



# An experimental study on the effect of prosecutorial Brady violations on confidence in exonerating individuals wrongfully convicted of murder

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## Abstract

**Objectives** While several contributing factors can lead to wrongful convictions, it is unclear whether the public perceives these methods of exonerating convicted murderers differently.

**Methods** We distributed an online survey to a nationally representative sample of 1193 individuals. After reading a prompt about the increased attention and production of digital media on wrongful convictions and exonerations, respondents were randomized into two conditions to evaluate their confidence in the exoneration of a convicted murderer across four contributing factors. The experimental condition contained the addition of prosecutorial misconduct in withholding evidence.

**Results** Public confidence in wrongful conviction exonerations varied across the four contributing factors, with DNA evidence consistently held in the highest regard. Confidence then followed a descending order, beginning with police-induced forced confessions, false testimonies, and eyewitness statements, with all three showing increased confidence ratings when prosecutorial misconduct was involved.

**Conclusions** The public distinguishes between contributing factors in murder exonerations. DNA is the most trusted evidence for murder exonerations regardless of misconduct, while confidence in the other contributing factors to exonerate murderers significantly increases when prosecutorial misconduct is present.

**Keywords** Exonerations · Wrongful convictions · Brady violation · Prosecutorial misconduct · Public attitudes

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## Introduction

The National Registry of Exonerations (2024c), which manages the most comprehensive record of exonerations in the USA, reports that nearly 3600 individuals have been officially cleared (or exonerated) after being wrongfully convicted of crimes that they factually did not commit. Similarly, the Innocence Project (2024), a non-profit legal clinic specializing in post-conviction DNA testing, has exonerated 375 people through DNA evidence. While these cases are relatively rare in the scope of the entire criminal justice system, the magnitude of their impact on public sentiment regarding the legitimacy of the criminal justice system can be enormous. Cases of wrongfully convicted individuals who have been exonerated, particularly in murder cases, have increasingly entered the public consciousness through popular streaming media and other digital platforms (Stoll, 2024). Public perception of the credibility of exonerating evidence is complicated by its presentation within the same fallible justice system that allowed the real perpetrators to remain at large, raising questions about the system's reliability.

Existing research on public attitudes toward wrongful convictions and exonerations is based on community and student samples (Blandisi et al., 2015; Clow & Leach, 2015a, b; Clow & Ricciardelli, 2015; Nowotny et al., 2023; Scherr & Normile, 2022; Zalman et al., 2012), but few comprise a nationally representative sample (Donovan & Klahm, 2018; Garrett & Mitchell, 2023; Norris & Mullinix, 2020). Further, this research often focuses on perceptions of wrongful convictions and exonerations and the accused but rarely on the core reason for reconsidering their conviction, the evidence. This evidence (otherwise known as contributing factors) can lead to a conviction under erroneous circumstances and includes false testimonies, forced confessions, forensic evidence, mistaken eyewitness identification, and official misconduct (National Registry of Exonerations, 2024c). Notable among these five contributing factors is official misconduct, which encompasses prosecutorial misconduct, as the most prevalent identified factor resulting in a person being exonerated for murder. Prosecutors who do not disclose material evidence favorable to the defense would exculpate the accused per the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruling in *Brady v. Maryland* (1963) risk violating the defendant's constitutional right to due process. Prosecutorial misconduct is the most frequently cited criminal procedure issue (Garrett et al., 2024). Our study moves beyond the narrative case studies that Leo and Gould (2009) stated dominated wrongful conviction research by exploring the multifactorial nature of exonerating evidence in wrongful convictions to assess its effect on public opinion and inform relevant policy reforms.

To test whether contributing factors yield varying degrees of confidence in exonerating someone convicted of murder, we conducted a two-condition survey experiment using a nationally representative sample. Participants were randomly assigned to a control or treatment group, with the only difference being the presence of a Brady violation, where the prosecutor withheld exculpatory evidence. Our first finding demonstrated that DNA is considered the "gold standard" when it comes to the public's confidence in supporting the exoneration of an individual wrongfully

convicted of murder compared with the other tested contributing factors. Thus, this result suggests that without biological evidence, support weakens, as the public shows greater skepticism toward exonerations based on false confessions, false testimony, and the recantation of eyewitness testimony. Similarly, and excluding DNA, our second finding shows that the presence of a Brady violation significantly increased confidence in exonerating an individual wrongfully convicted of murder in three of the four contributing factors. The rank order of public confidence across the four contributing factors remained the same: DNA garnered the highest confidence, eyewitness recantations were the least convincing, and forced confessions and false testimonies fell in between. Some insight into the public's continued support for DNA evidence can be gained from their existing confidence in institutions that show science topping police in trust, with the criminal justice system generally ranked at the bottom (Gallup, 2024; Jones, 2021; Saad, 2023). Third, and finally, among the few patterns that emerged, confidence in exonerations involving prosecutorial misconduct was notably shaped by sociodemographic factors, with political ideology and race being significant predictors; most strikingly, conservatives exhibited reduced levels of confidence in exonerations when DNA evidence and forced confessions were presented. These three primary findings advance our understanding of how the public perceives different types of evidence and how these perceptions may influence attitudes toward wrongful convictions and exonerations.

## Literature review

### Understanding wrongful convictions and exonerations: definitions, prevalence, causes, and prosecutorial misconduct

A conviction may be classified as wrongful for two reasons: The defendant is factually innocent of the crime for which they were convicted, or procedural errors (e.g., constitutional errors, evidentiary errors, and prosecutorial misconduct) violated the convicted defendant's rights (National Institute of Justice, n.d.). While procedural errors alone may lead to a conviction being overturned, they are classified as wrongful only when they result in the conviction of an innocent person. Post-conviction appeals may lead to exoneration when new evidence emerges, resulting in outcomes such as re-establishing wrongfulness, factual innocence declarations, full pardons, and acquittals or dismissals of charges—if that evidence was not presented at trial or during a plea (National Registry of Exonerations, 2024e). While the prevalence of wrongful convictions and exonerations is not zero and varies depending on how legal (i.e., procedural errors) and factual innocence are classified, it helps contextualize the evolving scholarship, which can be divided into three distinct eras.

