and observed the chapter leaders in action as they convened a listening session with local area Black men.

Voice of the Experienced (VOTE) Louisiana:

RCs run VOTE, a grassroots organization that focuses on pursuing electoral and policy reforms in the state, through intensive get-out-the-vote efforts, rights restoration for justice-involved individuals, and lobbying. Between July 2021 and December 2022, I had five in-person and virtual conversations with VOTE's Deputy Director.

Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC):

This grassroots organization pursues policy advances in areas ranging from climate to protections for coal miners to rights restoration. Between July 2022 and March 2023, I spoke virtually with six justice advocates affiliated with KFTC, who work to restore voting rights for RCs and mobilize RCs and their networks toward greater electoral participation. Many of the KFTC advocates I spoke with have either founded or are active within other Kentucky-based organizations working directly or indirectly with PCRCs. All of the KFTC affiliates I spoke with had prior convictions and five of the six are RCs.

In addition to conversations with members of these organizations, I examined trends from the 2016 (Barreto et al 2017) and 2020 (Frasure, et al 2021) editions of the Collaborative Multi-racial Post-election Survey (CMPS). Unlike other large and nationally-representative surveys, CMPS makes exceptional efforts to attain large samples of non-white respondents. Thus, the 2016 and 2020 Surveys contain exceptionally large numbers of Black, Latina/o and Asian American respondents. Throughout this report, I fluctuate between presenting findings from the 2016 and 2020 surveys for two reasons. One, many of the questions I examine are asked in only one of the two surveys. And two, looking at both years allows for a snapshot of the distinct features that correlate with the electoral engagement of PCRCs across two very different

⁸ Quotes shared in the report are lightly edited for clarity.

political moments in time — the transition from the Obama to Trump era in the winter of 2017, and the on-going COVID-19 pandemic in winter 2021. The themes exhibit strong correlations with PCRCs’ political engagement across both of these different contexts, which increases our confidence that our findings are not a flash in the pan.

A CMPS question from contributing social scientists (of which I am one) asks if the respondent has a loved one with a felony conviction. Across both survey years, I compare the many trends in perceptions and political engagement across survey respondents who have and those who do not have loved ones with felony convictions. Throughout this report, I highlight the trends that showcase the distinctive political perceptions and behaviors of PCRCs and relate the trends to the four interrelated themes listed above.

Notably, PCRCs are by no means in a niche group. On the contrary, a substantial proportion of the US population has intimate ties to a justice-involved person. Figures 2A and 2B present the proportion of survey respondents across each major racial/ethnic group who have loved ones with felony convictions.

As expected, given the disproportionate racial tally of mass incarceration, Black and Latina/o respondents are most likely to be PCRCs. In fact, a majority of Latina/o respondents in 2016 and of Black respondents in 2020 report having loved ones with felony convictions.⁹ Just over one-third of the total samples across both years know and love someone with a felony conviction.

It should be noted that CMPS figures fail to capture the full scope of people connected to justice-involved individuals, as the category “felony conviction” does not include people with

⁹ I cannot identify a definitive reason for the large proportion of Black and Latinx respondents in the 2020 survey who report having a loved one with a felony conviction, compared to 2016. The different distributions are most likely a quirk of the random sampling strategy. It is possible that the different distributions reflect differences from one time period to another in respondents being forthcoming, for whatever reason. Regardless, the fluctuation underscores just how likely the people in our orbit are to be PCRCs.

misdemeanor convictions and other interactions with the carceral state, such as arrests, stops, and detentions. However, for the purpose of this research, I use CMPS data on people who have loved ones with felony convictions as a proxy for people connected with justice-involved individuals (“PCRCs”). I use CMPS data for people who do not have loved ones with felony convictions as a proxy for people not connected with justice-involved individuals (“non-PCRCs”).

This report is organized largely around the insights of the people who shared their stories with me, supplemented with information I gleaned from CMPS data. As best as I can, I aim to place the stories front and center and elucidate the take-aways. I have been guided in this approach by a number of the people I spoke with who emphasized the power that comes from RCs and the people connected to them owning their narratives. Savvy, founder and CEO of [Life Coach Each One Teach One Reentry Fellowship](#) and President of the Kentucky chapter of [All of Us or None](#), made the case plainly:

The worst thing that you can do to someone is tell the story for them. [...] We have to own our own stories, and we have to bring out that empathy in people so they can understand what we’re faced with (Shabazz, 3/6/2023).

ACRONYMS:

CMPS: Collaborative Multi-racial Post-Election Survey

KFTC: Kentuckians for the Commonwealth

PCRC: person connected to a returning citizen

RC: returning citizen

VOTE: Voice of the Experienced

Figure 2A: Proportions of 2016 CMPS respondents who have loved ones with felony convictions

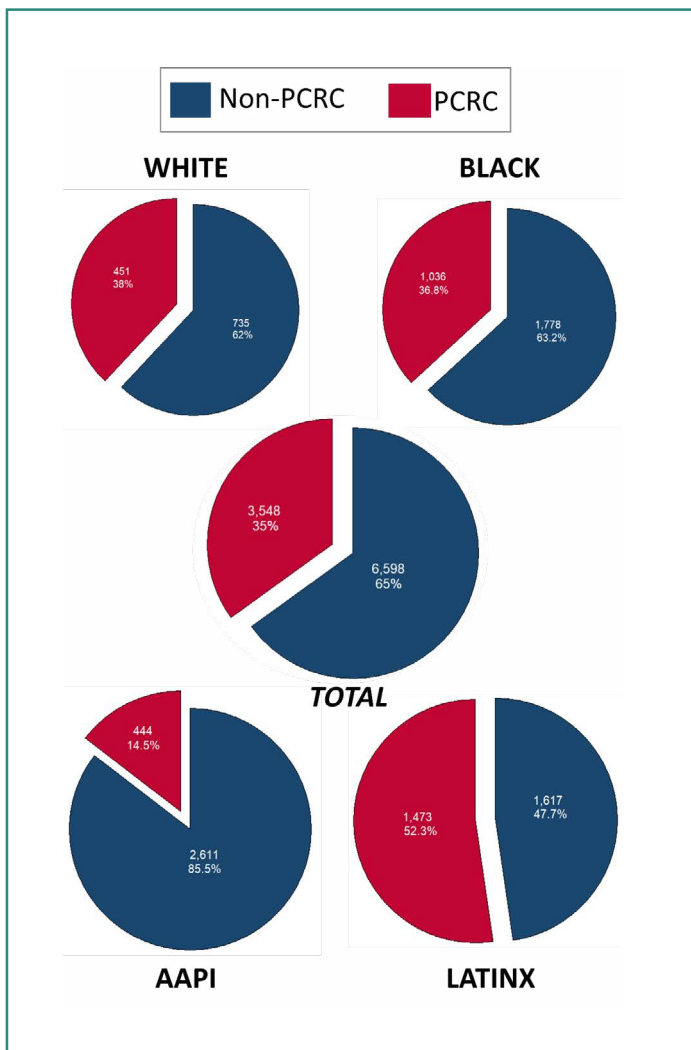
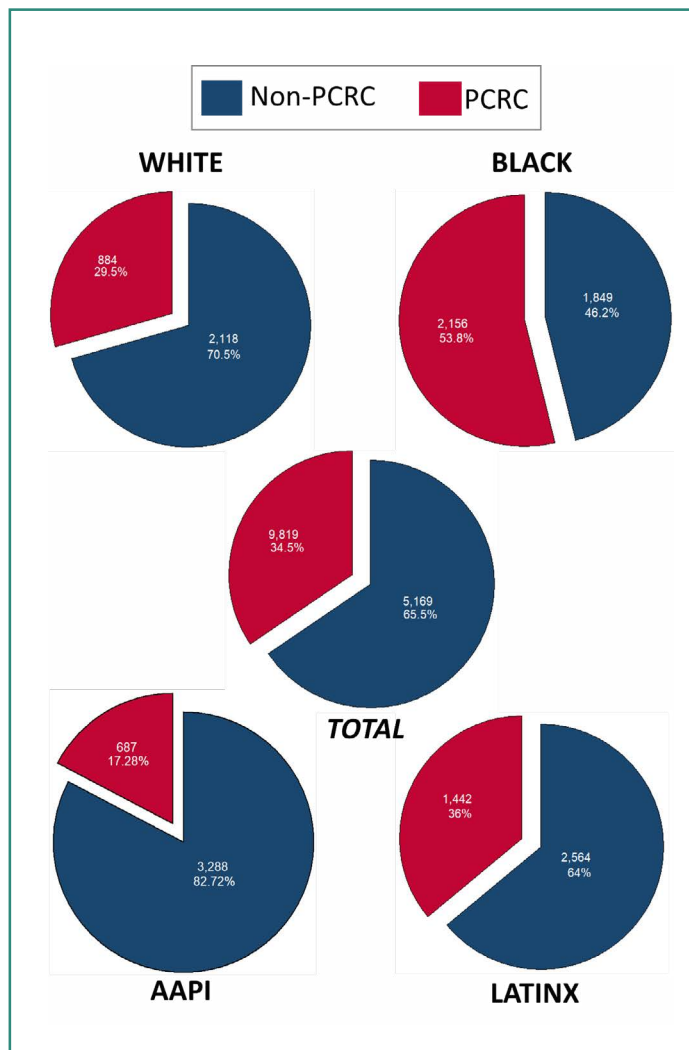


Figure 2B: Proportions of 2020 CMPS respondents who have loved ones with felony convictions



FINDINGS

The next sections elaborate on the significance of each of the four interrelated themes. I draw extensively from advocates' stories and insights to identify the central elements that define the themes and their significance for generating active political engagement among PCRCs. Woven throughout these discussions are reflections on how achieving the themes can help to foment a sense of linked fate of the experienced among PCRCs, which I argue is critical to motivating political action as an expression of their responsibility to and care for the larger PCRC community.

I present trends from the 2016 and 2020 CMPS to demonstrate the unique capacity of community-belonging, pride, hope, and mutual care to mobilize PCRCs. I conclude each section with recommended actions. Finally, I present how interventions by Faith in Florida organizers may offer a pathway for identity-based community-building and -mobilizing that can be effective for PCRCs.

BUILDING COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

We're in this together

This section discusses the importance of **restoring a sense of community that is ruptured by the carceral experience**, and the value of **creating shared identity among PCRCs based on common experiences and challenges**.

RESTORING THE COMMUNAL TIES RUPTURED BY THE INCARCERATION PERIOD

One recurring sentiment across all three participating organizations is how devastatingly isolating incarceration can be — for the incarcerated individuals and for their loved ones. This isolation takes many forms, such as the RC perceiving limited prospects to repair severed relationships with family and friends, or having limited opportunities to pursue romantic partnerships. Bruce, Deputy Director of VOTE, noted that people with past felony convictions are often precluded even from joining dating apps. The sense of isolation cultivates feelings of powerlessness, which erect a major barrier to political engagement.

Savvy, the Kentucky-based advocate, clarifies that RCs' loved ones also endure an isolating and alienating experience:

I think we need to understand that the family does the time with the individual as well, you know, at the end of the day. Yeah, people are locked up. People are incarcerated. People have committed offenses. But that's still somebody's brother. It's still somebody's father. That's still somebody's son. It's still somebody's uncle. [...]It can be a lot of stress on those individuals as well. [...] People can completely miss opportunities to build relationships with not only their family members, but the children, too. You know, [someone] that's just done 10 years he'll never get that back. That's 10 years out of their child's life, that you'll never get back (Shabazz, 3/6/2023).

Savvy's point about the disconnect RCs can feel from their children is worth more reflection. According to a 2016 report compiled by The Sentencing Project, about 47% of people in state prisons and 57% of people in federal prisons are parents of children under the age of 18.¹⁰ Thus, RCs and PCRCs commonly experience the wrenching effects of separation from each other. As justice advocate Kenneth noted, this familial connection is not easily restored once an individual returns home. Kenneth recounted the bureaucratic hurdles RCs have to clear to take seemingly simple actions, such as accompanying their children on a school field trip. Savvy echoes this frustration for not being able to coach his nephew's football team.

These are just a few examples of how RC alienation from the community does not end when incarceration ends.

Reverend Rhonda Thomas, Executive Director of Faith in Florida, emphasized that, when families and church homes struggle to effectively demonstrate forgiveness and acceptance to RCs, they can compound the stigma that RCs carry upon return. In turn, stigma ruptures the sense of community.

