



# The Role of Political Ideology in Agreement with Prisoner Responsibility for Personal Safety and Well-Being

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## Abstract

Although the United States leads the world in its imprisonment rate, an investigation of American public attitudes toward the safety and well-being of prisoners has not kept pace. In a survey distributed via Mechanical Turk (MTurk) ( $n=979$ ), the authors explore how respondents' political ideology influences their views on seven specific aspects of prison conditions related to prisoners' self-defense and responsibility for their safety, including physical and sexual assaults, as well as acceptance of poor prison conditions. Political ideology is a large and significant predictor of opinions on these seven aspects of prisoner safety and wellness. Conservatives are more likely than liberals to agree with statements supporting harsher prison conditions. While political ideological gaps are wide, these gaps narrow on statements regarding the expectations of prisoners to defend themselves from physical and sexual assault. These findings add insight into how ideological attitudes may influence justice-related decisions on prison life and punishment for prisoners.

**Keywords** Public opinion · Punishment · Prison · Safety · Political ideology · Survey

## Introduction

From 2011 to 2021, an average of 1.46 million persons per year were imprisoned in federal or state institutions in the United States (Carson, 2022). Although the rate of imprisonment has continued to decline precipitously over the past decade, with the prison population in 2021 (at 1.2 million) being the lowest since 1996—largely due to depopulation efforts related to COVID-19—the United States continues to lead with an incarceration

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rate that exceeds other industrialized countries (Carson, 2022; World Prison Brief, 2021). Punishment via incarceration has become so widely applied that half of Americans know of an immediate family member who has been confined (Elderbroom et al., 2018). Despite these figures indicating that prisons are a known form of punishment, Roberts and Hough (2005) noted a paradoxical empirical deficiency in public attitudes toward the conditions of imprisonment.

Much of the attitudinal research related to incarceration is focused on the approach to crime and justice in the form of correctional policy preferences and reform, sentencing schemes, and reentry (Applegate et al., 2002; Costelloe et al., 2009; Cullen et al., 1990; Hansen & Navarro, 2023a; Johnson, 2007; King & Maruna, 2009). Research on public opinion toward punitiveness demonstrates that various socio-demographics, particularly those identifying as conservative, are consistently associated with and/or yield large effects on attitudes toward different punishments (Costelloe et al., 2009; King & Maruna, 2009). However, research examining public perceptions of prison life suggests that political ideology is inconsequential (Wozniak, 2014).

The socio-political landscape of prison conditions is ripe for assessing public attitudes due to a declining prison population, accelerated by a global pandemic that highlighted many other pertinent issues about imprisonment and led to an ideological reshaping across the federal judiciary (Carson, 2022; Federal Judicial Center, 2023; Google Trends, n.d.; Gramlich, 2021; Reuters, 2020). Supporting this, Google Trends data from early 2020 to the end of 2022 shows that searches on “prisons” increased significantly in mid-March 2020, returning to relatively normal trends seen in the previous year by mid to late summer 2020 (Google Trends, n.d.). Additionally, the federal judiciary underwent an ideological shift as a significant number of judges were appointed during a Republican-majority Senate and a one-term Republican presidency (Federal Judicial Center, 2023; Gramlich, 2021; Reuters, 2020). In light of these sociopolitical events, including increased public interest in prisons and an ideological shift in the federal judiciary, we conducted a nationally representative survey distributed through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Our particular research question is, “what role does political ideology play in the agreement with harsh prison conditions?” We posed a range of statements that explored the prison experience, with findings demonstrating that individuals who identify as conservative view punishment as extending beyond the loss of freedom to include harsh prison conditions that compromise prisoner safety and wellness by placing them in dangerous situations.

## Conditions of Prison Life

A discussion about prison sociology naturally includes *The Society of Captives* (1958) by Gresham Sykes, who described prisoners’ lifestyles and experiences at a maximum-security state institution in New Jersey. Sykes (1958) detailed how the intolerable living conditions of prisons generated riots among the prisoners, events that can momentarily bring public attention to these conditions (Surette, 2015; Sykes, 1958). While Sykes (1958) regarded prison riots as political protests against a failed penal policy, they can also erode public support for rehabilitation as a viable punishment philosophy (Surette, 2015). The fundamental issue here is that the public’s perception of prisons is likely rife with misconceptions,

shaped by portrayals of violent, hardened prisoners, which increases the appeal of punitive responses.

What soon followed (the exponential increase in the incarceration rate during the 1970s) were landmark cases ruling on prison conditions with the incarcerated as plaintiffs contending that their rights under the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments were being violated (Gottschalk, 2016). Notable among these judiciary decisions on prison reform includes the acknowledgment of prisoners' right to medical treatment (*Estelle v. Gamble*, 1976). Subsequent High Court rulings affirmed that overcrowding impeded access to adequate medical and mental health care (*Ruiz v. Estelle*, 1980). Although the judiciary recognized the legal voices of the incarcerated concerning their intolerable conditions in prison from the 1970s to the mid-1990s, the passage of the Prison Litigation Reform Act in 1996 has been criticized for limiting the incarcerated population's ability to litigate these conditions (Gottschalk, 2016). Other federal laws, although less controversial and passed with bipartisan support, include the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003 and the Second Chance Act of 2007. Overall, the safety and wellness of the incarcerated have garnered attention and consensus among congressional lawmakers.