The scholarship begins with the pioneering research by Yale University law professor Edwin Borchard. His initial interest in wrongful convictions is demonstrated in a 1913 study, where he wrote, “[n]o attempt whatever seems to have been made in the United States to indemnify these unfortunate victims of mistakes in the administration of the criminal law, although cases of shocking injustice are of

not infrequent occurrence” (p. 684). In *Convicting the Innocent: Sixty-five Actual Errors of Criminal Justice* (1932), Borchard chronicled 65 case studies of individuals wrongfully convicted through a combination of factors remarkably identical to the current set of contributing factors. Inspired by this work, Bedau and Radelet (1987) systematically reviewed capital and potentially capital cases from 1900 to 1985 in the USA, identifying 350 cases of wrongful convictions that have led to 23 executions. Despite its infrequent use, an estimated 4.1% of defendants sentenced to death from 1973 to 2004 would have been exonerated if they had remained under threat of execution, highlighting the system’s error rate even when the stakes are high (Gelman et al., 2004; Gross et al., 2014; Liebman et al., 2000). The advent of DNA testing in the late 1980s to link suspects to crimes, which led to the first exoneration (and eventual pardoning of Illinoisian Gary Dotson for sex crimes) by DNA in 1989 (Quintanilla, 2008), sparked growing scholarly interest and institutional efforts that have exposed flaws in the criminal justice system, resulting in thousands of exonerations across the USA (Innocence Project, 2024; National Registry of Exonerations, 2024c).

Evidence is central to these exonerations and often discussed in terms of five (or six) contributing factors. King (2014) classified four of these contributing factors as factual errors, with the remaining two being procedural errors, including ineffective counsel and official misconduct, with the latter encompassing prosecutorial misconduct and police misconduct.<sup>1</sup> Using the largest manager of exoneration data in the USA, the National Registry of Exonerations (2024c) identifies perjury and false accusations (often provided by informants) as the leading contributing factor occurring in 64% of cases as of September 2024 (Gross et al., 2020; West & Meterko, 2016). The second most frequent contributing factor is official misconduct, which we discuss later in detail, occurring in 60% of cases (National Registry of Exonerations, 2024c). Although DNA is considered the only credible form of forensics (West & Meterko, 2016), false/misleading forensics (e.g., through misapplication, testing errors, and unreliable methods) has accounted for 29% of cases, making it the third most frequently referenced contributing factor (National Registry of Exonerations, 2024c). Finally, the fourth and fifth most referenced contributing factors are (flawed or) mistaken witness identification (27%) and false confessions (13%). Exonerations are often multifactorial, with an average of two contributing factors per case (West & Meterko, 2016); however, for model parsimony, this study focuses on investigating the individual effects of these factors on perceived confidence in exonerations—an area that, to our knowledge, no previous study has explored.

Our study focuses on public opinion surrounding murder because not only are these cases the most common to result in exoneration (National Registry of Exonerations, 2024d), but the severity of the crime often leads to longer sentences and the risk of a death sentence. Again, using the National Registry of Exonerations (2024c) data, official misconduct (73%) is the most common contributing factor

<sup>1</sup> Although defense attorneys are officials, Gross et al. (2020) do not incorporate their misconduct into official misconduct as they represent the defendant, not the state. Further, the Brady rule also applies to police officers, as they are government agents (Kyles v. Whitley, 1995).

for those exonerated from homicide, closely followed by perjury or false accusation (72%), then false/misleading forensics (34%), mistaken witness ID (29%), and false confessions (23%) as of September 2024. Misconduct is expected in murder cases due to the increased pressures and high stakes (Berube et al., 2022).

The Brady rule, which constitutionally mandates the prosecution to disclose any evidence favorable to the defense, originates from John Brady, who claimed that his murder conviction and death sentence were unwarranted as his co-defendant, Charles Boblit, was responsible for the death, information withheld by the prosecution. SCOTUS ruled in *Brady v. Maryland* (1963) that the withholding of exculpatory evidence, such as how the prosecution suppressed the exculpatory statement by Brady's co-defendant confessing to the murder, violates the defendant's due process rights. While the most common form of prosecutorial misconduct is the one presented here, being the failure to disclose (or destroying) evidence that reveals one's innocence, it can take various forms, including introducing false evidence, making improper statements that harm the defendant's case, and offering leniency for testimony that helped convict the innocent (Drummond & Mills, 2020; Innocence Project, 2016). Often intentional rather than accidental, there is an enduring element of the concealment of exculpatory evidence, as half of all Brady violations from 2015 to 2019 were identified in homicide cases (Garrett et al., 2024).

A conversation about prosecutorial misconduct works in tandem with understanding the courtroom workgroup. Swisher (2010) states that the justice system pressures judges to be tough on crime, and judges pander to the public's preference for punitive responses, as demonstrated by the delivery of longer sentences and higher incarceration rates as reelections approach (Huber & Gordon, 2004). The public is actively involved in selecting judges, who can be publicly elected, appointed by the governor, or selected from a list of names provided to the governor by a nominating commission that includes public members (Ballotpedia, 2024). In keeping with this logic about electoral pressures and campaign promises, if trained as prosecutors, as is common among judges who preside in criminal districts in Texas and the Court of Criminal Appeals (Texas Judicial Branch, 2024), personal biases can affect their decision-making in criminal cases (Swisher, 2010). The cordial relationship between the two actors can be demonstrated by the lack of judiciary disciplining of prosecutors who engaged in (serious and intentional) misconduct (Garrett et al., 2024; Gross et al., 2020), further evidenced by their anonymity and noniterative naming should they be named at all—officers were twice as likely to be named compared to prosecutors when implicated for withholding Brady material (Garrett et al., 2024; see *Kyles v. Whitley*, 1995). The Innocence Project (2016) highlighted this absence of prosecutorial accountability, noting that only one prosecutor of 660 criminal cases faced discipline where misconduct was identified. Prosecutors are arguably the most powerful criminal justice actors, acting as both judge and jury by having control of information that is unknowable to the defense (Appleman, 2015; Gross et al., 2020). This power positions defense attorneys at a strategic disadvantage from the outset, which may explain why the public rated judges and prosecutors as more reliable and competent than defense attorneys (Zalman et al., 2012).

