

The Effect of Incarceration on Political Beliefs for Vulnerable Populations

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In an era of mass incarceration and increased polarization of prison reform, I explore the interrelated question: if incarceration affects political beliefs, and, if so, for whom are these effects strongest? I use data from over 5,000 inmate responses to a survey collected from jails and prisons across the United States in 2020 by the Marshall Project. My results demonstrate that incarceration significantly affects political beliefs of currently incarcerated people and the most vulnerable demographics imprisoned — women and people of color — experiencing an increased change in political beliefs compared to men and white counterparts.

The disenfranchisement of people in prison has become a policy topic that has transitioned from an era of tough on crime to mass incarceration attributing to the polarization of American politics. States are debating policy proposals based on whether currently incarcerated people deserve the right to vote and the restoration of voting rights for the formerly incarcerated. These policy proposals, criminal justice reform, and Bernie Sanders' attention to Vermont's retention of voting rights while imprisoned has caused an increase in recent attention to voting behaviors (*French* 2019), and the potential influence these voters will have on elections (*White and Nguyen* 2022). However, the debate has neglected to examine how the experience of prison impacts political beliefs and its key role in voting behaviors. In this article, I analyze if incarceration affects political beliefs, and, if so, for whom are these effects strongest?

Since the War on Drugs, punitive punishment became popular amongst both major political parties in the United States supporting “tough on crime” criminal justice policy, like mandatory minimum sentencing (*Tonry* 1995). Crime and punishment has always been politicised and with nearly two million people currently imprisoned in the United States (*Western* 2006) it is no surprise that the debate of restoring voting rights to imprisoned people is discussed as a risk to election outcomes and potential political incentives (*White and Nguyen* 2022, *Shjarback and Young* 2018). Previous research has found no accurate way to predict voting habits of currently incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people without overestimating the potential this population would vote Democrat (*Hjalmarsson and Lopez* 2010). Additional research finds even if re-enfranchised the population of voters in question are not likely to go to the voting polls (*Meredith and Morse* 2014). While prior research focuses on the impact of re-enfranchisement on election outcomes, I seek to understand the affected population within prison and if the experience of incarceration has changed their political beliefs. I find incarceration significantly effects the political beliefs of people imprisoned with a pronounced affect on over-represented and vulnerable populations including women and people of color.

The Prison Experience

The growing use of prison is identified to have four goals: retribution, incapacitation, deterrence, and rehabilitation (*Kifer, Hemmens, Stohr* 2003). Nearly half of federal offenders are re-arrested after being released from prison (*Cotter Semisch and Rutter* 2022). The institution unequivocally fails at the goal of rehabilitation and only truly achieves potential retribution and incapacitation of people perceived to have committed crimes. The prison system is incredibly successful at its goal of incapacitation.

Prison and jail staff identify incapacitation as their main goal and function of prison (*Kifer, Hemmens, Stohr* 2003). While initial understanding of incapacitation is the iso-

lation of imprisonment, removal from the public, restricted rights, and freedoms. Then, how are prison personnel achieving incapacitation as their main goal of their job duties? The practice of incapacitation must be extend beyond imprisonment and the removal of rights. The execution of incapacitation unjustly goes further than isolation from the general public and restricted freedoms inherently adopted from being imprisoned. In fact, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports 2,229 staff related inmate sexual victims over a three-year period¹. The exercise of sexual abuse and other forms of violence of inmates by prison staff and personnel is a practice of incapacitation and control. The inmates lose bodily autonomy and safety by being abused by those in positions of power and control. From this point in the article, I use the term incapacitation with the understanding that prison personnel and the system of prison exercises incapacitation beyond imprisonment and restrictions of freedoms but also violence. Specific groups of incarcerated people experience different levels of incapacitation and execution of abuse by prison personnel.

Women in prison and especially Black women in prison experience heightened rates of abuse and violence (*Belknap* 2021, *Beichner et al.* 2021, *Beichner and Hagemann* 2022). Overall, people of color experience sexual abuse at a significantly higher rate than their white counterparts when prison personnel is the aggressor (*Wolff et. al* 2008). While majority of people incarcerated experience abuse and violence either as a victim or witness, Latine victims of physical abuse by prison staff express a racial motive by their abuser (*Wolff et. al* 2008). Adjacent, the population of Latine people incarcerated increased ten fold between 1971 and 2001 (*Morín* 2009). The over-representation of people of color in prison creates a vulnerable demographic for prison personnel to prey on and execute their identified primary goal of incapacitation.