Trends from 2020 to the end of 2022 suggest that the public has become increasingly engaged with issues related to prisons, as evidenced by Google Trends data (n.d.). The top five "breakout" terms (increased search popularity and novelty compared to previous searches) for web searches associated with prisons during this period frequently included "COVID" or "coronavirus". This heightened interest may reflect broader concerns about prison conditions, especially in light of Surette's (2015) observation that news coverage of the corrections system often focuses on negative stories, such as correctional failures, misguided goals emphasizing amenities over punishment, and systemic corruption and misconduct.

## Attitudinal Research on Prison Conditions

One of the first assessments of public attitudes that shed light on perceptions of prison life involved survey data from Britain (Roberts & Hough, 2005). The results showed that, compared to police and courts, the public's understanding of corrections is considerably lower. Correspondingly, public sentiment indicated greater confidence in the police and the court system to do a good job, with the least confidence placed in prisons. Although the public held high confidence that prisons treat prisoners humanely, this item was rated the lowest in importance compared to other items, such as the incapacitation of prisoners and rehabilitating them for reentry as law-abiding citizens. Reiter et al. (2018) argue that even countries like Denmark, which have a reputation for humane treatment of prisoners, still resemble the harsher confinement regimes of the U. K. and U. S. This is evidenced by the micro-level experiences of punishment (e.g., freedom of movement and association, isolation) reported through interviews with prisoners, staff, and experts.

Thus, perceptions about prison experiences seem comparable across different nations, with a consensus that the U.S. tends to support harsh prison conditions (Applegate, 2001; Reiter et al., 2018; Roberts & Hough, 2005; Wozniak, 2014). Among 200 surveyed Floridians, there was support for keeping roughly 16 of 26 amenities, on average, within prisons (Applegate, 2001). Respondents often supported keeping educational/psychological/ and vocational programs and other amenities, such as supervised family visits (93.0%) and

access to books (91.5%). By contrast, public support for punitiveness was evidenced by eliminating prison amenities related to entertainment or recreation, which included pornographic magazines (82.9%), cable television (78.4%), R-rated movies (66.8%), and other amenities such as the distribution of condoms (72.0%).

Applegate (2001) incorporated the four philosophies of punishment—deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation, and retribution—in a predictive model to identify significant factors for public endorsement of prison amenities. The study found that those who placed greater importance on rehabilitation tended to support more prison amenities. In contrast, those who indicated retribution as the preferred correctional goal tended to support the elimination of prison amenities (as evidenced by the marginal statistical effect). The model found no predictive association between support for prison amenities and incapacitation or deterrence or the socio-demographic factors of the respondents, such as gender, race, or age. Other socio-demographic characteristics yielded larger effects of eliminating prison amenities, including persons with lower education, stronger conservative views, and those who had never visited a correctional institution or knew a prison or jail inmate.

Wozniak (2014) builds on research concerning public perceptions of prison life and preferences for prison punitiveness by mailing a paper survey to roughly 3,000 potential respondents nationwide between late 2010 and early 2011. Among the roughly 500 individuals who responded to the survey, prison life was viewed as dangerous, depressing, and hard, especially by those who attributed criminality to external factors, had a connection to someone who was or had been incarcerated, and believed prisoners spent their time idly. Despite most individuals perceiving prison life as dangerous, depressing, and hard, only a tenth of respondents (11.9%) indicated that prison life is too harsh, while many thought that prisons were either not harsh enough (46.6%) or were neither too harsh nor too lenient (41.6%). The variables predicting perceptions of prison life and prison punitiveness varied across the regression models, with conservatives and those exposed to political rhetoric (i.e., smart on crime, tough on crime) consistently showing null effects. Although Wozniak's (2014) work consistently showed a null effect of political ideology, we build on this by exploring a broader range of prison experiences, specifically focusing on the roles of correctional officers, interactions with other prisoners, and the comfort and safety of prison.