PCRCs feel alienated when their efforts to support returned loved ones seem futile, no matter how much **time** was devoted during and after incarceration to assembling care packages, visiting, arranging legal consultations, and aiding in searches for housing and employment.¹¹

A number of KFTC justice advocates who are RCs spoke at length about how PCRCs are too often well-meaning but ill-equipped to provide

effective support. Many PCRCs are simply unable to talk about the incarceration experience in a way that does not magnify the RC's sense of stigma and shame. Roger, another KFTC justice advocate, notes:

There's still this stigma attached to people with felonies and their families, even though everybody's affected. They just don't want to talk about it, you know, like people go to church, and then they don't want to talk. [But] that's community right? That's a place where people should be able to support each other. But it just doesn't happen. And then, like even family trying to find support for one another and for their loved ones, it just doesn't even happen (Fox, 3/7/2023).

Existing research demonstrates that actively engaging in conversations about politics fosters greater participation.¹² So when political conversations are off limits or practically unnavigable among RCs and their loved ones — because these conversations surface the stigma or trauma from interactions with the justice system — there is a distinct cost in terms of political activity. Offering concrete ways to help steer PCRCs and their returning loved ones through difficult conversations can help ease them (back) into ongoing local political conversations.

¹⁰ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/policy-brief/parents-in-prison/>

¹¹ Lee, Porter, and Comfort, 2014; Walker, 2020

¹² See in particular work by Dhavan Shah (Shah et al 2005; 2007; Shah 2016).

BUILDING COLLECTIVE IDENTITY THROUGH SHARING COMMON NARRATIVES

There is broad agreement that, while these conversations are difficult to have, they are essential to give RCs and PCRCs a chance to reframe the narrative around the carceral experience. Savvy notes that RCs should be the ones to lead the conversations:

That's where that lived experience comes into play. It's an understanding that we just have from being formerly incarcerated amongst ourselves. He's one of us. She's one of us. Let me get up under him. Let me learn, and let me see what he has to offer, because we're so used to having people that have never experienced anything that we've been through telling us what we need to be doing to become better people. That's not the case. It's different when [it's] someone that's been in that bed or that bunk, or had to make those collect calls (Shabazz, 3/6/2023).

This point is echoed by Marcus, another KFTC justice advocate who stresses that RCs can be essential in guiding PCRCs in how to treat their returning loved one with grace and without being patronizing.

What is the political value in restoring relational bonds and offering a genuine sense of acceptance within RC networks? Re-establishing a sense of community and belongingness is critical to building political engagement among PCRCs. On this point, Roger draws an analogy between his advocacy on rights restoration among RCs and his advocacy in substance addiction recovery. Carceral experiences and addiction create a demobilizing disconnect among family and friend networks. The solution is community:

Our product is community — being a part of the community. And that's why we stay sober because we're finally accepted back into the community. But then [transitioning to RCs], it's just so hard to feel a part of the community when there's still that thing [disenfranchisement] that is holding us back or keeping us separate (Fox, 3/7/2023).

That sense of community may be restored through spaces where RCs and PCRCs can share and make peace around the incarceration experience. For many RCs I spoke with, opportunities to own their stories and share them on their terms were liberating experiences, allowing them to transform personal narratives from shame to commonality with others. KFTC justice advocate Deb shares this sentiment. Once Deb began sharing her narrative as part of KFTCs' statewide campaign to restore voting rights to people with felony convictions, she began to feel a sense of belonging within the community of advocates and the community of returning citizens:

[Working with KFTC] is the only thing that really makes me feel comfortable here [in Frankfort], and I didn't have that until people found out that I had a story to tell them. And they trot me out and let me share my story. That's kind of how I found myself [emphasis added] (Graner, 2/28/2023).

Deb's colleague Savvy suggests that feeling like "she's one of us" cultivates an identity as an RC rooted in a shared sense of endurance that can only be fully appreciated by others who have been through the same experience.

This is the foundation of linked fate of the experienced: a tie that binds on the basis of shared struggle or shared marginalized status and on the basis of shared perseverance and resilience.

Similarly, PCRC collective spaces can transform the trauma and stigma around the incarceration of their loved ones. Marcus relays the sense of shame he felt when his father was incarcerated and the way this shame made him feel alienated — from his father and from himself:

My father was looked at like a criminal. Okay? So, he was sent to prison. And that was a source of shame for me because of society, you know. I love my dad. That was my superhero. My identity was attached to him. And if he was labeled as a horrible person and no good, what does that mean about me? [...] So I had to overcompensate to feel like I wasn't bad, and I had to disassociate myself and say things that I should have never said about my father around certain groups that looked at him a certain way. So as a kid, we're not set up to handle these types of things, so I was pretty much faking it (Jackson, 3/13/2023).

The distress Marcus described of carrying the burden of shame as a youth is undoubtedly shared by PCRCs of every age. Spaces specifically designed for PCRCs to process and share their narratives allows them to find community with others who share similar experiences and lays the foundation for linked fate of the experienced, which then becomes the basis for collective mobilization.

BUILDING COMMUNITY FROM PCRC POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Data from the 2016 CMPS show how important it is for PCRCs to have positive perceptions of their communities. I looked at rates of **electoral participation**, which includes activities such as voting in an election, volunteering for a campaign or political organization, and donating to a campaign or political organization. I compared rates between people who have loved ones with felony convictions and those who do not.

Before diving into the findings, a brief note on the data. The three types of actions that I group under the label of electoral participation by no means capture the full slate of ways that PCRCs can affect change in their community. But this range of actions also extends the conversation beyond just voting, which is especially important when examining large-scale survey data like the CMPS. The people who take the time to respond to these surveys are the types of folks who are more likely to view an action like voting as a core duty. Accordingly, the rate of voting among these survey respondents is much higher than among the national population. Across the two surveys, the percentage of non-PCRCs who report having voted in the most recent Presidential election is around 94%, and about 91.5% among PCRCs. There is not much room for improvement with those numbers, leading to a ceiling effect. But rates of volunteering for campaigns or donating to campaigns are much lower among survey respondents, hovering around 7.5% and 15% respectively for both groups. By looking at a bundle of high-and low-propensity actions together, I can discern meaningful variation in how PCRC and non-PCRC participation in electoral actions is correlated with factors relating to community perceptions, pride, hope, and more.

One of the survey questions asked people to rate the quality of their community as a place to live. Positive ratings are correlated with

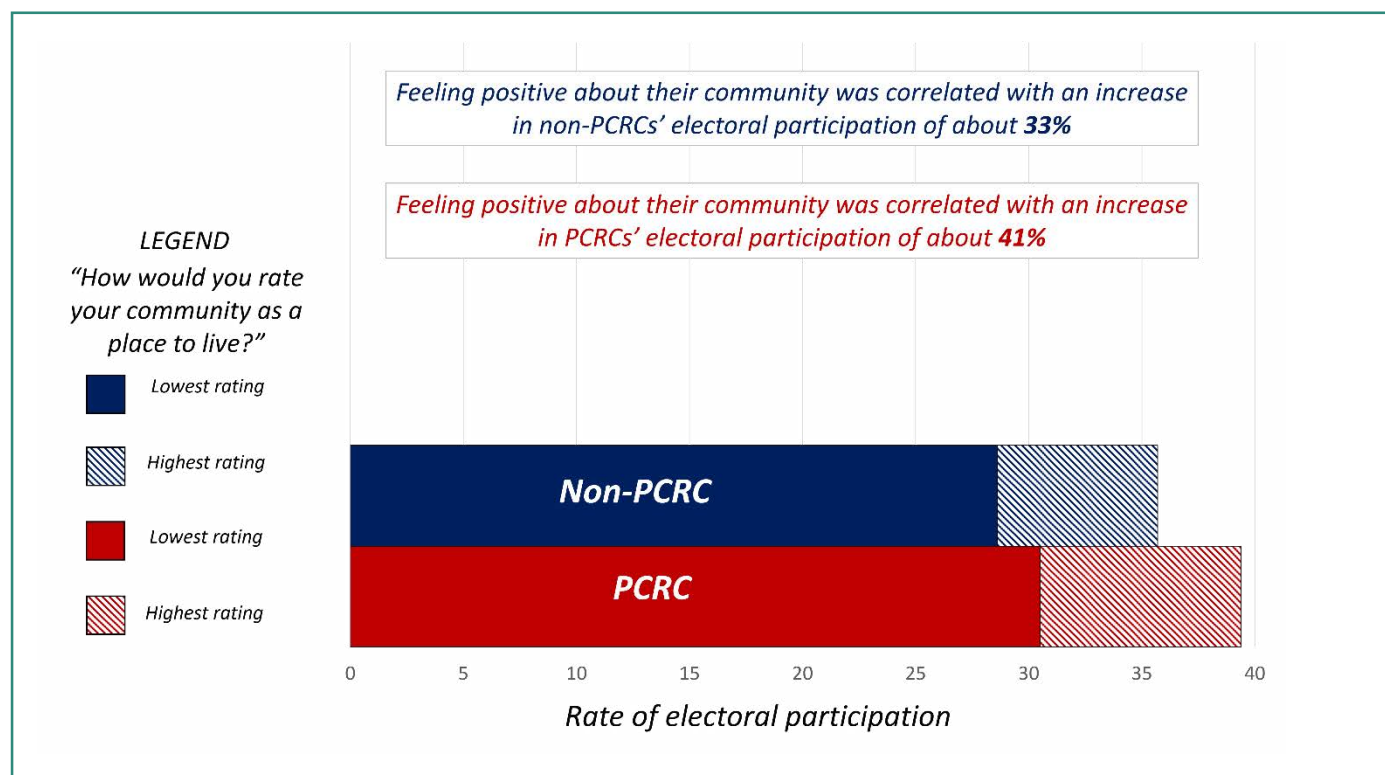
higher electoral participation of both sets of survey participants. People who rate their communities the highest participate in electoral politics more than those who rate their communities the lowest. Meanwhile, **the correlations between positive community ratings and participation is larger for people who have loved ones with felony convictions.**¹³

This difference takes into account the influences of age, gender, race/ethnicity, and party identification on participants' electoral participation. Even when accounting for these factors, which are strong determinants of political participation, this difference indicates that being connected to a

justice-involved individual is a meaningful factor for people's political activity. Furthermore, positive feelings about community matter more for PCRCs than for people without a connection to a justice-involved individual.

But there is a catch: as might be expected, *people who have loved ones with felony convictions rate their communities 10% less positively than people without that connection.* From this data, I hypothesize that fortifying communal ties in ways that enhance PCRCs' perceptions of their community can meaningfully boost their willingness to raise their voices in electoral politics.

Figure 3: Comparing rates of electoral participation by ratings of participants' communities in the 2016 CMPS



¹³ Figure 3 is one of a few instances in which PCRCs appear to exhibit a higher likelihood of participating than non-PCRCs in the baseline condition. But that difference is statistically negligible, whereas the differences in likelihood of participation among those in the higher condition are generally more substantially large and statistically significant at the 0.05 alpha level.

CONCRETE WAYS TO BUILD COMMUNITY AND BELONGING AMONG PCRCs

In seeking to establish true community among PCRCs, an early priority can be the creation of **support groups** — not in name, but in practice — specifically for PCRCs. Ideally, these groups welcome people while their loved ones are still incarcerated. Support groups would focus on **storytelling and narrative-sharing** around PCRCs' experiences and challenges during this period and after their loved ones return. A combination of lightly moderated circle shares, incorporation of narrative art techniques, and other practices effective at helping people collectively process and express traumatic experiences, allows group members to reduce senses of stigma and shame, see that they are not alone and forge connections with others undergoing similar experiences, and share resources and insights that help them navigate particular challenges.

These groups should be directed by the participating PCRCs. As the people I spoke with consistently emphasized, this work needs to be done by people with **credibility of experience**. Thus, it is imperative to identify people who can effectively lead the interventions to create an empowering sense of linked fate of the experienced.

Additionally, **forums facilitated by RCs** can be provided for PCRCs to participate in on the eve of their loved ones' return from incarceration. These forums would provide practice-informed answers to key questions that many PCRCs will have, including: what will my RC need or expect from me upon their return, logistically, materially, and emotionally? What resources and support networks can my RC connect with upon release — particularly networks run by or populated by RCs? And, how can I support my RC without being patronizing? How do I approach difficult conversations? How can I effectively demonstrate acceptance and love?