Additionally, Novisky and Peralta (2020) discuss lingering affects of witnessing physical violence in prison. For incarcerated people who do not personally experience violence and abuse, they are exposed as witnesses to the abuse and violence. Both prison experiences are

¹<https://bjs.ojp.gov/press-release/substantiated-incidents-sexual-victimization-reported-adult-correctional-authorities>

correlated with feelings of shame, guilt, avoidance, anxiety, and low self-esteem among the incarcerated (*Tangney et al.* 2011, *Novisky and Peralta* 2020).

Direct physical and sexual violence is not the only form of abuse used to incapacitate people incarcerated in prison. Prior research has identified an average of 14 deaths per year related to the heat and lack of air conditioning in Texas prisons (*Skarha* 2022). The Alabama Prison Strike² drew attention to unpaid prison labor, lack of livable conditions including air conditioning, and safety as inmates refused to leave their cells for nearly three weeks until the state met their demands. Forced labor for prison and corporation profit is widely discussed as forms of slavery, again the people incarcerated are denied bodily autonomy and safety.

The increase of public awareness and support for improved treatment of people who are incarcerated caused collective protests to mobilize the state and award the strike conditions. This shift of public attention and beliefs on punitive treatment has garnered attention to the potential impact of restored voting rights, voting rights for incarcerated people in Maine and Vermont, and attention to voting habits of people formerly incarcerated.

Restoring Voting Rights

The increased attention to the rights of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people lead scholars to attempt to predict potential changes to elections if the identified population were allowed to vote as they are in Maine and Vermont (*French* 2019, *White and Nguyen* 2022). Others seek to understand the low turn-out rates of those whom received restored voting rights with an emphasis in education, and awareness of their rights after being incarcerated and disenfranchised (*Meredith and Morse* 2014, *Hjalmarsson and Lopez* 2010).

Hjalmarsson and Lopez (2010, 358) find that after voting rights are restored, formerly incarcerated people are 31% less likely to vote than their counterparts. White and Nguyen (2022) support Hjalmarsson and Lopez findings by analyzing the voting habits of individuals incarcerated in Maine and Vermont who never lost the right to vote and find less than one in

²<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/12/01/alabama-prisons-humanitarian-crisis-523548>

ten inmates voted in the 2018 election. Ultimately, even with restored voting rights, the turnout of the identified population would be low and not change the outcome of state elections (*White and Nguyen* 2022). However, *Shineman* (2018) finds that restored rights increase political trust and government cooperation for formerly incarcerated voters. While restoring voting rights increases trust in government for formerly incarcerated people, it is not enough to encourage political engagement at levels that would influence election outcomes.

Incapacitation of incarcerated individuals includes imprisonment, sexual abuse, physical abuse, deathly living conditions, and forced labor. The success of incapacitation extends to include diminished political engagement for formerly incarcerated people through the lingering effect of the prison experience.

Incapacitation Theory

As the prior research shows the prison experience is abusive, violent, and operates as a racist and prejudiced institution, especially against people of color and women. Prison and jail staff focus on the punitive function of incapacitation beyond the removal from the mass population and commit crimes, and violence against those imprisoned. The treatment and experience of prison causes Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (*Belet et. al* 2020), shame, anxiety, and mental illnesses for people incarcerated (*Tangney et al.* 2011, *Novisky and Peralta* 2020). The over-representation in prison and targeting of Black and Latine people incarcerated cause these groups to experience the violence and harms within prison more than their white counterparts (*Rowell – Cunsolo et. al* 2014). However, the mere experience of prison and witnessing of its violence affects the health for all who have been incarcerated (*Novisky and Peralta* 2020). Such an extreme experience alters perceptions of identity and self-esteem (*Wolff et. al* 2008, *Novisky and Peralta* 2020). The incapacitation efforts exercised in prison create long-term crisis for people who experienced incarceration. While trust in government may increase with restored voting rights (*Shineman* 2018), I suggest

incapacitation while incarcerated changes political beliefs due to changed perceptions of identity, self-esteem, shame, and feelings of anxiety. As a person's perception of identity becomes more negative the more they will change their political beliefs to also feel negative towards policy that may have benefited one or more of layers of their identity. Incapacitation will cause a perception of feeling undeserving of potential benefiting policies.

Many individuals change their political beliefs over time. However, most political beliefs are significantly identified by generation the voter belongs to (*Ghitza Gelman, and Auerbach* 2022), and political orientations are set early on in life (*Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb* 1991). Prison will change the political beliefs of people incarcerated differently than identified in previous research. People who are incarcerated in prison have already socialized and been identified in a generational group with aligned political beliefs but prison will create a change to those established beliefs. The longer an individual experiences the violence of incapacitation while incarcerated the more likely they would be to change their beliefs differing from prior literature that political orientations are set early on.