Finally, aside from the global pandemic, another impetus for understanding public opinion on prison conditions is the ideological shift of the federal judiciary by Senate Republicans during Trump's one-term Republican presidency (Federal Judicial Center, 2023; Gramlich, 2021; Reuters, 2020). By this time, the three Supreme Court justices nominated during Donald Trump's presidency are the highest number of any president since Ronald Reagan and the most by a one-term president since Herbert Hoover (although Richard Nixon appointed four justices in his first term) (Federal Judicial Center, 2023). Directly below the judiciary power of the Supreme Court are the federal appellate courts: appellate judges are also granted lifetime tenures. In this judicial body, Trump's presidency led to an ideological flip in three—2nd, 3rd, and 11th—of the 13 appellate circuits; justices are assigned supervisory roles across the 13 circuits (28 U.S. Code § 42; Reuters, 2020). As an ideological shift unfolds in the federal judiciary, it may shape the handling of prison conditions and lawsuits from prisoners, impacting prison operations and potentially hindering the policy agenda of future administrations.

In sum, despite past research showing mixed results on the role political ideology has on prison conditions, with conservatives supporting the elimination of prison amenities

(Applegate, 2001), subsequent work demonstrated its null effect on the challenges of prison life and preference for punitiveness (Wozniak, 2014). The contradictory results of past work may stem from differing opinions on the various aspects of prison life and specific conditions within the prison environment that lead to differing levels of support for those particular conditions. This rationale is also supported by the unprecedented global pandemic, which presumably renewed interest in the health and safety of the incarcerated (Google Trends, n.d.). Furthermore, liberals consistently endorsed a rehabilitative approach, while (moderate) conservatives tended to favor retributive punishments (Confino et al., 2022). Thus, the ideological shift in the federal judiciary during a Republican-majority Senate and presidency has potential legislative consequences. To foster bipartisan cooperation on prison conditions, we assess various issues related to the safety and well-being of the incarcerated to inform dialogue and policy development.

## Hypotheses

**H1** Conservative respondents will have a higher level of agreement with all prison condition statements compared to liberal respondents.

**H2** Very liberal respondents will express some level of disagreement with the prison conditions statements, while very conservative respondents will have strong agreement with the statements.

## Data

To study views on prison conditions in the United States, we conducted an original survey through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in conjunction with Qualtrics survey software. The survey was launched on 24 October 2022. Before potential participants accessed the survey, they were presented with the consent form informing them of their rights as participants and the scope of the study, with continued participation indicating consent. Adults aged 18 and older residing in the United States were potential respondents who were paid \$0.80 for their participation, even if they did not answer all the questions. The average time it took respondents to complete the survey was 6 min and 12 s<sup>1</sup>, which, if calculated at an hourly rate, would be slightly over the federal minimum wage. Of the 1,002 respondents who attempted the survey, 979 answered all the questions estimated in the multiple regression analyses. Prior to starting the study, ethical approval was obtained from the second author's respective university Institution Review Board.

Despite nearly all samples in social science being convenient, researchers can advance science using MTurk by acknowledging and addressing potential differences between their

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<sup>1</sup> The minimum time recorded for completing the survey was 3 min and 22 s, while the maximum was approximately 55 min. It was observed that a few participants accessed the survey but were inactive for a period of time. Additionally, fewer than 5% of respondents provided the same response value across all questions. This low percentage suggests that respondents were discerning between different scenarios, underscoring the robustness of the data.

sample and the population (Baker et al., 2010; Landers & Behrend, 2015; Levay et al., 2016). For instance, samples acquired using MTurk have been identified as more demographically diverse than other samples generated through the internet and traditional paper-and-paper surveys (Buhrmester et al., 2011). Participant attention from MTurk is similar to that of offline participants, indicating that online participants provide data that is both reliable and valid in comparison (Thomas & Clifford, 2017). The personality traits and values observed in MTurk workers closely mirror high-quality national data, such as the American National Election Studies: conservatives showed no noticeable distinctions across samples, and MTurk liberals exhibited more typical liberal dispositions (Clifford et al., 2015). By weighting basic demographic variables, it is possible to mitigate potential unmeasurable differences between the MTurk sample and comparable groups not included in the study, supporting the similarity of MTurk respondents to widely used national population-based surveys reported by previous work (Clifford et al., 2015; Levay et al., 2016). One drawback to using MTurk, as identified by Thompson and Pickett (2020), is that the magnitudes of the coefficients were either under- or over-estimated when comparing outcomes to nationwide surveys like the General Social Survey, but the directionality of the coefficients was comparable. Nevertheless, opt-in panels pooled through the internet “have proven to be a valuable resource for methodological research of all kinds...[but] researchers should...consider any biases...and qualify their conclusions appropriately” (Baker et al., 2010, p. 759). Baker and their colleagues (2010; 2013) provide additional insights into the costs and benefits of opt-in panels and recommended best practices. For these reasons, it is important to continue the practice of replication of opt-in studies facilitated through MTurk.

Our sample was quite similar to the population when exploring the important socio-demographic and attitudinal trends, with two exceptions. The sample had a larger proportion of men respondents than women. Although this is not atypical through MTurk-generated samples (Levay et al., 2016), another explanation for the gender ratio of the study’s participants is that the topic of corrections may have garnered greater interest among men than women. Additionally, after coding partisan leaners as partisans, the sample had a noticeably higher proportion of Democratic identifiers. In order to account for these two trends in the data, we estimate post-stratification survey weights based on US Census data and aggregated polling data. All of the multiple OLS regression models were computed with survey weights through the “survey” packages in R statistical software to approximate the sample to the population.