## Public awareness and attitudes toward wrongful convictions

Media has improved reporting on wrongful convictions and exonerations (Warden, 2003), which can attract public interest through popular streaming platforms. The significance of *Netflix's* influence on the subject is notable due to the sensations that surrounded the releases of certain true crime documentary series, including *Making a Murderer* (with 70.84 million *Netflix* subscribers in Q4-2015), *When They See Us* (with 151.56 million *Netflix* users in Q2-2019), and *The Innocence Files* (with 192.95 million *Netflix* users in Q2-2020) (Stoll, 2024). Preceding the cultural phenomenon that *Making a Murderer* generated was *Serial*, a podcast that became a global sensation, with 40 million downloads by December 2014 after airing in early October 2014. It became the fastest-growing podcast in iTunes history and raised questions about Adnan Syad's conviction for the 1999 murder of his former girlfriend, Hae Min Lee (Roberts, 2014). Notably, presenting wrongful convictions and exonerations through narrative depictions has less impact on eroding trust in the criminal justice system than statistical presentations, though both reduce support for the death penalty, with narrative depictions leading to a more significant decrease (Norris & Mullinix, 2020). Overall, the reach of popular digital media in generating awareness and shifting public opinion on wrongful convictions and exonerations is substantial. This continues with popular podcasts like *Wrongful Convictions* (2024), echoing findings by Baumgartner et al. (2008), who showed that media coverage has increasingly adopted a critical tone toward the death penalty, with the innocence frame becoming a dominant narrative. In support, Americans largely agree that wrongful convictions occur frequently or occasionally, though perceptions vary by sociodemographic groups (Norris et al., 2023; Nowotny et al., 2023; Zalman et al., 2012), contrasting with the lower frequencies reported by criminal justice practitioners (Ramsey & Frank, 2007).

In addition, wrongfully convicted individuals are viewed more negatively than people in general and are perceived similarly to convicted offenders (Clow & Leach, 2015a), with this stigmatization being particularly pronounced for those wrongfully convicted of serious crimes like murder (Blandisi et al., 2015). Moreover, in a vignette study using Canadian university students, Clow and Leach (2015b) explored perceptions of a DNA exoneration involving a man wrongfully convicted of murder after spending ten years in prison, manipulating the scenario to indicate either the exoneree falsely confessed, was misidentified by an eyewitness, or was implicated by a jailhouse snitch. The findings suggest that not all DNA exonerees are viewed equally, with those who falsely confessed facing more stigma than those misidentified by eyewitnesses or wrongfully convicted via false testimony. Clow and Ricciardelli's (2015) analysis of public stigma was broadened by including additional common contributing factors such as prosecutorial/police misconduct (classified as one variable) and improper/invalidated forensic evidence. Results reinforced the public's high regard for DNA as exonerating evidence for murder (Lieberman et al., 2008; Maeder et al., 2017), showing that those exonerated by DNA experienced less stigma than those exonerated through other contributing factors, as reflected in undergraduate ratings of their comfort levels in hypothetical interactions (Clow & Ricciardelli, 2015). We build on prior work demonstrating the notably high perceived value of DNA as exonerating evidence by exploring the individual effects

of four contributing factors—DNA, eyewitness, false testimony, and forced confession—on public confidence in exonerating murderers using a sample drawn from a nationally representative population of US residents:

*H<sub>1</sub>*: Confidence in exonerating a wrongfully convicted murderer will be higher when DNA evidence is the basis and lower when other types of new evidentiary reasons are presented.

Although it is not yet known the effect of prosecutorial misconduct on the interpretation of the exonerating evidence, even though its frequency is quite high, especially for cases involving murder (National Registry of Exonerations, 2024c), we posed the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>2</sub>*: Confidence in exonerating a wrongfully convicted murderer is higher when a Brady violation was the reason for the exonerating evidence to be withheld.

Perceptions of wrongful convictions and support for relevant criminal justice reform vary across individual-level sociodemographics (Donovan & Klahm, 2018; Garrett & Mitchell, 2023; Norris & Mullinix, 2020; Norris et al., 2023; Nowotny et al., 2023; Zalman et al., 2012; Hansen & Navarro 2023a), emphasizing the importance of considering them as predictors when analyzing confidence in exonerations. For instance, Black respondents are more aware of wrongful executions than White respondents but generally (as with gender) have similar attitudes toward reform (Norris et al., 2023). Notably, the innocence argument (without racial identifiers) significantly increased additional opposition to the death penalty among Black respondents compared with the racial framing of disproportionate executions of Black individuals, while White respondents exhibited reduced support for the death penalty under the innocence frame compared with the racial frame (Peffley & Hurwitz, 2007). Whether racial differences in confidence will emerge when supporting the exoneration of a murderer across the four contributing factors, regardless of prosecutorial misconduct, remains unclear; however, one experimental study found that the frequency of wrongful convictions involving police misconduct does not vary by the respondent's race (Donovan & Klahm, 2018).

Verdict errors, such as false acquittals and false convictions, were viewed equally as bad across gender, age, education, and political party in a sample of over 12,000 Americans; men, those with post-college degrees, and Democrats showed the greatest concern about false convictions, highlighting how other sociodemographics shape perceptions of the issue (Garrett & Mitchell, 2023). For instance, younger respondents that believed wrongful convictions occur more frequently and were more likely to hear about them, with women encountering these cases through fictional sources like movies and television shows (Norris et al., 2023). Republicans, on the other hand, were the least likely to believe wrongful convictions occur frequently, with conservatives more likely to hear about them through fictional sources (Norris et al., 2023; Nowotny et al., 2023). This finding may explain why states with non-Republican majorities (and higher percentages of Black residents) are more likely to support pro-defendant legislation aimed at preventing wrongful

convictions, whereas Republican-controlled legislatures are less inclined to pass such laws (Kent & Carmichael, 2015; however, see Michael Morton Act, 2013). Recent research shows that political ideology plays an important role in predicting attitudes towards the criminal justice system (Hansen & Navarro 2023b, 2024; Navarro & Hansen 2023). For example, an ideological divide exists regarding opinion on systemic failures: Liberals may accept the possibility of professional misconduct, whereas conservatives generally trust the effectiveness and fairness of the criminal justice system, even in occasional lapses like prosecutorial misconduct (Donovan & Klahm, 2018; Norris & Mullinix, 2020). Overall, our understanding of how factual and procedural errors in wrongful convictions shape public attitudes is still developing; thus, we propose a final non-directional hypothesis:

*H<sub>3</sub>*: This study expects that predictors of confidence in wrongful convictions may differ between cases of exoneration with and without a Brady violation, with pronounced ideological gaps in confidence.