The last point represents a bridge between the work of the PCRC support groups and the work of these RC-facilitated forums. These spaces are intentionally designed to share resources with PCRCs, help PCRCs process and heal from the trauma they have endured through their indirect interactions with the carceral state, and offer guidance on how PCRCs can effectively support their returning loved ones.

These goals are conspicuously lacking in organizational efforts centered on power-building among marginalized communities and rights restoration. Yet, they can make a critical difference in building a collective communal identity, which may serve as the foundation for political mobilization.

Focusing on “heart work” is essential for building community. As evident in the definition of community offered by Kungu, a returning citizen, affiliate of KFTC, and Policy Strategist for the ACLU of Kentucky: power cannot be built within a space in which people cannot be their true selves. For RCs and PCRCs, learning to own the carceral experience as part of one's truth is critical in the process of developing linked fate of the experienced:

[Community is] anyone I can be my authentic self with, and not have to put on a mask. I feel being in community [means that] you kind of share some of the same struggles that I've had
(Njuguna, 3/10/2023).

BUILDING COLLECTIVE PRIDE AND AGENCY

We got this

This section highlights two strategies that are critical to building a sense of political agency among PCRCs: **reframing politics to emphasize the value of the political process as much as political results**, and **making politics local** to emphasize the daily consequences of politics for PCRCs and the immediate influence of PCRCs' input on politics.

I had no idea I could do this stuff, man. And I've just been blessed and fortunate enough to run into some folks, they let me know. Yeah, you can do this, and we're gonna do it. (Williams, 3/7/2023).

When returning citizen Kenneth, a justice advocate with KFTC, reflects on his experiences advocating for rights restoration, he punctures the mythical image of the superhuman advocate. His passion and capacity to do this work did not materialize out of thin air. On the contrary, Kenneth has been bolstered by a support network in Kentucky, which encouraged and equipped him to do advocacy work for which he never thought he would have the skills. Kenneth's girlfriend, a PCRC, played an especially critical role in organizing Kenneth toward this work, and Kenneth credits her for shifting his perspective on his carceral experience:

My girlfriend at the time comes and tells me, 'You've got your rights restored. Would you like to, you know, sign up to get your rights back?' And I said, 'Absolutely not. I don't believe in this country. [...] This is not a democracy we live in. This is a straight dictatorship, and they're gonna do whatever they want to do to you.' [...] And she tells me, 'Doesn't that make it all the more important for you to have your voice back, so you can tell people your story and get this out there and let them know that there was a great injustice done?' (Williams, 3/7/2023).

Conversations like this helped Kenneth decide to stop internalizing the disillusionment he felt about the political system and instead share his story to call out those injustices and connect with others who had been dealt a similarly unjust hand. The difference? Kenneth went from wanting nothing to do with politics to being a deeply engaged citizen, helping to organize town halls and registration drives and mounting personalized persuasion campaigns to people

within his circle, just as his girlfriend had done for him.

Kenneth's story exemplifies how influential RCs and PCRCs can be when they own the power of their stories and take advantage of opportunities to share those stories in political venues. The way to tap into that power is to not leave PCRCs in a space of disillusionment. Instead, power emerges after moving from validating that initial disillusionment to cajoling, prodding, and encouraging RCs and PCRCs to see that they *can* affect change through their stories and actions.

Kentucky offers a recent example of the power of RCs and PCRCs sharing their stories through political channels. Many of the six Kentucky-based activists I interviewed either directly or indirectly discussed the successful statewide campaign to restore the voting rights of residents with a prior non-violent felony conviction. Kentucky was formerly one of only two states in the nation to have permanently banned former felons from voting. KFTC's efforts to restore enfranchisement included mobilizing RCs and PCRCs to share their stories at legislative committee hearings in Frankfort, Kentucky's capital, and organizing phone drives for residents to call and urge local lawmakers to support a Constitutional amendment.

Ultimately, the ban was partially reversed by an Executive Order signed into law by newly-elected governor Andy Beshear in 2019. This breakthrough via an unconventional political channel illustrates how political opportunities and barriers are constantly shifting. Indeed, the efforts by KFTC and other groups to mobilize RCs and PCRCs to attach their faces and stories to this issue, to make it personal and urgent to relevant political actors, needed to be steadfast and persistent to withstand the shifting political tides. All the folks who answered the call to share their stories can feel assured that their collectively-shared voices helped chip away at a political machine that long appeared resistant to this magnitude of change. They can come away from this arduous process with a profound sense of agency. Even if

the results do not materialize as expected, or when expected, full commitment to the process creates new possibilities.

What can sustain these folks through the dispiriting political losses, so they can keep persevering until the opportunity for political victory arises? I argue that, by generating a sense of pride tied to their narratives, as well as the bonds they can form based on their linked fate of the experienced, PCRCs in particular can develop the resilience needed to stay involved in local politics through the many discouraging and exhausting ebbs and flows. The sections below offer thoughts on how that pride can be activated and how PCRCs can cultivate a sense of political agency that is resilient to setbacks and disappointments.

MAKING ALL POLITICS LOCAL

Chuck, an RC who holds executive roles in multiple statewide organizations in Florida, focuses on substance abuse prevention, building power in local area Black communities, and local mobilization efforts. Chuck bristles at the notion that the communities he works with are politically apathetic. The problem, in his view, is that people do not believe that they can make a difference in politics, so they appear checked out, not out of lack of interest, but out of self-preservation. *Why waste my time and energy playing a losing game?* Or as Rev. Rhonda of Faith in Florida puts it: "I know the game. I see right through it."

Many people emphasized the importance of reframing the conversation around politics for RCs and PCRCs in a manner that disrupts their sense of political malaise. Chuck, Kenneth, Roger, and Marcus all stress that nationally-salient wedge issues, like abortion and the national economy, often feel far removed from anyone's immediate lived experiences. Messaging centered on these big issues only augments people's sense of alienation from politics (see the next section for more on this particular point).

Instead, these advocates push to make politics local for their community members. They begin by inviting RCs and PCRCs to share their biggest priorities: what lingers on their minds and keeps them up at night? They then connect the identified priorities with the local issues and candidates on the ballot. For Marcus, messaging for RCs and PCRCs starts with helping them understand that working together will directly affect the concerns that matter to them most:

When you look at our school boards in some counties, I have 5,400 people that have had their rights restored to vote, the majority of which are parents. And you have a school board election in which someone, I heard, is talking about CRT [critical race theory] and not teaching it in our school. 500 of us can get together and vote that person straight out [...] So, I mean, that's the power we have to recognize that. And a lot of what we do is connect those dots (Jackson, 3/13/2023).

In this messaging, Marcus draws upon voters' salient identity as parents. He recognizes that this identity compels people to act to benefit or protect their children.

Therefore, the stakes of politics shift from distant, national, and abstract to proximate, personal, and effective. Marcus can make a compelling case for why to act because he also makes clear why that action *matters*. In this realm, there is no electoral college, no billion-dollar campaign, or constant attack ads. There is a community of prospective voters who care for their kids, which happens to be larger than the margin of victory in a typical local, or perhaps even statewide election.

I see great promise in PCRC as an identity salient and central to how people view themselves within the context of local politics. PCRCs can

be mobilized to engage in politics to advance the interests of returning loved ones and fellow PCRCs with whom they develop a linked fate of the experienced.

Politics becomes less about a system that is hostile to the input and needs of *people like us* and more a venue through which one can work to support, protect, and benefit *people like us*.

But this shift can only come about if politics and the value of political action is framed in an effective way.

Bruce worked on precisely this kind of framing. As he worked with VOTE to mobilize RCs to participate in a number of high stakes elections in Louisiana over a two-year period, including a special runoff election for a Congressional seat and a bitterly-contested election for sheriff, Bruce aimed to reframe the discussion of politics.

The candidates, platforms, and policy proposals matter, but they are not the starting point or central focus of the conversation. Rather, the people set the tone of the conversation by discussing what matters to them and how the issues might be resolved. This shift, which centers people and their ideas before drawing connections between identified issues and the candidates on the ballot, engenders agency among voters.

The perception that they are being heard and that their input is valued imbues people with pride, and **pride bolsters participation**.

Similarly, Sheila, an affiliate of Faith in Florida who founded an organization for increasing municipal-level voting among local area Millennials, also frames politics within local issues. Sheila believes her generation was socialized with problematic messaging about

their civic duty; they were inundated with appeals to express their input within Presidential and national elections, while the local elections that affect their day-to-day lives the most received scant attention. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, as she attended city council meetings online, Sheila saw the clear disconnect between the urgent needs of her community and the issues being prioritized by local officials.

Sheila now seeks to shift the narrative around politics that matter to Millennials in her neighborhoods. She draws attention to how people can affect local outcomes that shape their daily lives and she leverages community ties to make sure the message sticks. Sheila ensures that the mobilizing messages are communicated to people from peers they know from school, or church, or from growing up on the same block.

Sheila's interventions to register local voters — specifically younger voters — reflect the importance of connecting with people on their own terms and where they feel most comfortable. For Millennials, that is not always the church hall. Thus, Sheila remixes a Souls to the Polls-type event as “Trap to the Polls,” incorporating within a registration or voting drive event the types of music and recreational activities that would not be conceivable if the drive were hosted by a local church, or even a longstanding civic organization.

This intentional consideration of space and atmosphere — the vibe — is critical, because in essence, Sheila is trying to engage people in politics without activating their aversion to politics. This is not just about meeting people where they are at; it is about signaling to people that you *see* them, you *respect* them, and consequently, your attempts to draw them into politics will *accommodate* and *center* them, rather than accommodate the prototypical idea of an engaged citizen — a prototype that does not fit them. Drawing PCRCs into politics on *their* terms makes them feel seen, heard, and centered, engendering a sense of agency that is critical for getting and staying active in political affairs.

It is worth reiterating the importance of building real relationships with and among PCRCs. Leveraging the social capital that emanates from these relationships makes the call to act in local politics compelling. If someone I know, trust, and adore is telling me I should raise my voice, I am motivated on the basis of two factors: I want to make good on the potential this loved one sees in me, and I am more likely to believe that my voice matters when someone I have such a relationship with insists that it does.

The stakes of local politics can be credibly communicated by members of the local community who are trusted and respected. Therefore, a focus on local politics can effectively engender more engagement among PCRCs. Of course, the first step is (re)establishing the community ties that raise RC and PCRC voices in the first place (see “Building Community and Belonging”).

EMPHASIZING THE POLITICAL PROCESS OVER POLITICAL RESULTS

Just as messaging can center voters' perspectives instead of the perspectives of the parties and candidates, the acts of voting, canvassing, and attending town hall meetings can center around people's political voices, instead of the achievement of a specific electoral or policy outcome. The key is to place greater emphasis on the political **process** than on **results**. Kenneth explained the value in emphasizing the process over results when reflecting on his efforts to mobilize local voters in a recent election:

You gotta appreciate everything that you do. Like, I said, when the Republicans had a clean sweep here [...], ‘They won everything.’ I was burned out after that. And [my girlfriend] was telling me ‘no, we’ve done great work. We registered

voters that week that [we hadn't before]. We did phone banks, text banks. We had the pizza parties. We did everything we could to pull the people together with the resources we were given.' And I looked at it like that and I said, 'Okay, you're right, but we can do more. We can, we can, we can. We can do this bigger.'

(Williams, 3/7/2023).

Rather than let him be discouraged by the voting returns, Kenneth's girlfriend shifted his focus to the clear gains they made in engaging more people during the run-up to the election. Regardless of the outcome, they were successful in mobilizing people who typically consider politics to be a losing game. While the election results were disappointing, Kenneth can take forward the mobilization he achieved and build on it further.

A result is unchangeable;
a process is motivational.

In another example, at KFTC Roger views voting as far more than an election outcome. For RCs, voting is an act of affirming community ties that were ruptured by the carceral experience. Voting is also a means of disrupting generational senses of political alienation created by the carceral state. Voting is about sowing a seed for future generations to feel a greater sense of societal belonging:

[Voting] goes a long way in reversing some of this, like, generational damage that we do, you know? Like, my father was a felon. My father never voted. [...] So, like, breaking these generational things that go on in families, you know. Helping my clients return to the community, become a part of the community, and then start holding up to their duties in the community, which is engaging in

elections. And then you turn around and, like, you tell your kid 'this is why it's important when you grow up to participate.' And then hopefully, they tell their kids the same thing, you know. So just kind of like reversing all that stuff (Fox, 3/7/2023).