## Dependent Variables and Methods

Table 1 contains seven statements regarding views on prison conditions—specific to ensuring the safety and well-being of prisoners—organized in order of presentation to survey respondents.<sup>2</sup> Three of the statements are about the role of correctional officers in protecting prisoners. Specifically, that correctional officers cannot be expected to keep prisoners safe and are not to be blamed for failing to prevent violence and rape. Two of the statements are about the expectation of the prisoners to protect themselves. These statements indicate that prisoners are expected to defend themselves in physical altercations and sexual assaults. The

<sup>2</sup> As a robustness check, we explored whether question complexity or phrasing impacted the responses. We found that respondents were consistent in their direction of agreement or disagreement based on the content of the condition and that there were no widely divergent answers based on wording.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics – views on prison conditions

Question	Mean	SD
Correctional officers cannot be expected to keep all prisoners safe.	5.94	2.77
Prisoners are expected to defend themselves in the case of physical altercations.	6.23	2.61
Poor prison conditions are an aspect of punishment for committing a crime.	5.53	2.95
Correctional officers are not to blame for failing to prevent violent altercations in prison.	5.38	2.78
Correctional officers are not to blame for failing to prevent incidences of rape in prison.	5.05	2.96
Prisoners are expected to defend themselves from sexual assaults in prison.	6.15	2.72
Prisoners should not expect comfortable conditions in prison.	6.16	2.66

*Note* The level of agreement on a Likert-scale from 0=not at all to 10=to a great degree

last two statements are about the general prison environment. One states that poor prison conditions are an aspect of punishment, and the other indicates that prisoners should not expect comfortable conditions. The prompt displayed to each respondent was: “We would like to ask your opinions on prisons and punishment for a crime. Please, indicate on the scale (that range from 0 – not at all to 10 – to a great degree) your level of agreement with the statements.” Respondents rated their agreement on this scale, where a score of 5 indicated a neutral position – “neither agree nor disagree”.<sup>3</sup>

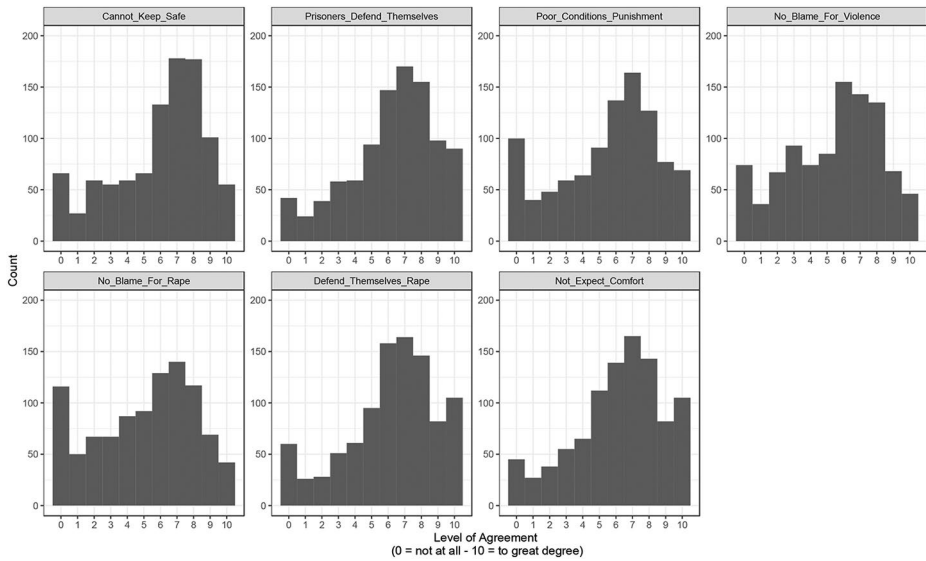
The mean level of response leans towards agreement (i.e., mean > 5) for each of the seven statements (Table 1). Agreement was strongest for the two statements assigning the prisoner the role of defending themselves as well as for the statement indicating that prisoners should not expect comfortable conditions in prison. On the other hand, the agreement was weakest for the statements regarding correctional officers’ blame for failing to prevent violent altercations or incidences of rape.

In Fig. 1, response counts are presented for each of the seven statements, illustrating two notable patterns. Specifically, the statements containing the largest variance in agreement level indicate that the correctional officers are not to blame for failing to prevent violence or rape. Broadly, the distributions indicate that a fairly large number of respondents selected the “0=not at all” level of agreement with several statements. Overall, the histograms show considerable variance in agreement with the statements ripe for further investigation and empirical inquiry.