## Method

### Data

This study surveyed 1193 individuals in the USA on 18 July 2024 (after accounting for item non-response and survey incompletions) to inquire about their attitudes regarding the exonerations of wrongfully convicted murderers. Participants provided informed consent and had the option to skip questions or exit the survey at any time. Participants were sampled using a representative online panel of adults through Prolific residing in the USA, 18 years of age or older. The company's stratified sampling strategy aimed to recruit respondents in a manner that closely mirrors the sociodemographic composition of the USA population using Census and electoral data, including variables such as age, gender, education, and income. While the sample could also be stratified for representativeness by partisanship or race, pursuing both simultaneously is not an option offered by the company. Given the increasingly partisan polarization of the criminal justice system and the study's objectives (see Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008), we prioritized partisanship over race, particularly since the sample size was insufficient to estimate racial effects across all groups reliably. After the data was collected, responses to sociodemographic questions in this study's survey were compared with data previously collected through the survey research company during recruitment to ensure data quality, and the comparison yielded perfect matches. Participation in the recruitment company's sample pool is contingent upon a thorough and stringent selection process. Prospective participants are required to verify their identity through official documentation and complete a series of critical screening questions, which are subsequently confirmed to ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of the sample. When accounting for individuals who paused and resumed the survey, the median completion time was 13 min and 34 s, with compensation averaging about \$10.00 per hour. The Institutional Review Board at Sam Houston State University approved the experiment.

## Experimental design and dependent variables

This study uses an experimental survey design to assess how confidence in exonerations of wrongful convictions varies depending on the type of evidence and the presence of a prosecutorial Brady violation. Prior to data collection, the experiment was pre-registered on 18 March 2024 through the Center for Open Science: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/KZ6AE>. Participants began the study with this prompt:

A relatively recent area of criminal law involves a focus on wrongful convictions where people are exonerated (or declared innocent) of a fault or wrongdoing. The increased attention that wrongful convictions have received has led to numerous podcasts and documentary shows on Netflix. Lawyers recognize that wrongful convictions can exist for numerous reasons and that not all reasons for overturning a conviction are equally convincing. We are going to provide you with some scenarios and ask your level of confidence that the person was wrongfully convicted.

Respondents were provided a scale from “0=no confidence at all” to “10=complete confidence,” with “5” indicating “a neutral level of confidence.” The four questions in the survey address a man being exonerated for murder based on four different types of evidence: DNA evidence, an eyewitness recanting testimony, false testimony from a police informant, or a confession obtained through physical force by the police. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: one where they evaluated statements that detailed four distinct scenarios of exonerating evidence for a wrongful conviction ( $n = 598$ ), with the other condition incorporating the additional clause, “it was found that the prosecutor withheld” ( $n = 595$ ) (see Table 1). The prompt, response scale, and statements comprise the full survey instrument for the experiment.

**Table 1** Scenario statements

Condition 1: no Brady violation	Condition 2: Brady violation
1a. A man is exonerated for murder after DNA evidence was found and matched another suspect	2a. A man is exonerated for murder after <i>it was found that the prosecutor withheld</i> DNA evidence that matched another suspect
1b. A man is exonerated for murder after an eyewitness recants testimony that they saw the murder	2b. A man is exonerated for murder after <i>it was found that the prosecutor withheld</i> an eyewitness statement recanting that they saw the murder
1c. A man is exonerated for murder after it was found that the police informant had provided false testimony in other wrongful conviction cases	2c. A man is exonerated for murder after <i>it was found that the prosecutor withheld</i> that the police informant had provided false testimony in other wrongful conviction cases
1d. A man is exonerated for murder after it was found that an officer had used physical force to elicit a confession	2d. A man is exonerated for murder after <i>it was found that the prosecutor withheld</i> that an officer had used physical force to elicit a confession

*Note.* Italics were added to emphasize the topic for readers but were absent for the respondents

## Independent variables

Beyond sociodemographic predictors, the analysis includes two attitudinal variables: political ideology and partisan identification. Both variables have become significant predictors in shaping attitudes on various US issues, including views on the system reform and the legal system (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Donovan & Klahm, 2018; Garrett & Mitchell, 2023; Hansen & Seppälä, 2023; Kent & Carmichael, 2015; Norris & Mullinix, 2020; Norris et al., 2023; Nowotny et al., 2023; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2007). In this analysis, respondents who indicated they lean toward a party were coded as partisan identifiers of that party to avoid overinflating the effect through limiting partisanship of strong identifiers. Building on insights from descriptive statistics and bivariate tests about the effect of the Brady violation on perceptions of exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers, OLS multiple regression models were estimated to incorporate key individual-level predictors (with established relationships to legal system attitudes) and the experimental manipulation, with confidence (treated as a continuous measure) as the dependent variable (see Appendices 1 and 2 for variable coding and descriptive statistics for all variables utilized in this study's analysis).

## Results

### Descriptive statistics and bivariate statistical tests

The results presented in Table 2 reveal variations in confidence levels of the types of evidence used to exonerate wrongfully convicted murderers across the conditions with the presence or absence of a Brady violation. Some patterns deserve attention before the descriptive statistics for the full sample and the samples by condition are discussed. First, the mean confidence in these wrongful convictions is relatively high across the four types of evidence. Second, and regardless of the condition, the rank order in how respondents rated their confidence remained the same: (1) DNA, (2) false testimony, (3) forced confession, and (4) eyewitness testimony.