Numerous people expressed similar sentiments about the significance of voting beyond the outcome of the election. Kenneth, for example, stressed that voting made him feel a deeper connection to a country from which he had long felt estranged:

I went to vote for the first time in 2020. I've never participated in an election ever. So, me walking in that voting booth and coming out was life changing. [...] I mean you really feel a part of America. [...] You're intertwined with this thing, and you have a say so (Williams, 3/7/2023).

Emphasizing the value of voting and other forms of electoral participation, specifically the value of feeling connected to a broader community, is an effective mobilizing tool. But that value cannot be effectively conveyed through a fancy messaging strategy. It must be expressed through the lived relational experience of community, a community sustained through interactions and interventions that cultivate the linked fate of the experienced. Thus, it is important to cultivate a meaningful collective identity among PCRCs. This identity, and the resulting linked fate of the experienced, can be the basis on which people mobilize to take up political action as a means to affirm their commitment to their community and to reflect the validation they receive from the community.

Once again, RCs and PCRCs are the most effective messengers to communicate the value and importance of electoral action to PCRCs who remain on the sidelines. Their credibility gives them a unique purchase to shift the narrative on political action.

BUILDING PCRC COLLECTIVE PRIDE FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Data from the CMPS illustrate that feelings of pride have an outsized effect on the electoral participation of PCRCs. Returning to the 2016 CMPS, I looked at how expressions of pride relate to electoral participation, again comparing people who have/do not have loved ones with felony convictions. I found that the correlation between pride and electoral action during the 2016 election was much stronger for PCRCs than for non-PCRCs.

Among both groups, people who felt proud all the time throughout the 2016 election season took up electoral actions much more than those who never felt proud. Yet, **the correlation between feeling proud and electoral participation is notably stronger among PCRCs**. Again, this difference takes into account the roles of age, gender, race/ethnicity, and party identification in shaping people's participation. Pride is a

universal difference-maker in the electoral participation of PCRCs.

It is hard to overstate how valuable it is to cultivate a sense of pride among PCRCs. The good news is that CMPS participants who have loved ones with felony convictions do not express pride at rates any different from people who do not. The bad news is that, among both groups, reports of pride are quite low. How can reframing the narrative around politics make PCRCs feel proud of the process of engaging in politics?

The 2016 CMPS question on pride is rather broad, leaving it unclear what sources of pride might particularly animate participation. The 2020 CMPS includes questions about particular dimensions of pride and therefore lends more insight into the specific contours of pride that are valuable to cultivate among PCRCs. One of the measures gauges how much pride people feel when they participate in a civic or political action, such as voting, contacting an elected official, or discussing issues with others.

Figure 4: Comparing rates of electoral participation by feelings of pride during the 2016 election season

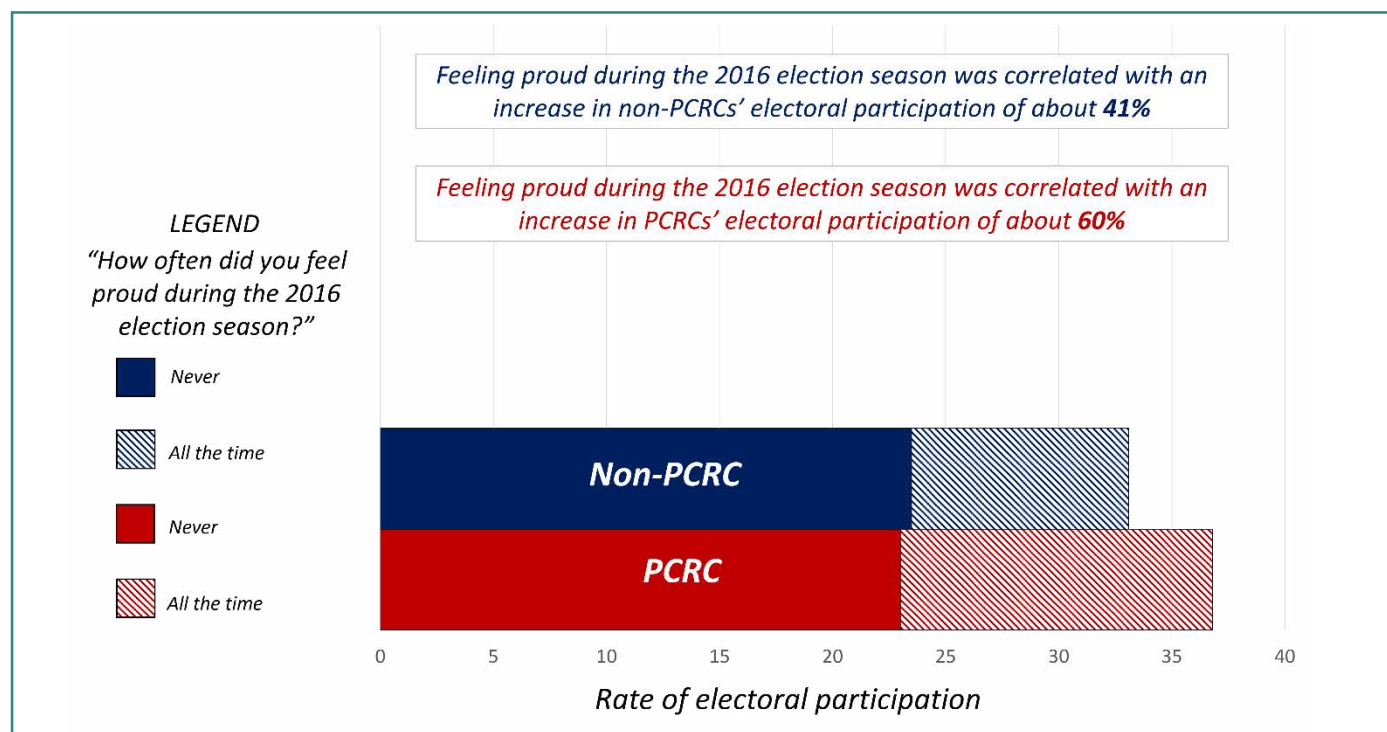
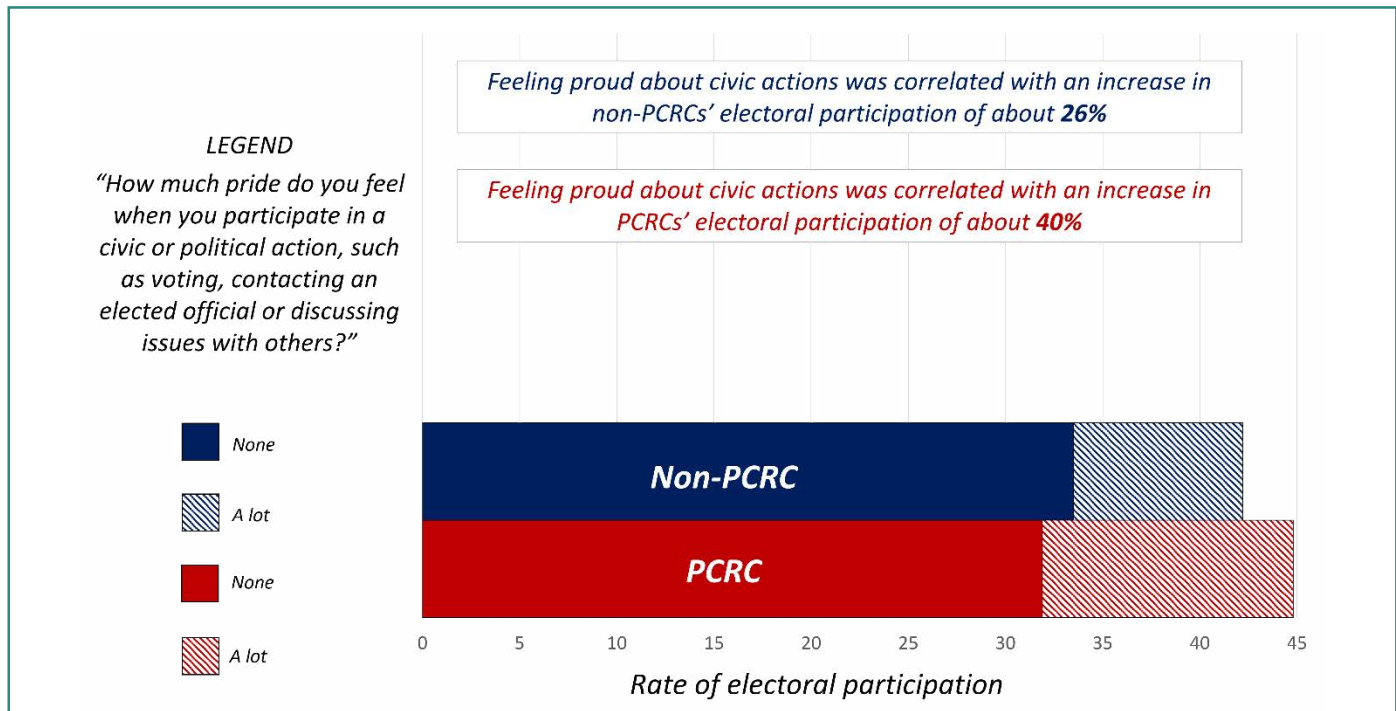


Figure 5: Comparing rates of electoral participation by feelings of pride in civic actions in the 2020 CMPS



Pride in civic actions was more strongly correlated with electoral participation among PCRCs. This trend helps us pinpoint the value in framing voting and other forms of electoral engagement for expressing one’s voice. When people who have loved ones with felony convictions can take pride in these actions — regardless of the outcome of the actions — then they are especially motivated to be active in electoral politics.

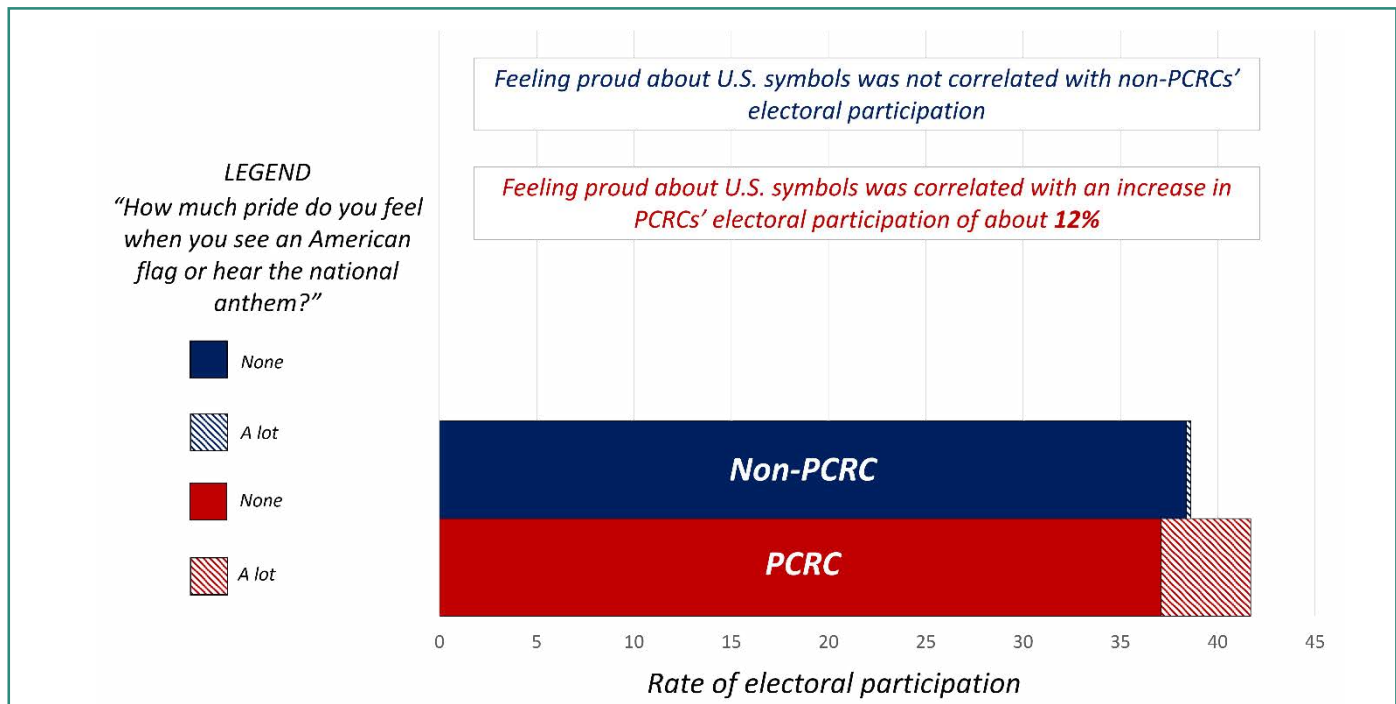
Emphasizing the benefits of the **process** of political action, such as feeling stronger connections to one’s community or setting an example for future generations, irrespective of the observable **results** of that action, can make a great difference among PCRCs.