## Independent Variables

A number of socio-demographic and attitudinal measures are included in the analytical models as control variables. Socio-demographics include age, gender, race, education, and income. Attitudinal predictors include partisan identification and political ideology, the key

<sup>3</sup> The level of agreement 0–10, from “0 - not at all agree” indicating disagreement, to “5 - neither agree nor disagree” indicating a neutral position, to “10 - to a great degree agree” indicating agreement is a standard measure in some of the most reputable, international, and longstanding survey agendas (e.g., European Social Survey, European Values Study, and the World Values Survey). In addition, the attitudinal rating scales, which respondents selected on a similar 0-100 scale, are widely used in U.S. large-scale surveys (i.e., American National Election Studies). We conduct robustness checks to confirm: (1) the categories are meaningfully distinct using ordinal logistic regression, (2) straight-lining (where a respondent selects the same answer for all questions) was not an issue, and (3) that there existed no widely divergent selections for respondents based on their other selections (i.e., such as strong disagreement with one item and strong agreement with a similar item).



**Fig. 1** Response counts – dependent variables

independent variable in predicting views on prison conditions.<sup>4</sup> Here, we measure political ideology as on a scale from “0=very liberal” to “10=very conservative”. The respondent was asked, “On a scale from 0–10, with 0 representing very liberal and 10 representing very conservative, where would you place your political views?”. Large-scale, cross-national surveys, such as the European Social Survey and World Value Survey, measure political ideology in this way. The distribution of responses for the variable mirrors the distributions of nationally representative surveys. Variable coding and descriptive statistics for all other independent variables can be found in Appendix A.

## Results

Table 2 provides output from the seven regression models predicting respondents’ level of agreement with prison conditions. A few trends are worth mentioning when exploring the control variables. Specifically, the variables gender and race do not have any statistically significant relationship with attitudes toward prison conditions. By contrast, education is statistically and positively related to the agreement with the statements. The remaining

<sup>4</sup> Both partisan identification and political ideology must be controlled for per the political science literature that identifies them as distinct concepts (Blank & Shaw, 2015; Hansen & Seppälä, 2023). The included concept may be overinflated by omitting one of the two concepts from the analysis, leading to an underspecified model. As Hansen and Navarro (2023b) and Navarro and Hansen (2023) show, political ideology is the more important concept to focus on in research on attitudes towards aspects of the criminal justice system because clear partisan signals are absent on these topics when compared to vote choice or politician favorability. While politicians send strong partisan signals on policies such as gun reform (Hansen & Seppälä, 2023), these signals are absent on particulars of prison conditions. Further, our dataset shows a low correlation of 0.334 between the two variables. Finally, the results themselves support that attitudes towards prison conditions are ideological (as opposed to partisan) issue positions (see Table 1, where partisanship is only statistically significant and weakly correlated in one instance).

**Table 2** Models predicting level of agreement with prison conditions statements

	Cannot keep safe	Prisoners defend themselves	Poor conditions punishment	No Blame for violence	No Blame for rape	Defend themselves rape	Not expect comfort
Constant	2.211*** (0.657)	3.536*** (0.652)	2.037** (0.685)	1.015 (0.618)	0.192 (0.658)	3.755*** (0.682)	3.221*** (0.640)
Age	-0.013 (0.008)	0.0002 (0.008)	-0.031*** (0.008)	0.002 (0.008)	-0.011 (0.009)	0.008 (0.007)	0.024*** (0.007)
Woman	0.017 (0.173)	0.250 (0.168)	0.206 (0.182)	0.331 (0.169)	0.198 (0.186)	0.247 (0.179)	0.236 (0.173)
White	0.252 (0.283)	-0.072 (0.253)	0.371 (0.302)	0.140 (0.268)	0.572 (0.306)	-0.097 (0.294)	-0.286 (0.259)
Education	0.571*** (0.130)	0.506*** (0.133)	0.707*** (0.145)	0.588*** (0.124)	0.682*** (0.130)	0.284* (0.139)	0.067 (0.136)
Income	-0.038 (0.034)	-0.089** (0.032)	-0.082* (0.034)	-0.042 (0.035)	-0.012 (0.037)	-0.055 (0.034)	0.004 (0.034)
Party ID - Independent	-0.262 (0.249)	-0.197 (0.242)	-0.696** (0.264)	-0.438 (0.253)	-0.448 (0.266)	-0.024 (0.248)	-0.374 (0.241)
Party ID - Republican	-0.359 (0.200)	-0.175 (0.192)	-0.097 (0.221)	-0.306 (0.205)	-0.462* (0.224)	-0.163 (0.212)	-0.259 (0.205)
Political Ideology	0.376*** (0.034)	0.224*** (0.032)	0.385*** (0.037)	0.379*** (0.035)	0.412*** (0.036)	0.234*** (0.035)	0.343*** (0.033)
Observations	974	974	974	974	974	974	974
$R^2$	0.193	0.094	0.230	0.196	0.210	0.073	0.142
Log Likelihood	-2,296.5	-2,286.4	-2,334.2	-2,291.2	-2,359.6	-2,340.7	-2,297.6

Note. \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Standard errors in parentheses.

