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Felony Disenfranchisement Commercial Script

Int. An African American family sitting down for dinner.

A mother and father aged 35-40 and dressed business casual are sitting at the table. Their son and daughter are also there, aged 8-10. They appear to be upper-middle class and the TV in the background is showing a news channel discussing the 2020 presidential election.

Daughter

"Daddy, who did you vote for?"

Father

"Well your Uncle and I made a mistake and got in some trouble a long, long time ago and they took away our ability to vote."

Son

"Mom, what about you?"

Mother

"Well honey I'm able to, but since your dad and your Uncle have never been able to I never really got around to it."

Son

"But isn't it important?"

Dad

"If it's so important then why won't they let us do it?"

Screen fades black and infographic is shown regarding felony disenfranchisement and how it affects the community.

FELONY DISENFRANCHISEMENT

5.17

million
disenfranchised
in the US

2

states do not
disenfranchise

11

states
disenfranchise
permanently

The 2020 Presidential election was decided by
less than 7 million votes and that was less
than 3 million in 2016



When a large portion of the community is unable to
vote, that norm bleeds into the eligible voters in the

Overall Narrative:

The overall narrative idea is to frame the issue of felony disenfranchisement in a more human way rather than just as statistics and abstract ideas. Throughout the semester when auditing other messages regarding felony disenfranchisement, many of the rhetorical messages that were found were created through the realms of facts and statistics. There are positives and negatives to both aspects of both pathological and logical appeals, which is why we have included both in our message. Our message seeks to appeal to the people who may not think themselves as having anything in common with felony offenders and the racial connotation that follows with any talk of prison, sentencing, or judicial reform. In order to meet this goal, a lot was drawn from Haidt and his moral foundations, as well as the fixed versus fluid dichotomy argued in *Prius or Pickup?*.

We also reflected throughout the creation process about how to best appeal to the average American person without bludgeoning them with boring facts and statistics, while also not relying only on a pathetic argument with no real substantive information about the issue at hand. This issue was resolved by creating the infographic included in the message to be shown at the end of the commercial, as well as having potential to distribute it across social media platforms. Our initial message was not all well-rounded as it relied only on a pathetic appeal. Carroll describes a “rhetorical context” which is a specific situation in which the persuasion is occurring (49). For our message, without the logical appeal and the factual information of the infographic, our message could have been without context for many people who are not as apprised to the effect or expanse of felony disenfranchisement. The exigence of our message could have been lost on the majority of our audience and therefore our purpose made unclear and Carroll points out that effective messaging has clear purpose, meaning, and operates within its constraints (50).

The infographic helps to make clear the purpose of the message, it gives factual backup to the emotional tones of the commercial, as well as explaining the severity of the problem and the importance of action. People are more likely to pay attention to facts and statistics once their emotions and thoughts are primed by the pathetic appeals of the commercial. The infographic also makes clear what the audience should be doing to help. It provides a website to the NCSL where they can find all the state laws regarding felony disenfranchisement since they vary state to state, as well as imploring them to call their Congressperson.

Haidt in his text argues that Democrats (democrats and liberals are the main proponents of change in regards to felony disenfranchisement) operate with a three foundation morality as opposed to the six foundation morality that conservatives see the world through (216). Haidt argues that “liberal moral matrices rest on care/harm, liberty/oppression, and fairness/cheating foundations, although liberals are often willing to trade away fairness... when it conflicts with passion or their desire to fight oppression” (214). Conservatives morality on the other hand “rests on all six foundations, although conservatives are more willing than liberals to sacrifice care and let some people get hurt in order to achieve their moral objectives” (214). Therefore, through the lens of the moral foundations, it can be seen that it would be easier to convince liberals of the seriousness of felony disenfranchisement than conservatives because it clearly appeals strongly to all three foundations of liberal morality. These foundations are appealed to within the commercial through the dialogue and ideas of care, fairness, and liberty. The children show care in wondering who their parents voted for and the mother responds in a soft manner. Fairness comes into question by the parents response to the question of voting, saying that the father had made a mistake a long time ago that still hangs over him to this day, and even in the fact that the mother chooses not to vote since her husband has never been able to either. Lastly the foundation

of liberty is more implied in the overall context of the situation. Liberty in America is often characterized by political participation and the right to vote. In the instance portrayed in the commercial, and the instance of felony disenfranchisement on the whole, the right to vote has been stripped, diminished, or in some other way affected. Haidt states that on the left, this foundation supports “egalitarianism” and the equality of all people manifests itself often in voting booths.