Another question from the 2020 CMPS assesses the amount of pride people feel when they hear

the national anthem or see an American flag. Here we see a slight departure from the previous trends. Among people who do *not* have loved ones with felony convictions, expressing pride in US symbols has *no* meaningful association with electoral participation. In sharp contrast, **pride in US symbols is correlated with an increase in the electoral participation of people who have loved ones with felony convictions.**

It makes sense that expressing pride in the symbols of America carries such weight in the electoral participation of people connected with the carceral system. The carceral experience eats away at one’s sense of belonging as an American. Conversely, when people rebuild a sense of belonging and cultivate a sense of civic pride in the face of their experiences, they often stand on the front lines of political action in their communities.

Figure 6: Comparing rates of electoral participation by feelings of pride in US symbols in the 2020 CMPS



The unique correlation with pride in American symbols resonates with the powerful feeling Kenneth described when he stepped out of the voting booth for the first time:

you really feel a part of America. [...] You’re intertwined with this thing, and you have a say so (Williams, 3/7/2023).

And the feeling Roger described of breaking generational patterns and establishing a new tradition of producing active citizens:

voting goes a long way in reversing some of this generational damage that we do. (Fox, 3/7/2023).

The problem is: CMPS data shows that **people who have loved ones with felony convictions express about 10% less pride in American symbols than people without that connection.**

CONCRETE WAYS TO BUILD COLLECTIVE PRIDE AND AGENCY AMONG PCRCs

Pastors Rae and Tony of Faith in Florida demonstrated the value of building up community members’ senses of political agency long before an election. Months ahead of the fall election season, they convened a series of listening sessions with local area residents (see details below in the Summarizing Case Study). During the sessions, residents were invited to identify the issues most important to them and then encouraged to collaborate within the space to envision possible solutions to those issues.

I could see the seeds of common identity and a sense of empowerment being planted at the initial session I attended. And I see great promise in this type of forum for PCRCs specifically. As the listening sessions advance and bonds are strengthened among participants, local officials

and candidates can be invited to join the space, albeit with a caveat. Similar to the method introduced by Faith in Florida, public officials should be given the explicit instruction to listen to PCRCs without interjection. After PCRCs have their say, the official or candidate may express how they plan to be accountable to PCRCs' concerns. By scaling up the sessions so that PCRCs first feel *heard* by the forum organizers, their peers, and ultimately, by those representing their interests, these forums help to enhance PCRCs' political voice, while cementing their sense of linked fate of the experienced.

Additionally, the connections between PCRCs at in-person events can be fortified through email listservs, Slack channels, WhatsApp groups, and/or printed directories. These networks allow PCRCs to continually share resources, such as intel on who is hiring (and open to employing RCs), housing opportunities, sales at local stores, etc. Beyond those tangible offerings, these virtual networks can keep individual PCRCs' ties to the larger group salient in their minds, once again reinforcing the sense of linked fate of the experienced.

Finally, a number of the activists I spoke with during my Faith in Florida site visit stressed the skepticism they have about partnering with large advocacy networks or state agencies. This is based on feeling burned by such groups devaluing their experience and expertise, and instead imposing external values and modes of operation to achieve what were originally common goals. One way to build up PCRCs' sense of we got this is for them to provide resources for one another to meet material needs and address hardships while reducing their reliance on the "outsiders" or state agencies that have not earned their trust. This can be achieved through the creation of **mutual aid directories** run and populated by local area PCRCs.

These actions facilitate PCRCs' capacity to build up community-based reliance and resilience,

which foster a sense of collective pride. These steps also create spaces for the discourse around politics to be transformed from one that invites resignation to one that values the expressive and community power of raising one's voice. When PCRCs see the broader community as folks who understand their circumstances and will go to bat for them for immediate needs and politically, they will feel more motivated to act in support of that community.

Savvy recognizes the power that transpires when a community of RCs and PCRCs feels mutual concern for one another. This dynamic breaks down the kind of pride that inhibits people from seeking help and fosters collective pride in the community — the kind of pride that propels political action:

***We're going to help you get through this.
We can't lose you. You've come too far***
(Shabazz, 3/6/2023).

BUILDING COLLECTIVE HOPE

We believe

You can ride through our communities, and I can show you all the nihilism you want to see. But I also want to be able to share a light, too, and be like, you know. Let's try something different
(Shabazz, 3/6/2023).

This observation by Savvy on the pervasive hopelessness felt in communities connected to RCs was shared by many. For example, Pastor Tony of the Palm Beach chapter of Faith in Florida noted that the people who just seem casually indifferent to the call to action are the biggest stumbling block to his work as a community organizer, not the people who are actively resistant nor those who show early enthusiasm but whose interest wanes over time.

Savvy, Pastor Tony, and many more advocates work diligently to pierce that sense of political resignation by giving people something to feel hopeful about, something valuable they can work toward, something they can feel confident is genuinely within their reach. What is the power of hope in mobilizing PCRCs in particular? And why is hope an effective counter to the sense of political despair so often expressed by PCRCs? In this section, I highlight the importance of **countering the fatalism that clouds the lives of PCRCs** and **of helping PCRCs persevere in the face of political disappointments**.

COUNTERING FATALISM

Tayna, an RC and community advocate who in November 2022 was elected to the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Council, believes that the pathway to getting PCRCs to see the value of participation in local politics is activating PCRCs' passion about issues important to their lives. That passion is often eroded by a relentless onslaught of challenges, such as staggering economic vulnerability: *Will I make rent this month? How am I going to get new school clothes for my kids?* These kinds of questions gnaw away at folks, making them anxious and sapping away their energy for engaging in politics.¹⁴

PCRCs also face the bitter irony that, in neighborhoods highly affected by mass incarceration, they are simultaneously overpoliced and feel unsafe. Tayna observed that this dynamic produces a particular sense of fatalism, one that is especially pronounced among younger folks: *Why care about voting if I doubt I'll make it to my 30s?*

There are also many stressors related to the extensive interactions RCs and PCRCs have with the carceral system, which often make people feel isolated and vulnerable, and without a sense that positive change is possible.

Many experts of political communication and mobilization may believe the answer is to get folks angry about these adverse conditions. By translating anxiety to anger, they can get folks fired up to take political action to turn the tide. This notion is rooted in a wide body of research that demonstrates that anger moves people to act. Get them *mad as hell* and you get them primed for political action as the object of their anger.¹⁵

¹⁴ Tayna's observation is consistent with a wide body of empirical work showing that, when people are in a state of anxiety or fear, they are more likely to withdraw from political activity (see Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Marcus Neuman, and MacKuen, 2000).

¹⁵ For example, see work by political psychologist Nicholas Valentino (Valentino et al. 2009; 2011).

But my research shows that this conventional wisdom does not apply to everyone. I find that when people of color are angry about politics, they are not moved to take political action anywhere near to the degree of angry White people.

This racial *anger gap* suggests that members of groups that are typically marginalized by the political system are not inspired to act within that system when they feel aggrieved by it. Instead of retribution, they seek retreat.¹⁶

The people I spoke with for this project observed a similar dynamic among PCRCs. Their feelings of anger did not seem to animate a stronger motivation to engage in politics. For instance, Roger described an RC whose anger repelled him from the political arena:

There's a really good example of a gentleman that I've been working with. He's involved in KFTC. He was angry, you know. He's a veteran, and he comes home. He gets addicted to drugs. He goes to prison, and gets a felony, and you know he's angry. He's angry when he comes home. He's angry at the government. He's just angry at the world. And like, when he came home he doesn't see the point in voting. And we deal with that a lot (Fox, 3/7/2023).

Chuck echoes this point. He feels that national issue-based and political campaigns turn away RCs and PCRCs because of those campaigns'

¹⁶ This notion is corroborated by recent work emerging from Vesla Weaver's PORTALS project. A 2020 piece by Weaver, Prowse, and Piston reveals that, while justice-involved Black people tend to seek greater community with others in their orbit, they also withdraw from formal political institutions.

relentless messaging about what people stand to lose or how they will be harmed if the "wrong" side wins the political battle. Chuck finds this messaging exhausting rather than encouraging for people who already feel they have been dealt a losing hand.

He asserts that people in these communities are much more energized by the prospects of having someone or something to vote for, as opposed to someone or something to vote against.

Chuck's claim is consistent with my research on what does and does not mobilize racially-marginalized groups. And as I demonstrate below, there are striking trends in how RCs' and PCRCs' feelings translate to political action. Anger makes no discernable difference to political action. Hope, meanwhile, has a palpable effect on RC and PCRC political engagement.

With this in mind, how can we acknowledge the precarities faced by PCRCs and still give them a credible sense of hope? Unlike pride, which is a feeling independent of outside forces, hope has to be anchored to an external outcome. This means that people need a prospect that feels real in order to become hopeful.

In the course of this project, I learned how key organizations give RC and PCRC communities real hope. For their faith-based organization, the team at Faith in Florida draws analogies between the fight for justice in housing, employment, and policing with biblical narratives of persecuted people persevering and ultimately triumphing over adversities. Savvy engenders hope among RCs by providing a platform for them to feel heard and validated. He recently started a podcast that features RCs sharing their personal journeys. A core concept of his vision for the podcast is to reduce stigma and increase RCs' sense that, by taking ownership of their narratives, they can also change their lived experiences.

Tayna builds hope through forging deep emotional bonds with community members. By sharing her story of incarceration, she hopes to inspire RCs and PCRCs to engage in authentic and vulnerable sharing. The ensuing bonds reduce the sense of isolation, giving people hope that, collectively, they can effect positive change in a way that they felt incapable of doing alone.

Bruce continuously emphasizes to VOTE members the power they wield through strength of numbers. While acknowledging the many limits to government responsiveness to marginalized populations, he focuses on how much influence RCs and PCRCs can wield over political outcomes if and when they make a concerted effort to act in unison.

Across all approaches, RCs and PCRCs are endowed with a credible sense of hope by emphasizing a collective identity rooted in the common experiences of interactions with the carceral state. Once again, we see a clear value in developing a sense of linked fate of the experienced.

PERSEVERING THROUGH POLITICAL DISAPPOINTMENTS

Pastor Rae learned through his efforts to get out the vote among marginalized community members that the work cannot stop at getting people to the polls. When the candidate voters have placed their faith in is victorious, that is not the culmination of efforts but the beginning of a new phase of work: keeping that elected official *accountable* to the community members who voted him or her into office. When PCRCs perceive that the people they elected are not sufficiently accountable, they can feel anew that nullifying sense of political resignation.

A number of people also relayed anecdotes about RCs and PCRCs who resisted calls to act, wanting to protect themselves from inevitable disappointment. Many people

abstain from electoral politics so as to avoid the disappointment of either the “wrong side” winning the election or the “right side” not living up to campaign promises after winning. Deb recounted:

I had one girl who was old enough to register, and she said ‘I can’t. I can’t vote, because if I vote for the bad one, I’ll be upset, and if I vote for the good one [and they lose] I’ll be upset (Graner, 2/28/2023).

Advocates walk a fine line when encouraging people to enter the political fray. After all, you cannot guarantee positive outcomes. Sometimes the “wrong” side wins, and sometimes the “good” side falls short of expectations. How do you make the risks of political action seem worthwhile for a community where risk aversion seems like the safest stance?

There is no easy answer. Even advocates battle disillusionment when their efforts are stymied by resistant political officials. Kungu spoke on this frustration when reflecting on how an issue that he and others had been working diligently to advance was being held up in the state legislature:

You know the system beats you down because it’s — today’s a perfect example. We have a small bill. It has to do with harm reduction to decriminalize fentanyl testing strips so that more people can hand them out [and save lives]. We have like 4 days left in our session. The bill’s sitting in the Senate. It’s sponsored by everybody, but it might be dead because somebody doesn’t like it, you know you just... I mean, we put in a lot of work, a *lot* of work. And so, when you don’t have the victories, or you don’t see the change, it can just beat you down. And so I always tell them to keep staying hopeful and

then keep fighting, because ultimately it is there (Njuguna, 3/10/2023).