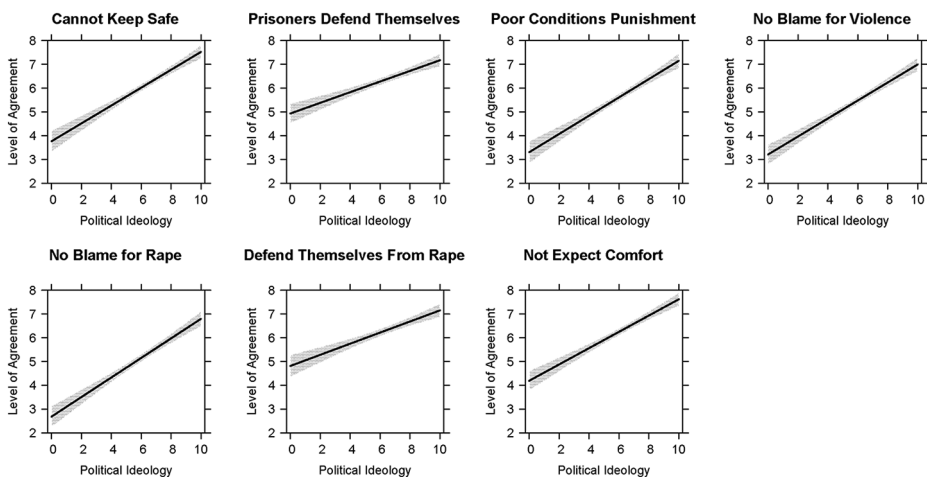
variables, age, income, and partisan identification, suggest occasional relationships with predicting agreement with the statements. When calculating predictions, holding variables at their survey-weighted means, the confidence bounds overlapped for these three variables, and the predicted value plots showed that, although statistically significant for certain prison conditions, the substantive effects were very small. There is also a clear trend in exploring model fit ( $R^2$  estimates). Of particular interest are the two models predicting agreement with prisoners expected to defend themselves from violence and sexual assault not performing as well as the other five models.

The results in Table 2 show clear and consistent trends that political ideology is a statistically significant predictor of the agreement for all prison condition statements. Since the coefficients are all positive, and the political ideology variable is coded so that higher values indicate stronger levels of conservatism, the results indicate that a stronger conservative ideology is related to a higher level of agreement with each of the seven statements. The results support  $H_1$ . Similar to the measure of model fit scores, the coefficient values of political ideology are smallest for the two statements, indicating that prisoners are expected to defend themselves. In contrast, the effect of political ideology and agreement is consistent with the other five statements regarding the role of correctional officers in ensuring safety and the unpleasant environmental conditions of prisons.

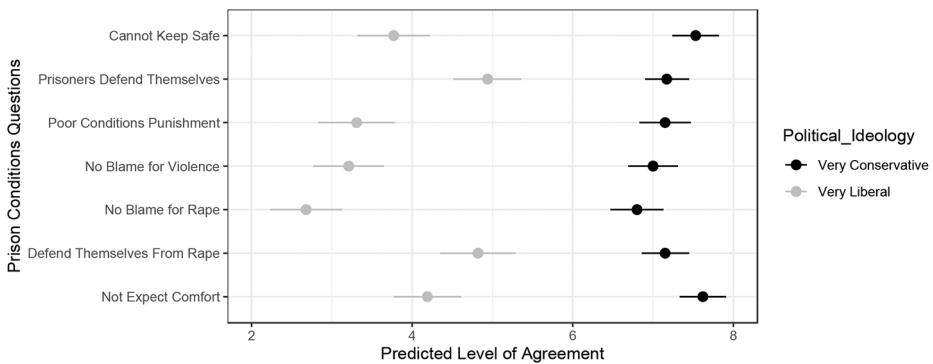
Predicted values were calculated while holding all other independent variables at their survey-weighted means to determine the precise effect of political ideology on the agreement to prison conditions. The predicted values are displayed in Fig. 2 with 95% confidence bounds shaded around the prediction lines. The predicted values plots demonstrate that political ideology plays a strong role in determining agreement with the prison conditions statements. For instance, when predicting agreement with the statement that correctional officers hold no blame for failing to prevent instances of rape, the overall effect of political ideology when moving from the lowest value to the highest value is a 5.5-point predicted change in the agreement. To reiterate, this is the overall effect when holding all of the other variables at their survey-weighted means. In other words, the political ideology variable explains over a 50% change in agreement with that particular statement. On average, the overall effect of political ideology on predicting agreement with the statements regarding correctional officers' role, the prisons' poor environmental conditions, and whether prisoners should expect comfort is around a 4-point difference. The predicted values even show a substantively important effect of political ideology on agreement with the two statements with the smallest variance. Here, the overall effect of political ideology on predicting the agreement that prisoners are expected to defend themselves from violence or sexual assault is around two points.