Hypothesis 1: As time spent incarcerated increases the likelihood an incarcerated person will have changed their political beliefs will also increase.

Increased experiences of violence, and over-representation in prison will have an enhanced affect on changed political beliefs. Women in prison, with an emphasis on Black women, experience higher rates of abuse (*Belknap* 2021, *Beichner et al.* 2021, *Beichner and Hagemann* 2022), similar to the experience of Black and Latine men incarcerated (*Wolff et. al* 2008). The increased violent experience suggests increased feelings of shame, changed self-image, anxiety, and other mental illnesses. Women in prison account for 23% of self harm incidents while only representing 5% of the prison population (*Wolff et. al* 2008). Additionally, women who have experienced incarceration express an impact on their mothering identity (*Baldwin* 2017). Societal expectations of motherhood and what is expected of mothers is explored by Baldwin (2017, 3). She explains how mothers in prison are impacted emphasizing the effect on their self-esteem and self-image. This impact on one form of identity is

associative with other changes in identity related to self-image and relationships. Mothers who become incarcerated share feelings of shame and feel like 'bad mothers' (Baldwin 2017). Alike feelings can also create similar perspectives of ones racial or ethnic group, gender, class, or other related identity. I suggest these feelings of shame and other negative perspectives of self will change an individual's political beliefs because of less positive feelings towards their own identity and thus influence their support for policy or political beliefs that affect their identity. Because of the heightened levels of incapacitation and abuse during incarceration for women and people of color, they will experience a higher likelihood of changing their political beliefs while incarcerated compared to men and their white incarcerated counterparts.

Hypothesis 2: Women are more likely to change their political beliefs compared to men incarcerated.

Hypothesis 3: People of color who are incarcerated are more likely to change their political beliefs compared to their white counterparts.

The incapacitation of people who are incarcerated is extremely advanced from mere imprisonment. The experience destabilizes their health through abuse and on-going trauma. Incapacitation causes a change in self perception due to experiencing prison and will logically impact ones' political beliefs because of the changes in feelings towards their identities. Incapacitation efforts in prison make it seemingly impossible to predict potential voting behaviors and patterns of those affected.

Data and Methods

I test my theory of incapacitation and the affect on political beliefs in a logit model. First, to test Hypothesis 1 the primary dependent variable is whether an individual's political beliefs have changed since incarceration and the independent variable is the length of time they have been in the prison facility at the time of data collection. Second, to test Hypotheses 2 and 3 I also include demographic variables: gender and race. I include age of the individual

as a control variable.

The dependent variable of interest is whether the incarcerated person's political beliefs have changed since incarcerated and requires a dichotomous coding of either yes coded as 1 or no coded as 0. I use survey data collected in 2020 by the Marshall Project which includes over 8,000 respondents that were incarcerated in 2020 within 501 different jails and prisons across the United States³. The survey was collected digitally in 25 states and in paper form across the country as an insert inside of *News Inside* magazine⁴.

Length of time in this facility is a binary variable asking the respondent if they'd been in the facility for 10 years or less coded as 0 or more than 10 years coded as 1. Unfortunately, I am unable to differentiate between respondents who have been transferred from another institution or have combined years of over ten years. The question specifically asks about the current institution the respondent is in.

I code the race variable by coding all white survey respondents as 0 and people of color as 1. Race was collected by asking respondents three questions, "Do you identify as white?", "Do you identify as Black?", or "Do you identify as Latino/Latinx?". The respondent was able to answer all three questions, providing "yes" to any and multiple of the three or "no" to all three. I removed any respondent that indicated white and another identity but combined any who responded no to all categories as a person of color with Black and Latine respondents⁵. Due to disproportionate data across racial groups, people of color are categorized in one group and white in the other, creating a dichotomous variable for race.

The gender variable is coded 0 for respondents who identify as a man and 1 for those who identify as a woman. The dichotomous variable was collected similarly to race and asked respondents, "do you identify as a man?" and "do you identify as a woman?". Because the gender variable is not male/female regarding sex, I kept the variables titled man and woman.

³<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/03/12/for-those-serving-long-sentences-politics-is-a-lifeline>

⁴State of the facility answered by the magazine insert were not collected, only the digital collection. See Appendix for state distribution of digitally collected surveys in the analysis.