What helps Kungu persist in the face of dispiriting developments and hold onto hope? He is buoyed by a community who affirms the value of his efforts (even in the face of disappointing immediate results), encourages him to lean on the team around him, and to rest and recharge:

I couldn't do this job without my colleagues, and other community partners who remind me that like, 'hey, you did a good job. Here's how we're moving things.' And also for self-care, because there are times they can see me, and they're like 'you need to step away. We got you.' Sometimes I feel like I got to do it all, and then I realize the community of folks here, and they'll say, 'you know what? This weekend, turn your phone off. Set aside your email. We got this.'

Disappointment is an inevitable part of the political process. But, in a community we win or lose **together**. Understanding linked fate of the experienced can make the wins feel sweeter and the losses more bearable.

The people around Kungu play a pivotal role in his perseverance by reminding him of his valuable role in the **process** — despite what the results might be. Further, they encourage him to look past the disappointments and to carve out time to take care of himself.

It is vital for RCs and PCRCs to be embedded within communities who provide this type of support. Providing space for self-care is crucial for communities constantly challenged by a

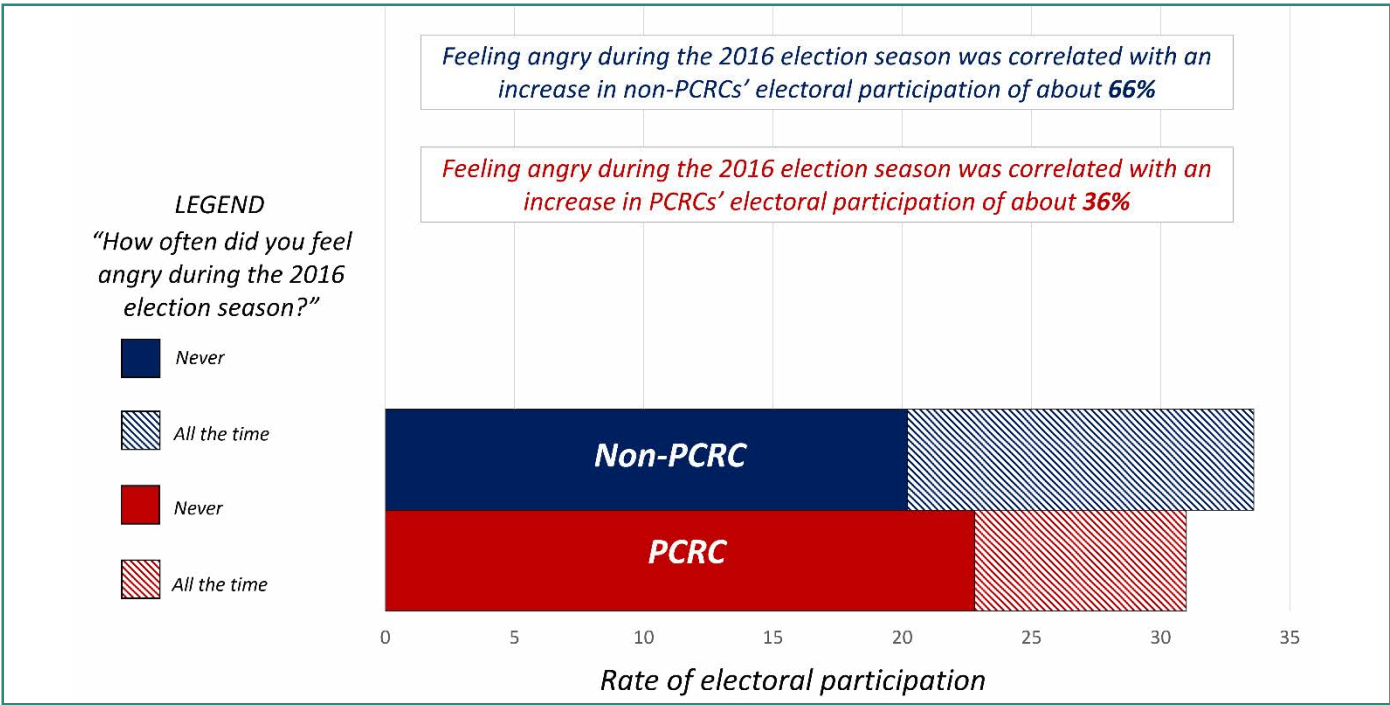
multitude of legal, sociopolitical, and economic vulnerabilities. Additionally, actively affirming the value of people's political work — regardless of outcomes — augments a sense of agency and protects optimism even in times of deep disappointment.

BUILDING COLLECTIVE HOPE AND COMBATING FATALISM

Data from the 2016 and 2020 CMPS illustrate why it is more effective to cultivate hope than rile up anger amongst RCs and PCRCs. Figure 7 shows how anger over the 2016 election season relates to electoral participation for people who have loved ones with felony convictions and people who do not.

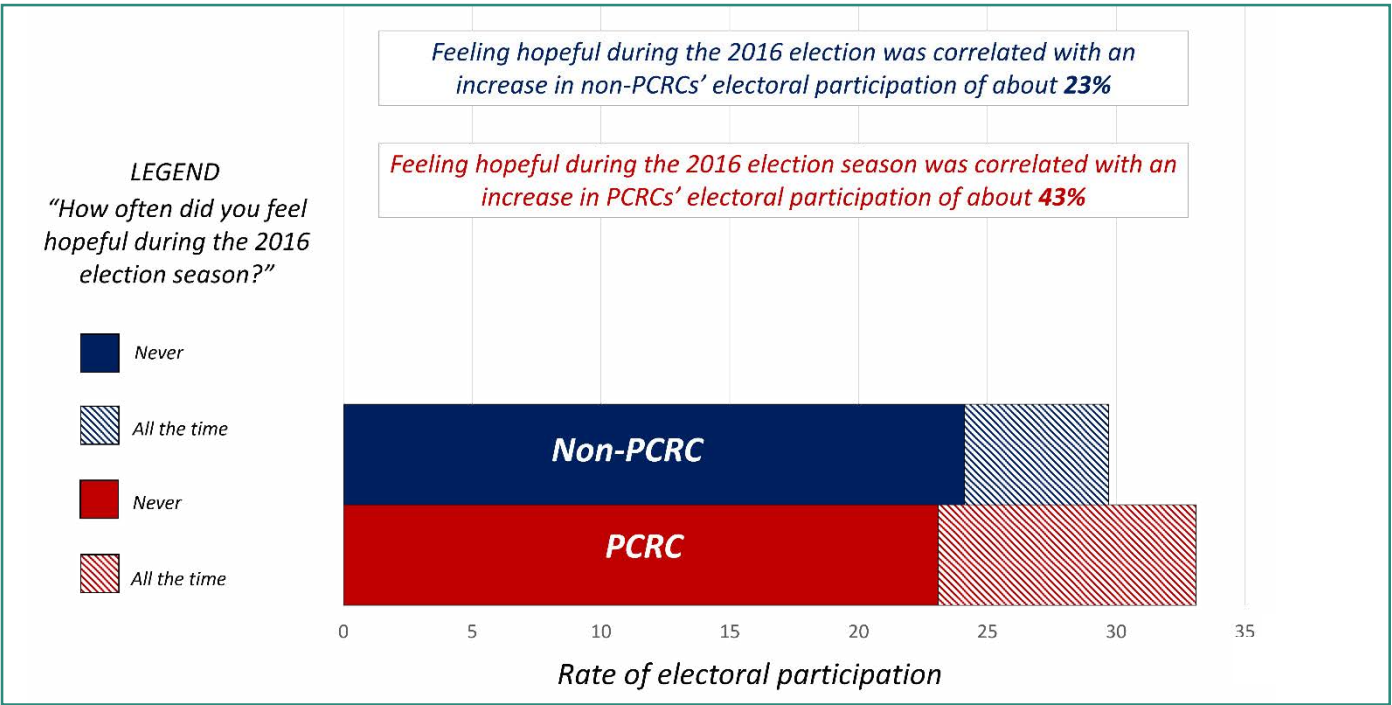
Among people who have loved ones with felony convictions and those who do not, people who felt angry all the time throughout the 2016 race take up electoral actions more than those who never felt angry. Yet, in a reversal from the previous patterns, **anger was more strongly correlated with electoral participation among non-PCRCs – people who do not have loved ones with felony convictions.**

Figure 7: Comparing rates of electoral participation by feelings of anger throughout the 2016 election season



This trend *reverses* when we shift from anger to hope. Figure 8 shows the relationship between hope and electoral participation for both groups.

Figure 8: Comparing rates of electoral participation by feelings of hope throughout the 2016 election season



Feeling hopeful all the time correlates with electoral participation to nearly twice the degree among PCRCs compared to non-PCRCs. Indeed, feelings of hope throughout the 2016 election are more strongly associated with PCRCs’ electoral participation than feelings of anger. This trend is consistent with the insights of RCs and advocates I spoke with for this study, who emphasized that RCs and PCRCs are moved to act when they feel positive outcomes are truly within their grasp.

The 2020 CMPS asked more specific questions about hope. Figure 9 shows the relationship between electoral participation and respondents’ sense of hope about the economy over the past year.

The devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased many people’s economic precarity, could easily have dimmed hope about the economy in 2020. So, did people who felt more hopeful rather than *less* hopeful about the economy also feel more motivated to take up electoral action?

Once again, hope appears to be more mobilizing for people who have loved ones with felony convictions. **Feeling hopeful about the state**

of the economy is associated with electoral participation to more than twice the degree among PCRCs compared to non-PCRCs.

This same pattern emerges when we shift the object of people’s hope from the state of the economy to the state of race relations over the past year. Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 was defined largely by massive global protests against racism and racialized violence, motivated by the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Were people who developed a sense of hope from these movements more motivated to take up political actions during this election year? Figure 10 shows the relationship between electoral participation and respondents’ sense of hope about race relations.

Once again, **feeling hopeful about the state of race relations is correlated with electoral participation to more than twice the degree for PCRCs compared to non-PCRCs.** This uniquely powerful mobilizing relationship between hope and participation among people who have loved ones with felony convictions makes clear why efforts to cultivate a sense of credible and unwavering hope among RCs and PCRCs are worthwhile.

Figure 9: Comparing rates of electoral participation by feelings of hope about the state of the economy over the past year in 2020 CMPS