It is more difficult to appeal to the conservative foundations of morality since liberals care most about oppression, but conservatives are more willing to sacrifice care and hold authority and obedience in higher moral regard than liberals. The conservative morality includes the three discussed for liberals, as well as authority/subversion, loyalty/betrayal, and sanctity/degradation (Haidt 214). It is harder to appeal more to conservatives in regards to this issue because of the emphasis put on authority so people should be punished for the crimes they commit.

Haidt describes conservative morality as “Durkheimian,” meaning that “the basic social unit is the family..., and in which order, hierarchy, and tradition are highly valued” (214). Since it was more difficult we also tried to focus on the ideas of fixed versus fluid lifestyles discussed in *Prius or Pickup?*. Conservatives have more fixed viewpoints on life and tend to show more reverence and affinity for tradition than liberals. We chose to focus on the ideas tradition, loyalty, and sanctity to appeal to a more conservative audience. We wanted to nail home the feeling of a quintessential American family by hitting the normal feelings and aesthetics of americana. Having the family all sitting around together for a family meal, all nicely dressed, with a tv playing the news in the background, is a picture of American life that can be taken from the 1950s to the present day. The surroundings are that of a middle-class home

and the parents attire is specifically described as business casual to hit the traditional ideals of the American dream of white picket fences, a family, and the middle class experience (the only non-traditional thing would be that the family is African-American and the “non-traditional” aspect of that presents more esoteric problems in itself).

The idea of family is also meant to be a main focal point of the ad and the infographic. The family sitting down together for dinner, the mention of an Uncle even though he is not present, the mother saying that she does not vote since her husband does not either, and the implied idea that political socialization occurs most importantly at the home and if the parents cannot vote, those around them are less likely to themselves. This idea was also meant to be driven home in the infographic which features images of parents, a child, and a home with the statement “community” and the exponential effects of disenfranchisement on it. The infographic also features a second image of a home and a statement enforcing the idea that the children of disenfranchised parents are less likely to vote. These two parts of the infographic were meant to shift the focus from the immediate offenders and subvert the foundation of authority and righteous punishment; to show that the punishment can expand onto those who have done no wrong, and to show detrimental effects it can have on family/community.

The value of patriotism is also included in the foundation of morality (as seen on Haidt’s chart) and is considered more associated with conservative morality than liberal. Patriotism should be automatically applied when discussing the right to vote which is most integral to the American experiment. The infographic was also meant to exhibit feelings of patriotism with its not-so-subtle color palette.

Audience

The twofold purpose of our message is to create a conversation centered around the issue of disenfranchisement and to consequently enact some level of change. The lack of awareness on this topic is a nationwide problem, and thus our primary audience will encompass broad geographic areas. With our chosen vehicles of distribution, specifically online streaming platforms, we will be able to direct our message within those geographic regions to very particular psychographic and demographic audiences. To make this simpler, we've divided our primary audience into two categories: families and lawmakers.

Our family category will focus on two main demographics: those who have experienced some aspect of disenfranchisement and those who lack an awareness of the issue. The former group consists primarily of low-income, Black or Hispanic families in areas with above-average prison populations (like Florida, for example). These families fit the categories of English or Spanish speaking, have one or more young children, and a vested psychographic interest in the issue at hand. The other demographic of families, those with little stake in the issue, are more likely to be low-or-middle-income white families with young children. We hope to appeal to these families with the emotional aspect of our message, inspiring dinner-table conversations that highlight the importance of voting and the banality of punishing small crimes with permanent civil death. Whether these families have a personal connection to someone who has lost the right to vote or not, we hope to appeal to their sense of moral obligation and encourage their children to take a deeper interest in the issue.

By "lawmakers" our second audience category refers to individuals with either a political stake in the issue or the means to enact some level of political change. This demographic holds the overall least concern for reforming disenfranchisement laws, as it consists primarily of those unaffected by it: white, upper-class lawmakers and people of status. Unfortunately, this group of

voices also holds the most power to enact change, as being wealthy and white predisposes an individual to political success in the U.S. The psychographic segments these families most likely belong to are: Christians, career oriented towards politics, an emotional interest in “charity” or civil rights. As with our child audience, they may lack an awareness of the issue’s severity or find themselves unable to apply it to their own lives. It is our hope that this message will encourage them to make a statement about the issue, therefore sparking a conversation amongst other people in power.