⁵Respondents who identify as Hispanic and white were removed from the analysis because the incapacitation theory is based on how the person is socialized and treated in prison. It is impossible to determine whether the respondent is perceived as white or Hispanic by their peers or prison staff.

Any respondent who did not identify as a man or woman was removed. There is a larger proportional difference between men and women in the survey, with men being majority of respondents.

I also include the control variable for age of respondent. A respondent who is 35 years old or younger is coded as 0 and 36 years or older is coded as 1. The dichotomous groups are used in the analysis to reference the questions asked in the survey.

After isolating these variables from the survey my analysis includes 5,577 respondents. Due to the binary nature of the variables, I use a logit model and adjust for robust standard errors to address the impact of potential omitted variables given the data limitations. I test the affect of all demographic and independent variables on the probability the respondent's political beliefs have changed since incarcerated. I report predicted probability figures to discuss the effect of demographic variables.

The Marshall Project produced the first of its kind survey, surveying the prison population with such high success is a difficult task. The population is properly protected and approval for data collection is difficult to obtain. It strictly limits the data available.

Results

The results of the logit model, displayed in Table 1, supports all three hypotheses. A respondent's time in the facility of over ten years is a significant and positive predictor of changed political beliefs all else equal. The length of time significantly effects the probability that a respondent has changed their political beliefs since being at the current prison facility providing support for Hypothesis 1. A respondent in the facility for ten years or less is approximately 36% likely to change their political beliefs. The likelihood a person changed their political beliefs since being at the prison facility for over ten years increases by 26% from being at the facility for ten years or less and are over 60% likely to have changed their political beliefs since being incarcerated (Figure 1).

Table 1: Demographics as Predictors of Changing Political Beliefs

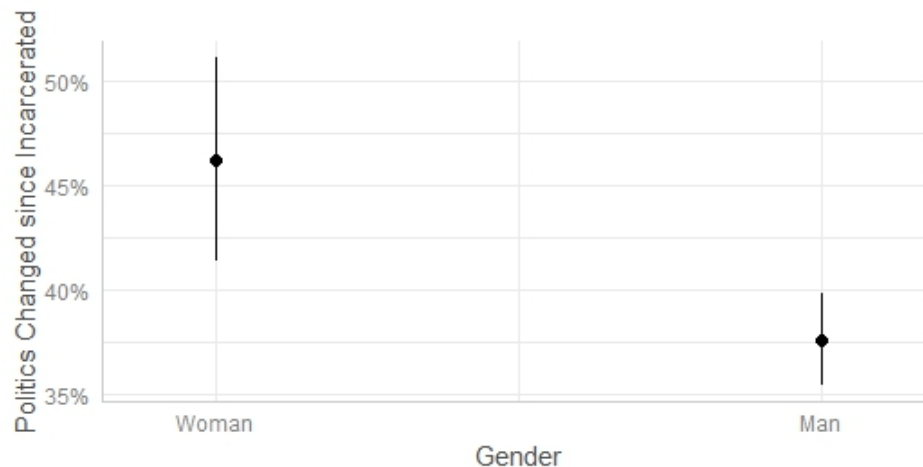
	Politics Changed since Incarcerated
Person of Color	0.424* (0.061)
Over 10 years	0.984* (0.082)
Woman	0.353* (0.103)
36 years or older	−0.127* (0.060)
Constant	−0.377* (0.050)
N	5,577
Log Likelihood	−3,755.653
Akaike Inf. Crit.	7,521.306
Notes	p < 0.05. Robust standard errors in parentheses

A respondent who identifies as a woman is significantly more likely to change their political beliefs since incarcerated than a respondent that identifies as a man all else equal. The predicted probability between women and men and changed political beliefs since incarcerated is shown in Figure 2. There is a significant increase in the likelihood a woman who is incarcerated had changed their political beliefs by approximately eight percent as opposed to a man who is incarcerated providing support for Hypothesis 2. An incarcerated woman is predicted to have a probability of changed political beliefs since incarcerated at roughly 47% meanwhile a respondent who identifies as a man has a predicted probability of 38%.