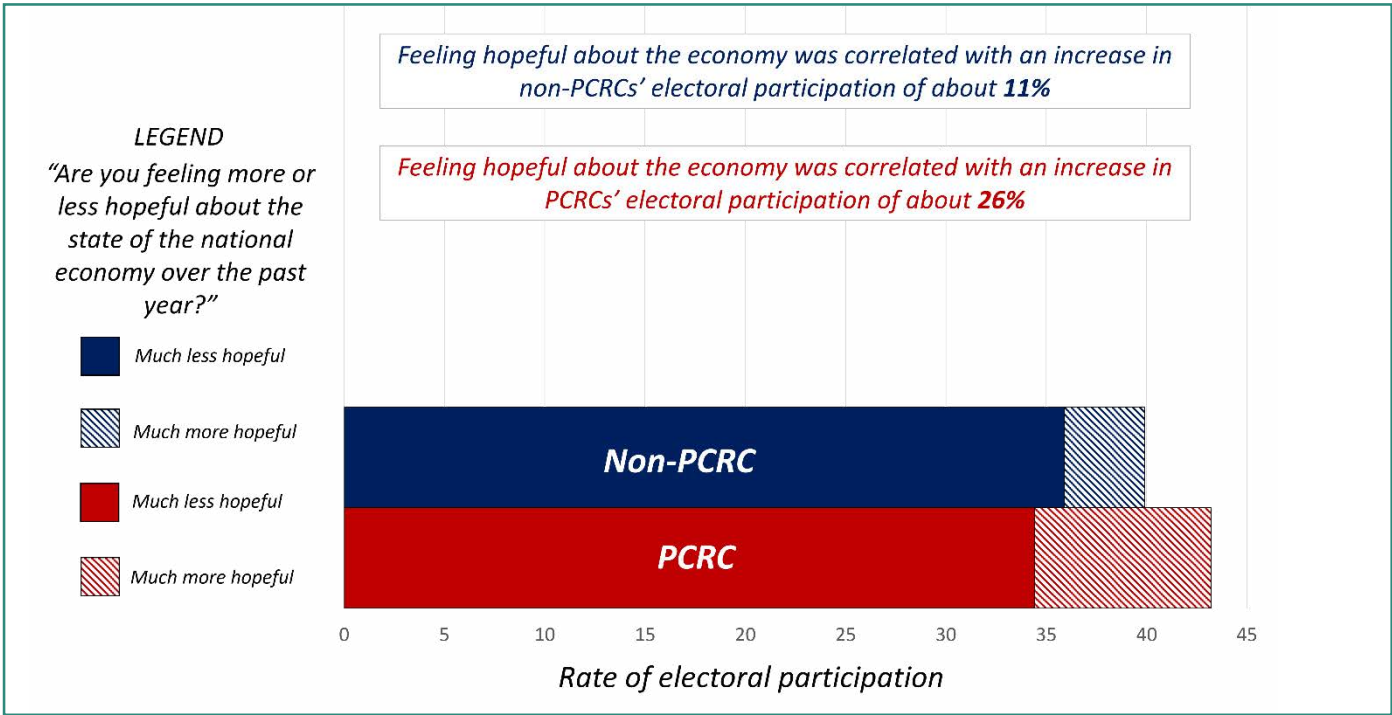
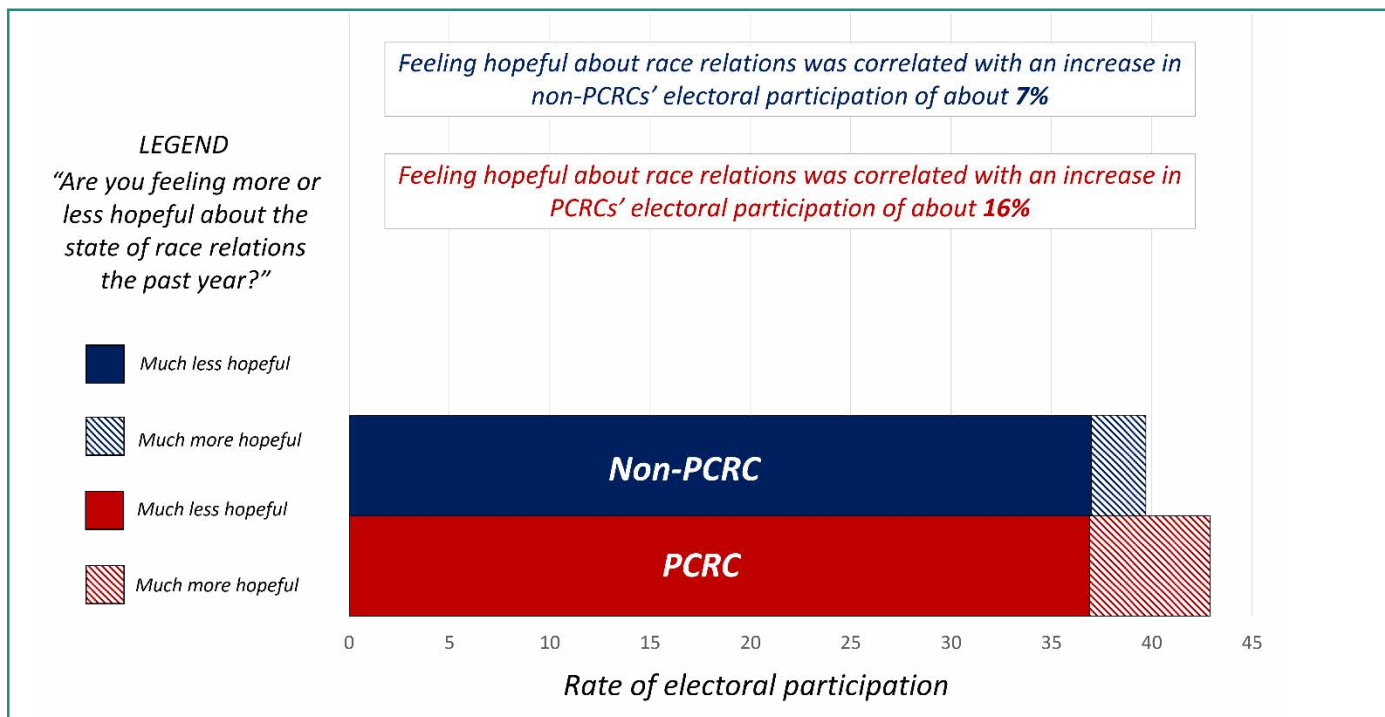


Figure 10: Comparing rates of electoral participation by feelings of hope about the state of the race relations in 2020 CMPS



CONCRETE WAYS TO BUILD COLLECTIVE HOPE AND COMBAT FATALISM AMONG PCRCs

Given the apparently strong correlations between feeling hopeful and participating in electoral politics, how can groups working with PCRCs cultivate hope? One way is to be intentional and proactive about creating space within the support and narrative groups, listening sessions, and online/physical directories for sharing good news and testimonials.

Leveraging spaces to engender a concrete sense of optimism might mean concluding each gathering of PCRCs with a session devoted to reporting any good news, spanning the political or the personal. Session leaders might encourage PCRCs to routinely share good news and testimonials via their online platforms, listservs, and printed newsletters. And PCRC gatherings

can be structured with an explicitly political focus (such as the listening sessions convened to identify important issues during elections) so events end with discussions of **what was achieved** or **what was learned**.

Furthermore, informal gatherings can be convened regularly after key political milestones, e.g., elections, the conclusion of state legislative sessions, the conclusion of the school year. In these post-milestone gatherings, which can feel more social than the other spaces, PCRCs may be guided to reflect on gains made and losses accrued throughout the process. The aim is to cultivate among PCRCs the sense that they experience the highs and lows of the political process **as a team**. Experiencing lows as part of a team can help to preserve PCRCs’ sense of optimism in the face of political setbacks.

BUILDING ON COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND LOVE

We do this for each other

What's your superpower? I asked advocates what makes them effective at building power among marginalized community members, specifically PCRCs. Their responses surfaced a common theme: it was less a question of *what* and more of *who*. *Who* propels them to do this work? For whom are they inspired to persist in their efforts?

Chuck links his commitment to building community power to his commitment to his child. He is motivated to work toward shaping a world that will not ensnare his child in the same traps that caught him. I heard a similar sentiment from Pastor Rae, a lead organizer with Faith in Florida, who also named his children as his primary motivator. Pastor Rae sees his children's transition to adulthood marked by dire landscapes in employment, housing, and violence.

A different set of loved ones motivates Dukes, an RC-turned community organizer with Faith in Florida Palm Beach chapter. Dukes is grateful for the love and unwavering support he received from people in his life when he was at his lowest. He is motivated to pay forward that investment of patience and care for people in his community who are considered "lost causes." Tayna is also motivated to work with "lost causes" to demonstrate through word and deed that even the most alienated and downtrodden community members are God's creatures and are loved.

Sheila first thought the anger she felt over how her community was marginalized by local officials during the COVID-19 pandemic motivated her. But upon deeper reflection, she realized her **love** for people is her superpower.

The theme is clear. Whether people discussed the agape love that comes from their spirituality, their love for and fervent desire to protect their children, or love for people in general, this emotion consistently emerged as the motivator to move from inaction to intense action and organizing.

Just as love motivates activists to build power among community members, love can also motivate RCs and PCRCs to join the political

fray. Framing political action as an act of love and protection of others can be extremely effective. Even when PCRCs feel like politics do not respond to their input, the desire to exercise commitment to loved ones — particularly RCs in their lives — can propel them to act anyway.

Deb has witnessed this dynamic play out at voter registration drives. When PCRCs learn there is a pathway for a loved RC to regain enfranchisement, they deeply value the opportunity to participate in getting this right restored:

When you're talking at a voting registration table they go, 'Oh, my son can't vote,' or 'I have a nephew...' It's like spreading the information ... And the little wins are big ones in your heart (Graner, 2/28/2023).

As mentioned above, PCRCs often have strong desire but no specific know-how or resources to offer their loved RCs the specific support needed. So when PCRCs can offer insight about the vote restoration process, or a lead on a job opportunity, or information on a resource group for RCs, they feel especially encouraged and empowered.

There is a clear take-away: when PCRCs are convinced that, by staying connected to civic organizations and plugged into local politics, they can stay abreast of resources that will be valuable to the RCs in their lives, they are effectively motivated to stay politically engaged. Love for their RCs motivates civic (political) engagement.

Many of the advocates who are RCs spoke about leveraging familial and friendship ties to inspire political action. Roger emphasizes how strongly he can relate to the universal feeling of wanting to make things better for children:

You know, I can make [politics] relatable when I talk about my daughter. Like, everybody with kids can pick up on that, you know? I just think that just being able to do that and like making [politics] real for somebody. Whoever it is, I feel like I can make it real to them (Fox, 3/7/2023).

Kenneth used an anecdote to illustrate how he leverages the trust and credibility he has established with longtime friends to apply tough love to urge them to register and vote:

And I try to tell them I'm speaking to you. You know me. We ran the streets together. Oh, I gave a man back his voice to vote. [...] He told me 'I ain't going to vote. I'm not going to register to vote.' I had 30 conversations with this cat. You know what I mean? And finally, we got the registration turned in. 'I ain't going to vote. I ain't going to vote.' Guess what? On election day I was right in front of his house beeping my horn. He said, 'what are we doin, man?' I said, 'we're having a voting party. Me and you are going to the polls together. We're going to vote together.' Oddly enough, his sister, my cousin, and his brother-in-law were at the [polling place] at the same time. So then we made it a big party. We put it on Facebook. And now we've piqued a little interest (Williams, 3/7/2023).

Kenneth has earned the right to be persistent, to the point of being pushy, and has the devotion to be so persistent with his friend because of the love

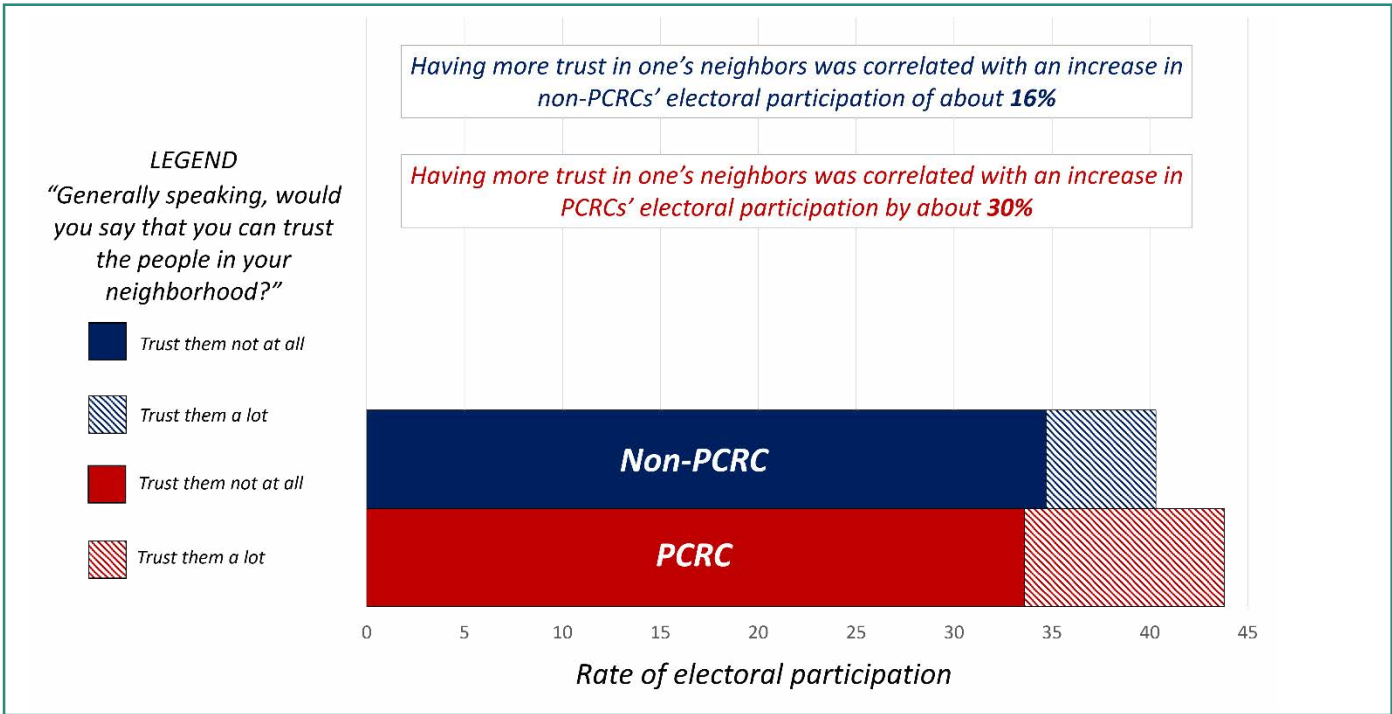
they share. If PCRCs can be drawn into politics to help their loved ones, then they can also make personalized and influential calls to draw their loved ones into politics.