The descriptive statistics of the full sample suggest that DNA evidence yielded a much higher confidence level in the exoneration of wrongfully convicted murderers ( $M = 8.71$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ) than the other three types of evidence. Eyewitness testimony,

**Table 2** Mean level of confidence in exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers

Variable	Full sample ( $n = 1193$ )	No Brady violation ( $n = 598$ )	Brady violation ( $n = 595$ )
DNA	8.71 (1.85)	8.77 (1.80)	8.64 (1.89)
Eyewitness	6.76 (2.43)	6.17 (2.47)	7.35* (2.23)
False testimony	7.18 (2.35)	7.00 (2.40)	7.36* (2.30)
Forced confession	7.42 (2.53)	7.28 (2.62)	7.56* (2.43)

*Notes.* Standard deviations in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$

“0 = no confidence at all” to “10 = complete confidence,” with “5” indicating “a neutral level of confidence”

by contrast, had the lowest overall mean confidence level ( $M=6.76$ ,  $SD=2.43$ ), reflecting the skepticism about the reliability of this evidence as a decisive factor in overturning the initial conviction. Forced confessions ( $M=7.42$ ,  $SD=2.53$ ) and false testimony ( $M=7.18$ ,  $SD=2.35$ ) fell between these extremes.  $H_1$  is supported.

Similarly, except for DNA,  $H_2$  is supported when looking at the confidence levels across the individual types of evidence with the added presence of a Brady violation. Although DNA evidence shows a slightly higher mean confidence level when no Brady violation is present ( $M=8.77$ ,  $SD=1.80$ ) compared with when a Brady violation is present ( $M=8.64$ ,  $SD=1.89$ ), this difference is not statistically significant. In contrast, and supporting  $H_2$ , scenarios involving eyewitness recantations ( $M=7.35$ ,  $SD=2.23$  versus  $M=6.17$ ,  $SD=2.47$ ), false testimonies ( $M=7.36$ ,  $SD=2.30$  versus  $M=7.00$ ,  $SD=2.40$ ), and forced confessions ( $M=7.56$ ,  $SD=2.43$  versus  $M=7.28$ ,  $SD=2.62$ ) showed higher confidence ratings in the exoneration of wrongfully convicted murderers when Brady violations were present compared with cases without prosecutorial misconduct at a significant level of  $p < 0.05$ .

## Regression analysis

Excluding education, income, and partisanship, the respondents' age, gender, race, and political ideology shaped their rating of confidence in the new evidentiary reason for exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers (see Table 3). For instance, across the full sample, age was the most consistent predictor for the dependent variable, showing significant positive coefficients across the four models ( $p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that older individuals tend to exhibit higher confidence in exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers irrespective of the type of evidence. Likewise, gender, although not as consistent, demonstrated that women, when compared with men, reported statistically significant decreased confidence ratings in exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers through eyewitness recantations ( $b = -0.33$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), false testimonies ( $b = -0.40$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), and forced confessions ( $b = -0.32$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, with political ideology, conservatives had statistically lower confidence ratings in exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers by DNA evidence, false testimony, or a forced confession compared with liberals. Race had a varied effect, with White respondents more confident than Blacks when exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers by DNA, but Black respondents were more confident in exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers by false testimony than their White counterparts. Finally, in line with the descriptive and bivariate test, the Brady violation, our treatment variable, yielded a statistically significant increase in confidence ratings of exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers by false testimony ( $b = 1.16$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and forced confession ( $b = 0.34$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), with a substantively large effect on eyewitness testimony ( $b = 0.28$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ).

A review of the constant terms in Table 4 between the conditions per evidentiary reason provides additional support for  $H_2$ . While the constant term remains relatively stable for DNA evidence with no significant change when a Brady violation is present, the constant terms increase with a Brady violation for eyewitness testimonies, false testimonies, and forced confessions, each at a significant level of  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 3** Regression models predicting confidence in exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers

	DNA	Eyewitness	False testimony	Forced confession
Constant	8.07** (0.25)	5.27** (0.32)	7.61** (0.32)	6.89** (0.34)
Age	0.02** (0.00)	0.03** (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)	0.02** (0.00)
Woman	0.02 (0.11)	-0.33* (0.13)	-0.40** (0.14)	-0.32* (0.14)
Race: White	0.37** (0.12)	0.02 (0.15)	-0.38* (0.16)	-0.10 (0.17)
Education	-0.00 (0.06)	0.08 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.08)	0.01 (0.08)
Income	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Political Ideology	-0.06* (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.11** (0.04)	-0.09* (0.04)
Party ID: Independent	0.14 (0.15)	-0.25 (0.19)	-0.07 (0.19)	0.09 (0.20)
Party ID: Republican	-0.04 (0.19)	-0.39 (0.25)	0.19 (0.25)	-0.48 (0.26)
Brady violation	-0.10 (0.11)	1.16** (0.13)	0.34* (0.13)	0.28* (0.14)
Observations	1193	1193	1193	1193
$R^2$	0.04	0.11	0.03	0.05
Adjusted $R^2$	0.03	0.10	0.03	0.05

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

Race reference: non-White. Party ID reference: Democratic

Overall, this suggests that confidence in exonerating the wrongfully convicted murderer increases when prosecutorial misconduct is involved in handling false testimonies or forced confessions, with this effect on the constant term especially pronounced for eyewitness testimony.

Table 4 also shows that across the four evidentiary reasons for exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers, age, gender, race, and political ideology continued to be relevant predictors, with political ideology and race having a significant effect on confidence, specifically when a Brady violation was present. For instance, the negative effects of political ideology on confidence when a Brady violation is present suggests that conservatives reported lower confidence in exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers when prosecutorial misconduct involved DNA ( $b = -0.08$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) or forced confessions ( $b = -0.11$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). In contrast to that trend, for false testimony, political ideology loses its significance when a Brady violation occurs, indicating that prosecutorial misconduct may overshadow the influence of political beliefs in that scenario. Political ideology shows no significant effects in

**Table 4** Regression models predicting confidence in exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers by treatment predictor