Both of our primary audiences can be found all throughout the US. Because only two states have abolished voter suppression, we have decided to share our message nationwide, in both urban and rural cities. We will run our ads most often during the evening, on networks that are most heavily watched and those that share family content. On streaming apps, we will air our message after popular young adult and children’s programs, focusing our reach on people whose psychographic and demographic interests relate to our target audiences. We will also share our message following law-related shows.

Vehicle

We thought the best vehicle for our message would be a TV advertisement, shown on both cable television (which is steadily going out of fashion) and streaming sites like Hulu and Amazon Prime Video, as well as YouTube. Because our target audience here is both Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, we acknowledge that we need to spread our message as far as possible. As of January 2020, Hulu had over 30 million subscribers and Amazon Prime Video over 26 million in the US alone. That says nothing about the number of *viewers* because a household of two or more—i.e., a family—often has one account and simply shares it. While we’d prefer to show it during any and all possible shows, it would be best to

focus on shows with preexisting focuses on politics and prominent African American characters, such as *Orange is the New Black* and *Black-ish*.

We're constantly being bombarded with messages and advertisements so in order to make ours stand out we used, as discussed above, familiar imagery of a family sitting down for dinner and patriotic colors on our infographic. The infographic itself could easily be screenshotted and shared on social media, allowing for further spread than just on the aforementioned streaming sites. This isn't without constraints though, especially on YouTube where people have the ability to skip ads after so many seconds. Even on Hulu and Amazon Prime Video where they can't be skipped, we can't ensure people won't just mute the TV or leave the room until their show begins. The only thing we could do to avoid that is make our message as eye-catching as possible and try to grab and maintain viewers' attention to persuade them to watch the whole thing.

Emotions

Emotions have already been discussed a little bit in the explanation for the overall effects of the message, however we have yet to talk about the use of angry rhetoric and other more specific emotional appeals. Condit argues that "understanding the lineaments of an emotion such as anger focuses our attention on what anger can and can't do, and it alerts us to where anger is most likely to go wrong and how we might make it go more right for us" (4). In other words, one of our emotional goals through this commercial would be to instill a form of righteous indignation, a sense of anger that a man who made a mistake years ago and has turned his life around is still being punished by not being able to vote.

This idea of a righteous anger would serve as a call to action for those watching the commercial and could be triggered in different ways. One way is through the overall idea of the

situation: the unfairness of felony disenfranchisement as a whole, the effect that it has on more than just the offenders, and through the statistics given on the infographic. These are implied through the commercial as ways to drive home the unfairness of the issue and to rally a group that would be able to pick out the more subtle aspects of the situation.

The other way that the righteous anger is meant to be instilled is through the “appraisal cues” of the father’s reaction and dialogue. Towards the end of the ad the father responds to his son in a more snippy manner, saying that if voting was so important why was he not able to do it. This hits on all four appraisal cues that Condit talks about: “(1) negative events have occurred [the father being disenfranchised] that (2) result in the blameworthy actions of others [the state legislatures for having disenfranchisement laws on the books], and (3) one has a reasonably high likelihood of controlling the others’ behavior [can call and vote for state legislatures and congress people who oppose disenfranchisement], and (4) a relatively high certainty about the events and their causes [father made a mistake a long time ago and then the statistics detailed in the infographic]” (Condit 4).

Therefore the ad and infographic should lead to “action tendencies” in our audience which will give them “heightened energy, approach orientation, and a proclivity for cognitive narrowing” (4). Meaning that the righteous anger that our audience should feel from the commercial and infographic will lead them to simplifying their thoughts on felony disenfranchisement, painting it in a light that affects more than just the person directly effected, and using the appraisal cues. These action tendencies will make it easier for people to contact their representatives and that can lead to change. The singular idea and “cognitive narrowing” will also make it easier for people to vote against felony disenfranchisement measures and those who support them. This would be most important as the issue begins to gain more national

attention than ever and states begin to explore changes in their laws regarding it. For example, recently Florida held a referendum that allowed the citizens themselves to decide whether or not they wanted the practice of felony disenfranchisement to continue. In this instance is where it would be most important to have the “heightened energy, approach orientation, and a proclivity for cognitive narrowing” to vote in favor of reforming the laws.