We examine the political consequences of conditioning ex-felon voting rights on the payment of legal financial obligations (LFOs) in Alabama and Tennessee. In both states, ex-felons cannot restore their voting rights until they have paid all court fees, fines, and restitution, plus child support in Tennessee. By randomly sampling court records of convicted felons in Alabama from 2005-2011, we estimate that the median amount of LFOs accrued is about $5,000 and that 85% have a non-zero balance. We examine that existing economic racial disparities will disproportionately reduce black felons’ ability to restore their right to vote. Consistent with this, we find that blacks are about 10 percentage points (p.p.) more likely to have a non-zero LFO balance in Alabama. Blacks are also about 16 and 12 p.p. more likely to have their voting rights applications denied due to LFOs in Alabama and Tennessee, respectively.

We collected Alabama court records through an online interface known as Alacourt. We used systematic sampling to first collect a sample of 8,372 circuit court cases, 3,452 of which contained at least one felony conviction. For each of these records, we extracted the convicted felon’s full name and date of birth and used the party search query to find and download all related cases in Alacourt. Because our individual-level sample is drawn from our case-level sample, this means that people convicted of felonies in multiple cases will be also be overrepresented in our individual-level sample. However, if we know πᵢ, the probability of convicted felon being selected into the individual-level sample, we can account for this overrepresentation by weighting observations by 1/πᵢ when conducting individual-level analyses.

For each of these records, we extracted the convicted felon’s full name and date of birth and used the party search query to find and download all related cases in Alacourt. Because our individual-level sample is drawn from our case-level sample, this means that people convicted of felonies in multiple cases will be also be overrepresented in our individual-level sample. However, if we know πᵢ, the probability of convicted felon being selected into the individual-level sample, we can account for this overrepresentation by weighting observations by 1/πᵢ when conducting individual-level analyses.

Using these individual-level data allow us to better measure whether a convicted felon has an outstanding LFO balance – on a representative sample after weighting.

We conceptualize that an LFO is disenfranchising when it is the sole criteria that prevents someone from voting. To formalize this logic, let LFOᵢ = 1 if convicted felon i owes LFOs to the state and LFOᵢ = 0 otherwise. Using these individual-level data allow us to better measure whether a convicted felon has an outstanding LFO balance – on a representative sample after weighting.