To better visualize the large substantive impact of political ideology on agreement with the prison conditions statements, we plot point estimates of the predicted level of agreement for the respondents that identified as the extreme responses of “very liberal” ( $n=87$ ) and “very conservative” ( $n=101$ ) with 95% confidence bounds (Fig. 3)—holding all other variables at their survey-weighted means. Overall, the results provide support for  $H_2$ , which hypothesized that conservatives would be more likely to agree about the conditions of prisons while liberals would be more likely to disagree. We first discuss the variance between conservatives and liberals, followed by a more detailed discussion of the findings among liberal respondents, concluding with a discussion of conservative respondents.

Across the seven statements on prison conditions, we find that the predicted level of agreement difference between the two political ideologies is the smallest for the two state-



**Fig. 2** Effect of political ideology on agreement with prison condition statements. 95% confidence intervals; calculated holding independent variables at their survey-weighted means



**Fig. 3** Comparing the effect of identifying as very liberal vs. very conservative. 95% confidence intervals; calculated holding independent variables at their survey-weighted means

ments regarding prisoners being expected to defend themselves from violence or sexual assault. Here, Fig. 3 shows that the predicted level of agreement with these two statements for respondents who indicated “very liberal” is just under 5 – “neither agree nor disagree”. Therefore, liberal respondents indicate discrete disagreement levels with all statements about prison conditions, leaning toward disagreement with five statements but taking close to a neutral position on prisoners defending themselves. The next statement where “very liberal” respondents leaned toward disagreement was whether prisoners should not expect comfortable conditions in prison, and nearby in disagreement was whether poor prison conditions are an aspect of punishment. Illustrating generally the strongest disagreement with prison conditions among “very liberal respondents” were statements that correctional officers are not to be expected to keep all prisoners safe, not to blame for failing to prevent violent altercations, with the greatest disagreement for their blame of sexual assault in prison. Whereas “very liberal” respondents wavered in agreement with prison conditions, respondents who indicated “very conservative” clearly signaled that they agreed with these two statements about prisoners defending themselves from violence or sexual assault as they firmly agreed with all seven statements.

## Conclusion

The main goal of the empirical analyses is to uncover the role, if any, that political ideology plays in predicting levels of agreement with statements about prison conditions, particularly regarding the safety and well-being of prisoners. The finding contributes to the understanding that political ideology affects the approval of prison life. That is, conservatives consistently agree with all seven statements of prison conditions, but liberals show a nuanced perception of prison life. Despite the wide ideological gaps across these statements, it is liberals who close the gap, especially in their agreement with the expectations that prisoners should defend themselves from physical and sexual assault. As with political ideology, education was consistently a large and significant predictor of the prison condition statements (except for the two prison environment conditions), with higher educational attainment associated with support for harsher conditions. Conversely, neither gender nor

race was associated with any prison condition statements. The remaining variables—age, income, and party identification—showed inconsistent (not statistically significant across all models) or mixed relationships (with both positive and negative coefficients) across the prison condition statements. Specifically, older respondents, those with higher incomes, and Democrats differ from their counterparts in their views on two aspects of prison conditions. For example, younger individuals more strongly supported the idea that poor prison conditions are part of the punishment, while older individuals rated that prisons should be uncomfortable (but did not view poor conditions as necessary). This shift in punitiveness, where younger individuals favor poor living conditions but also expect comfortable living conditions, may stem from the terms “punishment” and “comfortable conditions” evoking different connotations across age groups, as well as across income levels and political affiliations (specifically between Democrats and Independents). Further investigation is needed into why lower-income individuals and Democrats expect prisoners to defend themselves from physical and sexual assaults, respectively; however, a core finding of the study is that the sample generally shared similar expectations about prison life. Notably, it is the profile of the educated person and conservative thinker who holds more punitive views on prison conditions, standing in contrast to their counterparts. Overall, these results provide insights into correctional policies, potential human rights violations, and the influence of political ideology on attitudes toward prison conditions, both domestically and internationally.

An area ripe for future research is examining the prison conditions for women, as many of our respondents may have intuitively considered the conditions of men prisoners. This focus is understandable, given that women prisoners comprise a smaller share of the incarcerated population, averaging nearly 7.5% of the imprisoned population from 2011 to 2021 (Carson, 2022). Furthermore, while the prison incarceration rate of men has declined, the growth rate for women prisoners has remained relatively stable since 2011. Scholars should be particularly interested in the gender differences in prison life, as they can be remarkably distinct. For instance, nearly 58% of women prisoners have dependents (Maruschak et al., 2021). It is intriguing to explore whether the abandonment of material expectations acts as a punitive marker, especially considering previous research indicating that married women tend to be more punitive than unmarried women (Costelloe et al., 2009). This line of inquiry could contribute to the intersectional dialogue on gender politics. Moreover, one study has highlighted within-gender differences in support for correctional reform based on a nationally stratified survey sample (Hansen & Navarro, 2023a). These within-gender differences were significantly more pronounced when the sample was further separated by partisanship. Another research opportunity lies in incorporating gender into the phrasing of prison conditions to identify whether political ideology plays as strong of a role when asking specifically about incarcerated men or women.