The creation of spaces and programming that cultivate linked fate of the experienced among PCRCs is instrumental to bringing more PCRCs into political activity. Just as Roger can forge meaningful connections with people based on a shared identity as parents, PCRCs' linked fate of the experienced promotes political engagement. As parents can be moved to act to benefit their children, PCRCs can be moved to act to benefit their returning loved ones and the broader PCRC community.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BUILD ON COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND LOVE TO INSPIRE ACTION

Love is not always at the forefront of conversations on how to inspire political action. Thus, there are no measures in the 2016 or 2020 CMPS that directly tap into how love plays a role in respondents' political engagement. As a proxy, I use a question about trust from the 2020 CMPS to demonstrate that the bonds of mutual trust that PCRCs have with neighbors have uniquely mobilizing effects on their electoral participation. Figure 11 shows the relationship between respondents' trust in the people in their neighborhoods and their rates of electoral participation.

Figure 11: Comparing rates of electoral participation by trust in neighbors in the 2020 CMPS



People who trust their neighbors a lot are more active in electoral politics than people who do not trust their neighbors at all. This data shows that **the correlation between trusting one's neighbors and electoral participation is nearly twice as strong among PCRCs as among non-PCRCs**. This shows the unique value in building mutual trust and care within the PCRC community. When PCRCs feel supported, they are more likely to raise their voices in politics. People who trust their neighbors a lot are more active in electoral politics than people who do not trust their neighbors at all. This data shows that the correlation between trusting one's neighbors and electoral participation is nearly twice as strong among PCRCs as among non-PCRCs. This shows the unique value in building mutual trust and care within the PCRC community. When PCRCs feel supported, they are more likely to raise their voices in politics.

CONCRETE WAYS TO BUILD ON COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND LOVE TO INSPIRE ACTION

In order to help cultivate the sense of common identity and kinship from which acts of love spring, it is important to devote time within gathering spaces for PCRCs and RCs to guide participants through reflecting on **why** and **for whom** they are in these spaces. This can entail inviting participants within gathering spaces to engage in creative activities that remind them of their relational ties, such as encouraging PCRCs to **write letters to the RCs in their lives**, in which they detail their hopes and dreams for those loved ones. Participants should be encouraged to retain these letters and be asked on occasion to reflect on what they wrote in those letters to remind them of **why** they participate here and engage in local politics.

Additionally, in RC-led information sessions (especially those conducted while the loved one is still incarcerated), the RCs should give testimonials about how PCRCs make a difference in the RCs' journey from incarceration to

advocacy. These testimonials allow PCRCs to envision how they can support their returning loved ones, which encourages them to stay connected to the groups.

During the initial gathering of these spaces, PCRCs can be guided in the process of developing community agreements/guidelines that they jointly agree to adhere to in all subsequent sessions. This cements the understanding that the PCRCs are jointly responsible for the success of these sessions, gives them a sense of ownership over the spaces, and foment collective identity with fellow participants.

While these actions may feel far removed from the political realm, they are essential for establishing the community ties and shared responsibilities that motivate people to take actions that positively affect others — including political actions about which they previously had misgivings.

Framing political action as an act of love can transform PCRCs' perspectives by shifting the center of attention from elected officials, state agents, and party elites that they often feel marginalized by to the family, friends, and partners for whom they are willing to go the extra mile.

Marcus describes the transformative collective power that love inspires:

It's all rooted in love. Because I love that person standing next to me. I love what we do [together]. Let's get going. It's just — it's energizing, you know what I mean? It's just like the energy that you get like when we're together, we're holding hands. We're locked in, and we go in [together] (Jackson, 3/13/2023).

A SUMMARIZING CASE STUDY

Palm Beach listening sessions

PCRCs represent a patchwork of people who are diverse in race, gender, age, education level, and political affiliation. We typically think these identities shape people's political engagement, but it is abundantly clear that being a PCRC is a politically-relevant identity in its own right. Perceptions of community and feelings of pride, hope, and anger all operate differently for people connected with a justice-involved individual than for non-connected folks. Therefore, attempts to build more political engagement among PCRCs should be guided by the underlying goal of building up the distinctive linked fate of the experienced of being a PCRC.

PCRCs think and feel their way through politics in ways distinct from non-connected folks, which indicates that there is something meaningful and definitive about being a PCRC. Cultivating a strong sense of attachment to that identity, and a sense of linked fate with others sharing that identity, goes a long way toward building up the community attachments, pride, hope, and mutual care that are effective in mobilizing people toward electoral participation.

The recommendations throughout this report are informed by conversations with advocates about their effective practices and what they view as the distinctive needs of PCRCs. The recommendations are also drawn from my observations of the Palm Beach Faith in Florida leaders' attempts to foster a sense of collective identity among local residents, an identity that would compel the residents to feel a sense of

mutual obligation to each other and to take pride in their capacity to work in unison to affect local change. The organizers' efforts to create spaces and community demonstrate how the four central themes of this report can be achieved.

LESSONS FROM THE LISTENING SESSIONS IN PALM BEACH

Pastors Rae and Tony worked alongside Sheila to organize a listening session of local area Black men. The purpose of the session was twofold: to understand from Black men why their political engagement tends to lag behind that of Black women and to ultimately spur more political participation among the men.

This session was convened in a cigar bar. Why? To ensure the participants felt at ease and safe. The goal was essentially to *meet the men where they're at*, to signal that they could be their authentic selves. Being intentional about building a collective space in which the community members feel most at home helps to **build senses of community and belonging**. Additionally, meeting the community on their own terms signals a level of respect for their lived experiences and norms that helps to foster their sense of **agency**.

Consistent with the goal of **reframing the narrative around politics**, the facilitators of the session mostly refrained from directly

referencing conventional political subjects, like the parties, policy debates, or contentious issues. Instead, they let the participants define politics via prompts that centered participants' priorities. For instance, the session was framed as a *casual conversation* about *what issues matter to us*.

The intentional framing of “us” helps to **build a sense of collective identity** among the participants. Opening the session by inviting participants to reflect on what matters to them offered them the chance to define political issues on their own terms. Within the first ten minutes, gentrification, capitalism, community banking, and intergenerational divides within the Black community had been raised. Participants spoke about these issues with a rawness and personal conviction that revealed how these issues directly affect them and their loved ones. Defining politically-relevant issues on their own terms and from their own perspectives helped **build participants' sense of pride and agency**.

At one point, the facilitators explicitly invoked politics to ask participants for assessments of the Biden administration's record on matters important to them. There emerged a general consensus of resignation about the administration, a distinct sentiment of *he hasn't done anything for us, and I never expected him to do anything for us*. Importantly, multiple people drew a contrast between their lack of expectations of government at the federal level and their belief that local government is where their input is most urgently needed. Their expressions reflected the utility of **keeping politics local** to engender agency.

After this first listening session, I spoke with Pastors Rae and Tony about the follow-up sessions. They asserted that, in order for these listening sessions to be effective, the participants would have to feel a sense of direct ownership over them. So participants of the first session were invited to take the lead in convening the next session. Sure enough, one individual answered the call and made the hosting arrangements for the second and subsequently

the third sessions, held at a restaurant and a different smoke shop, respectively.

Placing the sessions directly in the hands of the participants cemented the notion that this was indeed their space, operating by *their* rules. This sense of collective ownership builds up participants' **senses of community and belonging while also building their senses of collective pride** over their space. That ownership also further reinforced the participants' senses of ease and safety, allowing them to be more raw and emotionally vulnerable with one another as the sessions advanced. That raw emotional expression is crucial to the men **building on their collective identity and showing love for one another**.

To ensure that this endeavor feels sufficiently *owned* by the community members, Sheila and Pastors Rae and Tony did not transform this alliance of men into a formal institution. They believe that the group can draw upon the bonds of trust and social capital to build a politically-engaged community without becoming a formal group, or creating a formal affiliation with an existing group. The underlying belief here is that formalizing this arrangement would deprive the participants of the sense of ownership they have over the group.

In a way, this decision resonates with the notion of emphasizing the **process over the results**. By not formalizing the group into an institution, the organizers of the initial session are banking on the participants to stay motivated to engage with one another based on their senses of mutual interdependence, the **linked fate of the experienced they have cultivated as a collective group**. Thus, as the men scale up their actions from convening and talking to people to ensure they are registered, to going door-to-door in their neighborhoods with personalized appeals to register and vote, they are acting out of **desire to demonstrate their commitments to one another and to advance the collective interests of this group with which they identify**.

In my view, the Palm Beach team is not reinventing the wheel or radically reimagining the approach to building community power. But they are remixing the traditional playbook to create spaces centered on building relationships and common identity.

The take-away is encouraging when we consider how to build the political engagement of PCRCs.

The common bonds that connect PCRCs can be empowering rather than stigmatizing, mobilizing rather than debilitating by

- (1) creating space to share narratives around PCRCs' indirect experiences with the carceral state;
- (2) offering PCRCs chances to provide support resources for one another; and
- (3) providing PCRCs opportunities to learn from RCs how they can aid the journeys of the RCs in their lives.

PCRCs can thereby develop pride and hope, and act to help the people they love. By taking these steps, organizers can help PCRCs tell new stories about justice-involved individuals, stories of people with the will, the minds, and the hearts to advance their communities' collective goals.

Who will tell those stories?

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

HOW TO BUILD COMMUNITY AND BELONGING?

Foster the perception that PCRCs are not alone, but part of a larger group of people persevering through common challenges.

- Create support groups PCRCs can join while their loved ones are still incarcerated. Lead group sessions that emphasize narrative-sharing around the indirect carceral experiences to help create a sense of communal identity and linked fate.
- Create RC-led forums that guide PCRCs through what they can expect and how they can be helpful resources to their returning loved ones – before their loved ones come home.
- Identify within-community solutions to some of the most pressing and immediate concerns facing PCRCs.

HOW TO BUILD COLLECTIVE PRIDE AND AGENCY?

Foster a sense of common identity and cultivate communal pride, as PCRCs look out for one another and collectively identify their priority political issues.

- Develop resources such as *mutual aid directories* run and populated by PCRCs to provide support resources for one another, fostering a sense of interdependence.
- Conduct listening sessions exclusively with PCRCs and RCs ahead of elections where they can voice their concerns and priority issues.
- Facilitate community-building and continuous narrative- and resource-sharing for local area PCRCs through email listservs, Slack channels, WhatsApp groups, and/or printed directories.

HOW TO BUILD COLLECTIVE HOPE?

Create spaces for PCRCs to experience and process the ups and downs of the local political cycle *together* so they may mutually encourage one another, keep their spirits up and hope alive.

- Structure gatherings of PCRCs with time devoted to sharing good news and testimonials. Encourage the sharing of good news across PCRC directories as well.
- Convene informal gatherings after key milestones (e.g., elections, the conclusions of state legislative sessions, the end of the school year) at which PCRCs may reflect on gains made and lessons learned.

HOW TO BUILD COLLECTIVE IDENTITY ROOTED IN LOVE?

Frame political actions as expressions of PCRCs' advocacy for the people they care about so they overcome political resignation and take action.

- Across gatherings of PCRCs and PCRC-exclusive directories, encourage intensive reflections on *why* and *for whom* PCRCs are making political efforts.
- In gatherings, invite RCs to share how the care and support of their loved ones were instrumental in their journeys post-incarceration.
- Guide PCRCs in developing *community agreements/guidelines* they collectively agree to adhere to within their gatherings. This cements the idea that PCRCs own these spaces and encourages them to engage in a way that benefits fellow PCRCs.

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