	DNA		Eyewitness		False testimony		Forced confession	
	Basic	Brady	Basic	Brady	Basic	Brady	Basic	Brady
Constant	8.27** (0.34)	7.75** (0.35)	5.30** (0.46)	6.39** (0.42)	7.31** (0.45)	8.22** (0.43)	6.60** (0.49)	7.47** (0.45)
Age	0.02** (0.00)	0.02** (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
Woman	0.05 (0.15)	-0.02 (0.15)	-0.32 (0.20)	-0.33 (0.18)	-0.40* (0.20)	-0.39* (0.19)	-0.43* (0.21)	-0.20 (0.20)
Race: White	0.27 (0.17)	0.47** (0.17)	0.01 (0.23)	0.04 (0.20)	-0.36 (0.23)	-0.42 (0.21)	0.03 (0.25)	-0.24 (0.22)
Education	-0.04 (0.09)	0.04 (0.09)	0.15 (0.12)	-0.01 (0.11)	0.04 (0.11)	-0.18 (0.11)	0.05 (0.12)	-0.02 (0.12)
Income	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
Political Ideology	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.05 (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)	-0.14** (0.05)	-0.08 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.11* (0.05)
Party ID: Independent	0.09 (0.21)	0.19 (0.21)	-0.34 (0.29)	-0.17 (0.25)	0.23 (0.28)	-0.38 (0.26)	0.22 (0.30)	-0.06 (0.27)
Party ID: Republican	-0.18 (0.28)	0.12 (0.28)	-0.29 (0.37)	-0.53 (0.33)	0.23 (0.37)	0.12 (0.34)	-0.57 (0.39)	-0.39 (0.35)
Observations	598	595	598	595	598	595	598	595
R <sup>2</sup>	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.06
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.04	0.04

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

Race reference: non-White. Party ID reference: Democratic

the context of eyewitness testimony. Overall, in support of  $H_3$ , there is evidence that confidence in exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers is influenced by both the presence of a Brady violation and political ideology.

## Discussion

As wrongful convictions gain increasing public attention, understanding public opinion of these cases is crucial due to its potential to influence criminal justice policy and reform. This study contributes to the extant scholarship by exploring how the type of evidence and the presence of a Brady violation affect public confidence in exonerating a wrongfully convicted individual of murder. Public attitudes can tangibly influence compensation measures, conviction integrity units (otherwise wrongful conviction review boards), and broader reforms, particularly regarding prosecutorial accountability, since politicians and judges adjust policies to align with public

sentiment (Huber & Gordon, 2004; Jennings et al., 2016). Before addressing how the public can support these initiatives and reduce the stigma surrounding exonerees, we first present our findings below.

The study tested three hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 proposed that DNA evidence would elicit the highest confidence compared with other contributing factors. Hypothesis 2 suggested that the presence of prosecutorial misconduct would significantly increase public confidence in exonerations. Hypothesis 3 posited that sociodemographic factors, particularly political ideology, would shape public confidence in varying ways. Our findings support all three hypotheses.

Our findings demonstrate the public's strong confidence in the perceived value of the exonerating strength of DNA evidence compared with the other three contributing factors. Although DNA scored the highest confidence rating—8.71 on a 10-point scale—it is noteworthy that respondents were not completely confident in the exoneree's innocence, suggesting additional information is needed to increase confidence. This value is consistent with prior research on the perceived value of DNA in establishing guilt, which often relied on student samples (Lieberman et al., 2008; Ling et al., 2021; Maeder et al., 2017). In this study, we extended the investigation to explore the perceived exonerating strength of DNA evidence for wrongful convictions among members of the American public. Replication is needed to reinforce this pattern, as public scrutiny of evidence differs depending on whether it is presented as incriminating or exonerating (Maeder et al., 2017). By contrast, eyewitness recantations yielded the lowest confidence ratings, suggesting that individuals might not view this evidence alone as sufficient to garner substantial support for an exoneration, while false testimonies and forced confessions were rated similarly and fell between DNA evidence and eyewitness recantations. However, the confidence gap between eyewitness testimony and the other contributing factors, false testimony and forced confession, narrowed when framed within the context of prosecutorial misconduct.

The presence of a Brady violation significantly increased public confidence in exonerations involving eyewitness testimony, false testimony, and forced confessions but did not enhance confidence in DNA exonerations. The results suggest that prosecutorial misconduct may provide a critical context that augments confidence in less compelling evidence types, while DNA evidence, already viewed as highly credible, is not affected by the addition of a Brady violation. These findings reveal the public's sensitivity to prosecutorial misconduct and its potential to reshape perceptions of exonerating evidence in the context of wrongful convictions.

Several sociodemographic factors also emerged as significant predictors of confidence toward exonerating individuals wrongfully convicted of murder. In particular, political ideology is a substantive variable when investigating public attitudes toward wrongful convictions and exonerations (Norris et al., 2023), with conservatives reporting lower confidence in the exonerations based on DNA evidence or forced confessions when prosecutorial misconduct was involved. Interestingly, this ideological effect diminished in cases involving false testimony and was not significant for eyewitness testimony, suggesting that the type of evidence can moderate ideological differences. Other notable sociodemographic outcomes, like gender and racial differences, further highlighted the nuances of public attitudes toward

wrongful convictions and exonerations, with women and non-Whites showing more variability in confidence across the study's scenarios.

Finally, the study raises critical concerns about the potential challenges faced by exoneration cases that lack DNA evidence. The study's findings suggest that the public views DNA as the most convincing form of exonerating evidence, creating challenges for cases relying on other contributing factors, especially when these factors occur together but lack the persuasive power of DNA. Future research should investigate strategies to mitigate the public's overreliance on DNA evidence and enhance public understanding of the reliability and significance of other contributing factors, particularly in cases where DNA evidence is unavailable.

## Future work and implications

### Understanding the multifactorial nature of wrongful convictions and exonerations

As the current study demonstrated variability in public confidence based on the evidence used to exonerate a wrongfully convicted murderer, it aligns with research showing that the method of exoneration can have detrimental effects on both the timing of their release and the compensation received. False confessions, for instance, are associated with longer delays between conviction and release (Scherr & Normile, 2022). Specifically for cases involving murder, the length of time from incarceration to being exonerated has tripled, from 6.7 years in 1989 to 19.8 years in 2023 (National Registry of Exonerations, 2024a). Additionally, exonerations for murder that contained prosecutorial misconduct underwent a five-and-a-half-year delay, on average (Gross et al., 2022). Although there are no racial differences in prosecutorial misconduct, Black murder exonerees undergo a lengthier delay in their exoneration than White murder exonerees. One avenue worth exploring would be assessing whether, irrespective of evidence, the public holds a different value of the evidence used to exonerate a Black or White murder exoneree.