Future research should also extend our survey to other experiences within correctional institutions to determine, such as how individuals view forced labor in prisons. Nearly 800,000 of the 1.2 million incarcerated folk engage in various work, often maintenance work but sometimes in dangerous conditions (e.g., firefighting) (Turner, 2022). In one comprehensive assessment of prison wages across the nation, prisoners earn, before deductions (e.g., restitution, room and board, taxes), on average, anywhere from 86 cents to less than half of the federal minimum wage per hour (Sawyer, 2017). Pandemic-era trends of minimum wages suggest that the average range of hourly wages earned by prisoners has declined to an average of 13 to 52 cents per hour (but this could also be a consequence of methodol-

ogy), with prisoners working for free on many work assignments for seven states (Turner, 2022). Federal protections are not afforded to incarcerated workers, nor are they exempt from the 13th Amendment's "Prohibition Clause", which abolished slavery and indentured servitude; some state courts have overturned these exceptions in their state constitutions, leaving 20 remaining state constitutions that contain language permitting forced labor among the incarcerated.

We close by acknowledging some limitations of this study with considerations of new avenues of empirical research. Although the findings identified substantial ideological differences—in response to extreme situations where one might expect a high level of public agreement—future research should explore less extreme or more varied versions of punishment within prison life. Additionally, future work should explore how support for punishment differs between conservatives and liberals regarding future criminal behavior, as these perspectives can influence policymaking for persons entering and departing prison. For example, one experimental study found that American conservatives supported harsher (retributive) punishment, with their support having increased when the offender was painted as unmalleable. Conversely, liberals favored rehabilitation, with their support for rehabilitation strengthening when offenders were portrayed as malleable (Confino et al., 2022). These findings are relevant to the ongoing reentry movement, which includes initiatives such as the Second Chance Act (achieved through bipartisan support) and second look sentencing, which facilitates easing the transition of recently released persons into the community (Lab et al., 2021). Finally, it is important to note that survey research is not without concerns of biases, particularly acquiescence bias, where respondents demonstrate a tendency to agree with questions or statements, regardless of their content. To mitigate systematic measurement errors, various strategies can be employed when designing surveys. These include providing pre-survey instructions to encourage honest and thoughtful responses, incorporating attention checks, avoiding leading questions, and offering a range of questions that are balanced between positively and negatively phrased questions (e.g., strongly disagree to strongly agree) with neutral options.

## Appendix A: Variable Coding and Descriptive Statistics

**Age** – continuous measure, respondent's age at the time of the survey.

**Gender** – Binary measure, 0=men; 1=women.

**Race** – Binary measure, 0=nonwhite; 1=White.

**Education** – Continuous measure, 1=less than high school; 2=high school/GED; 3=some college; 4=bachelor's degree; 5=graduate/professional degree.

**Income** – Continuous measure, 1=Under \$10,000; 2 = \$10,001 - \$20,000; 3 = \$20,001 - \$30,000; 4 = \$30,001 - \$40,000; 5 = \$40,001 - \$50,000; 6 = \$50,001 - \$60,000; 7 = \$60,001 - \$70,000; 8 = \$70,001 - \$80,000; 9 = \$80,001 - \$90,000; 10 = \$90,001 - \$100,000; 11 = \$100,001 - \$150,000; 12=more than \$150,000.

**Party Identification** – 3-category nominal measure (created from a 7-point measure with leaners coded as partisans), Democratic; Independent; Republican.

**Political Ideology** – Continuous scale from 0=very liberal to 10=very conservative.

**Prison Conditions Statements** – Continuous measure, respondents were provided 7 statements and asked their level of agreement regarding the prison conditions. The level of

agreement consisted of self-placement on a Likert-scale from 0=not at all to 10=to a great degree.

**Table A1** Descriptive statistics – independent variables

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	19	36	39.02	81	11.58
Education	1	4	3.84	5	0.74
Income	1	5	5.81	12	2.72
Political Ideology	0	6	5.71	10	3.11
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Dem</b>	<b>Ind</b>	<b>Rep</b>		
Party ID	60.18%	15.55%	24.27%		
<b>Variable</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>			
Gender	55.77%	44.23%			
Race	14.81%	85.19%			

*Note* Income and education are treated as continuous measures in the statistical models. As a robustness check, models were estimated with both variables treated as ordinal measures. The relationship between political ideology and attitudes on the dependent variables remained the same

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**Data availability** The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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