Figure 1: Predicted Probability of Changed Political Beliefs while Incarcerated

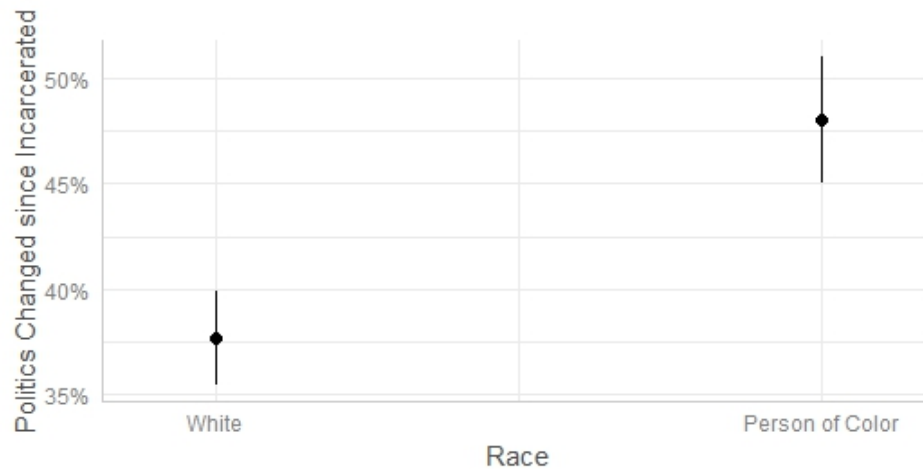


Figure 2: Predicted Probability by Gender on Changed Politics since being Incarcerated



The affect of race on probability of changed political beliefs since incarceration is also significantly higher for people of color compared to white people who are incarcerated supporting Hypothesis 3. Figure 3 displays the predicted probability for changed political beliefs since becoming incarcerated by racial groups. White respondents experience a 37% probability while people of color experience a 10% increase for roughly a 47% percent likelihood of changed political beliefs all else equal.

Figure 3: Predicted Probability by Race on Changed Politics since being Incarcerated



Interestingly, increased time in the facility increased the likelihood for changed political beliefs but respondents aged 36 or older are less likely to report changed political beliefs compared to people 35 years and younger who are incarcerated. Much like research indicates in the general population, political beliefs are more salient the older a person becomes but potentially at a later age for people incarcerated than those who are not.

The results of the logit model provides support for all hypotheses in the analysis and provide direction for further analysis based on the Incapacitation Theory of prison and understanding its affect on political beliefs of those incarcerated, especially vulnerable populations such as women and people of color.

Conclusion

Does incarceration affect political beliefs, and, if so, for whom are these effects strongest? As the theoretical model suggests the abuse and violence experienced in prison further incapacitates incarcerated people by changing their political beliefs. As a result, those experiences could further explain patterns and behaviors of formerly incarcerated people and voting. The Incapacitation Theory suggests that the use of prison as an effective institution for criminal punishment is untrue.

The empirical model supports the predictions of the Incapacitation Theory. The logit model shows people incarcerated are likely to experience changed political beliefs with an increased effect for women and people of color compared to incarcerated men and whites. People who are incarcerated have changed their political beliefs since becoming incarcerated at significant rates, supporting the prediction that the experience of prison has an effect on the political beliefs of those incarcerated. There is an increased effect the longer the person is incarcerated and thus exposed to more violence and abuse. While the measurement of 10 years or less in the facility is imperfect, it is incredibly important to note the introduction of incarceration has the probability of changed political beliefs by roughly 36% all else equal. The experience of being incarcerated effects the likelihood of changed political beliefs.

An increase to attention of prison reform policies, and restoring voting rights has encouraged scholars to analyze voting behavior of formerly incarcerated people, incarcerated people in Maine and Vermont, and potential changes in election outcomes. While rigorous and important, the results of these studies leave out an important part of the story: the experience of incarceration. Efforts have been spent to mobilize voters instead of understanding the affected populations increased feelings of shame, guilt, self-perception and the impact on political beliefs.

The current available data severely limits the ability to discuss the true purpose of incarceration since it fails at deterrence and rehabilitation. I cannot test the direction of change of political beliefs from liberal to conservative or vice versa. The size of the data

allows for successful testing of the identified variables with the ability to identify support for the effect of incarceration on the change of political beliefs, and the extreme effect on vulnerable populations. However, prison's success of incapacitation thrives with its embrace of institutional racism and sexism upheld through prison and jail conditions, and violence. Vulnerable groups in prison whom experience higher reported rates of imprisonment, violence, and abuse, change their political beliefs since incarceration at higher rates than white incarcerated people and those who identify as men. Future research should attempt to collect the direction of change in the political beliefs of those incarcerated from liberal or more conservative beliefs to further understand the effects of incarceration and its execution of incapacitation. Failure to shift will continuously recreate ineffective policy for prison reform, voting rights and voting behaviors, and re-enforce the injustices and violence toward women and people of color.

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Appendix

2,411 respondents completed the online version of the survey in five states, and the remaining respondents completed the magazine insert through mail.