Onto compensation, unlike parolees, exonerees are not eligible for certain services when released from incarceration (West & Meterko, 2016). In terms of attitudes towards compensation, Canadian students were more likely to support distributing monthly living expenses to people in general than the wrongfully convicted; however, they were more likely to endorse financial compensation for the wrongfully convicted than convicted offenders. Nevertheless, the exonerating evidence shapes the decision to support the provision of government assistance. Those exonerated by DNA but convicted with evidence provided by a jailhouse snitch were rated with the greatest support for government assistance, followed by mistaken eyewitness testimony, and finally, false confession (Clow & Leach, 2015b). These opinions play out in the compensation statutes, specifically demonstrating DNA's overwhelming strength in reinforcing confidence in the exoneration. Missouri, for instance, while in the minority, only compensates wrongfully convicted individuals if they were exonerated by DNA, simultaneously limiting them from pursuing additional compensation if restitution is provided (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 650. 058, 2006). By contrast, one of the most comprehensive compensation statutes in the USA, signed

by ex-Republican Governor Rick Perry of Texas, provides exonerees \$80,000 for each year of wrongful incarceration, along with eligibility for educational assistance, healthcare benefits, and non-monetary support to facilitate their reintegration into society (Norris et al., 2023; Tim Cole Act, 2009).

One aspect of this exploratory study that future work could build on is conducting an experiment that better captures the multifactorial nature of wrongful convictions and exonerations. The effectiveness of the survey's scenario statements could be improved, as the current model fit scores suggest that the scenarios may not have generated sufficient variations in confidence levels, likely due to their simplicity and lack of mirroring the complexity of real-world wrongful conviction cases. For example, a conjoint experiment could more effectively convey the variability and compounding effects of contributing factors by incorporating detailed scenarios and ensuring more robust manipulations that capture the nuances of public perceptions.

Further, future research could use this method or separately explore public perceptions of false confessions obtained through psychologically manipulative interrogation techniques rather than physical force. Although the study's findings are limited to scenarios involving physical force, which was used to establish a clear basis for a Brady violation scenario, false confessions may be elicited through psychological methods such as deception, prolonged questioning, or promises of leniency (Guðjónsson, 2018). Public confidence in exonerations involving these more common interrogation techniques may differ from cases of physical coercion. Experiments could include scenarios reflecting these techniques to capture a broader understanding of how various forms of coercion affect public trust in exonerations and support for relevant criminal justice reforms.

Additionally, replicating this study's experiment with a focus on rape and drug cases is essential (see Lieberman et al., 2008), as the contributing factors to wrongful convictions and exonerations vary by crime type. Although the advent of DNA testing has significantly increased exoneration rates for wrongfully convicted individuals, particularly in sex crimes, not all cases contain biological evidence for pre-conviction DNA analysis (Gould & Leo, 2010; Gross et al., 2022). This issue is compounded by variations in state legislation regarding the handling of forensic evidence, especially in rape and sexual assault cases (Fallik et al., 2024). Additionally, the destruction or loss of evidence presents a challenge, as 29% of the Innocence Project's (2024) cases from 2004 to June 2015 were closed due to missing evidence. This issue is particularly salient in rape/sexual assault cases, where racial disparities in conviction rates and wrongful convictions, often driven by eyewitness misidentifications, are prevalent (Berube et al., 2022; Gross et al., 2022).

### **Addressing prosecutorial misconduct**

Furthermore, the results suggest that increased awareness of the legal powers granted to officials of the system, particularly in relation to the accused, could lead to greater public support for the rights and protections of defendants. Our findings highlight how evidence and prosecutorial misconduct shape public

perceptions while also making the public realize the already significant challenges defendants and the wrongfully convicted face when contesting the prosecution's evidence and ineffective counsel, as reinforced by a series of SCOTUS rulings. In *Imbler v. Pachtman* (1976), SCOTUS unanimously agreed that prosecutors are granted absolute civil immunity for misconduct related to courtroom actions. In *United States v. Bagley* (1985), the Court refined the Brady materiality test, requiring disclosure of evidence, including impeachment evidence, if it could have altered the trial's outcome. Likewise, in *Strickland v. Washington* (1984), SCOTUS held that defendants claiming ineffective counsel must prove both deficient legal performance and a prejudicial outcome that likely influenced the trial's result. In *United States v. Ruiz* (2002), the Court ruled that the government is not required to disclose impeachment information (such as prior convictions) before a defendant submits a plea, even though many Brady violations involve impeachment evidence that undermines the credibility of key prosecution witnesses (Garrett et al., 2024). Finally, *Connick v. Thompson* (2011) held a 5–4 decision that a district attorney's office cannot be held liable for a single Brady violation unless there is evidence of a pattern of failure to train prosecutors.

In addition to the preexisting courtroom relationships, particularly that of the judge and prosecutor, improving systems for prosecutorial oversight may be more advantageous, given the difficulties in seeking redress for wrongful convictions (or post-conviction remedies). Prosecutors' offices should establish internal review mechanisms to monitor misconduct and ethics violations, incorporating reports of errors and corrective actions into performance evaluations while rewarding ethical behavior like disclosing exculpatory evidence or dismissing unreliable cases (Innocence Project, 2016). There are 102 conviction integrity units that work to identify potential wrongful convictions, which may strengthen the credibility of the prosecutor's offices, with 52 already responsible for at least one exoneration as of June 2024 (National Registry of Exonerations, 2024b). One notable example is Philadelphia's conviction integrity unit, which, since 2017, has exonerated 37 of 44 individuals of murder; these individuals were imprisoned for an average of 18 years, totaling 676 years combined. Additionally, law schools should build in or enhance ethics training, and offices should adopt open-file discovery policies to ensure transparency and minimize discretionary decisions when determining what evidence is material (Garrett et al., 2024; Innocence Project, 2016; Luna & Redlich, 2021). The benefits of open-file discovery are realized in Luna and Redlich's (2021) research as participants who played mock prosecutors and were assigned to an open-file discovery policy were more encouraged to be honest, leading to more discovery and exculpatory evidence to be turned over to the defense. Other states could model Texas' Michael Morton Act (codified at Texas Code of Criminal Procedure art. 39.14), a landmark reform named after a man wrongfully convicted and exonerated of his wife's murder. The Michael Morton Act, which became effective in 2014, mandates an open-file discovery process, requiring prosecutors to share their entire case files—including all evidence—with the defense. By minimizing prosecutorial discretion in evidence disclosure, the Act aims to reduce the suppression of evidence, enhance transparency, and restore public confidence in the justice system.

## Appendix 1. Variable coding

*Age* – continuous, respondent’s age

*Gender* – binary, 0 = man; 1 = woman

*Race* – binary, White = 1; Other races = 0

*Education* – continuous, 0 = did not graduate from high school; 1 = high school graduate/GED; 2 = some college, but no degree (yet); 3 = 2-year college degree; 4 = 4-year college degree; 5 = postgraduate degree; 6 = doctorate

*Income* – continuous, 0 = Less than \$10,000; 1 = \$10,001 - \$20,000; 2 = \$20,001 - \$30,000; 3 = \$30,001 - \$40,000; 4 = \$40,001 - \$50,000; 5 = \$50,001 - \$60,000; 6 = \$60,001 - \$70,000; 7 = \$70,001 - \$80,000; 8 = \$80,001 - \$90,000; 9 = \$90,001 - \$100,000; 10 = \$10,001 - \$150,000; 11 = greater than \$150,001

*Partisan Identification* – nominal, Democrat; Independent; Republican; leaners coded as partisans

*Political Ideology* – continuous 10-point scale, 0 = very liberal to 10 = very conservative

### Additional Sample Information:

*Race* – Respondents were asked about the racial group most identified with: 72% White, 16% Black, 4% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 3% other.

*Region* – Respondents were asked which region they were from: 20% Midwest, 21% Northeast, 42% South, 18% West.

## Appendix 2. Descriptive statistics

**Table 5** Independent variables

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	18	46	46.25	88	16.10
Education	0	3	2.56	4	0.94
Income	0	6	6.06	11	3.38
Political Ideology	0	5	4.75	10	3.00
Variable	<b>Dem</b>	<b>Ind</b>	<b>Rep</b>		
Party ID	37.10%	27.88%	35.02%		
Variable	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>			
Gender	49.12%	50.88%			
Variable	<b>Non-White</b>	<b>White</b>			
Race	28.46%	71.54%			

**Table 6** Responses to statements

Full sample	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
DNA	0	9	8.71	10	1.85
Eyewitness	0	7	6.76	10	2.43
False testimony	0	7	7.18	10	2.35
Forced confession	0	8	7.42	10	2.53
<b>No Brady violation (basic)</b>					
DNA	0	9	8.77	10	1.80
Eyewitness	0	6	6.17	10	2.47
False testimony	0	7	7.00	10	2.40
Forced confession	0	8	7.28	10	2.62
<b>Brady violation</b>					
DNA	0	9	8.64	10	1.89
Eyewitness	0	8	7.35	10	2.23
False testimony	0	8	7.36	10	2.30
Forced confession	0	8	7.56	10	2.43

*Note.* “0=no confidence at all” to “10=complete confidence,” with “5” indicating “a neutral level of confidence”

### Appendix 3. Confidence bounds (95%) for regression model outputs

**Table 7** Confidence bounds (95%) for regression models predicting confidence in exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers

Term	DNA		Eyewitness		False testimony		Forced confession	
	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
(Intercept)	7.58	8.56	4.65	5.89	6.98	8.24	6.23	7.56
Age	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.04	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.03
Woman	-0.19	0.23	-0.60	-0.07	-0.66	-0.13	-0.60	-0.03
Race: White	0.13	0.61	-0.28	0.32	-0.68	-0.07	-0.42	0.22
Education	-0.12	0.12	-0.08	0.23	-0.21	0.10	-0.16	0.17
Income	-0.05	0.01	-0.06	0.03	-0.05	0.04	-0.03	0.06
Political ideology	-0.11	0.00	-0.10	0.04	-0.18	-0.04	-0.16	-0.01
Party ID: Independent	-0.15	0.43	-0.62	0.12	-0.45	0.30	-0.31	0.49
Party ID: Republican	-0.42	0.34	-0.87	0.09	-0.30	0.67	-0.99	0.04
Brady violation	-0.30	0.11	0.90	1.42	0.08	0.60	0.00	0.56

**Table 8** Confidence bounds (95%) for regression models predicting confidence in exonerating wrongfully convicted murderers by treatment predictor

Term	DNA						Eyewitness						False testimony						Forced confession						
	Basic		Brady		Upper		Basic		Brady		Upper		Basic		Brady		Upper		Basic		Brady		Upper		
	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	
(Intercept)	7.60	8.94	7.06	8.45	4.40	6.21	5.57	7.21	6.43	8.20	7.37	9.07	5.64	7.55	6.58	8.36									
Age	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.04	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.04									
Woman	-0.24	0.34	-0.32	0.28	-0.72	0.07	-0.69	0.02	-0.78	-0.01	-0.76	-0.02	-0.85	-0.02	-0.59	0.18									
Race: White	-0.07	0.61	0.13	0.81	-0.44	0.47	-0.36	0.45	-0.81	0.09	-0.83	0.00	-0.45	0.51	-0.67	0.20									
Education	-0.21	0.13	-0.13	0.22	-0.08	0.38	-0.21	0.20	-0.19	0.26	-0.39	0.04	-0.19	0.29	-0.25	0.21									
Income	-0.07	0.02	-0.06	0.04	-0.09	0.03	-0.06	0.06	-0.06	0.06	-0.06	0.06	-0.04	0.09	-0.06	0.07									
Political ideology	-0.11	0.04	-0.16	-0.01	-0.16	0.05	-0.09	0.09	-0.24	-0.04	-0.17	0.02	-0.17	0.05	-0.21	-0.01									
Party ID: Independent	-0.33	0.51	-0.23	0.60	-0.91	0.23	-0.66	0.33	-0.33	0.78	-0.89	0.13	-0.38	0.81	-0.59	0.48									
Party ID: Republican	-0.72	0.36	-0.42	0.66	-1.03	0.44	-1.17	0.11	-0.49	0.94	-0.54	0.79	-1.35	0.20	-1.09	0.30									

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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

**Ethics approval and research involving human participants and/or animals** The questionnaire and methodology for this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Sam Houston State University.

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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