

Politics in Crime: Examining the Link Between Political Ideology and Crime Reports

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Introduction

The research question that this paper will aim to answer is whether an individual's perception of crime is a prediction for their political affiliation. It provides an intriguing look into how respondents of different political stances perceive criminal activity differently, and thus how they differ in reporting it.

Reviewing existing literature makes it clear that there are disparities in crime incidences versus official crime reports. Unlike most traditional studies that rely on crime data from law enforcement agencies, this research employs a qualitative approach to visualize varying degrees of crime frequency as reported by the respondents in the dataset.

The correlation between political affiliation and crime perception is what is truly being modeled in the regression analysis, though without context it would seem to measure the relationship between political party and crime frequency in that supposed party's district. While this is a crucial part of this analysis as a whole, the dataset used in this regression asks respondents directly how often they encounter certain crimes in their daily lives, and consequently serves as an alternative method of visualizing crime frequency.

The hypothesis tested was whether crime was seemingly more likely to occur in places where respondents identified themselves as leaning towards a particular political party. The specific prediction for the directional relationship is that people who identify further to the right will also report less crime to happen in their area. There are known, clear distinctions between how elected officials of opposing parties handle crime in their regions, and this regression analysis aims to uncover the true frequency of crime by the eyes of the people themselves.

Literature Review

The United States criminal justice system has long been scrutinized for its domination in global incarceration rates. Making up 5% of the world's population, the United States still accounts for 25% of the global prison population (Byrne, Pattavina, & Taxman 2015, Teasley, Spencer, & Bartholomew 2023). This has been the basis of many criminal justice reform conversations, with emphasis put on how this prison population also disproportionately affects minorities and particularly Black Americans (Grogger & Ridgeway 2006, McGee 2023, Williams & Vaughn 2023). However, the necessity of prison reform is an issue that fosters discussion at all ends of the political spectrum.

An indisputable phenomenon that is unique to American politics is the fluidity of the most far ends of the political spectrum. Even just a decade ago, in the early 2010s, a considerable population of conservatives showed support for historically more liberal ideas of criminal justice reform focused on rehabilitation and reducing recidivism rather than punishment (Dagan & Teles, 2012). In the year 2023, the United States has seen in the last decade countless instances of nationwide unrest aimed at correcting police brutality, defunding the police, supporting an unarmed police force, and exploiting racial profiling and racial treatment disparities (Howard et al. 2023, Sierra-Arévalo et al. 2023, White et al. 2023). After Donald Trump's election in 2016, the conservative shift back to the traditional tough-on-crime rhetoric was undeniable, serving as a more accurate depiction of the typical conservative attitude towards crime today (Rizer 2023, Baranauskas 2023).

This heated disagreement between the far left and right provides an extremely important context behind the modern state of the American criminal justice system. Of the states with the ten highest crime per 100,000 residents, seven are under the leadership of a Republican Attorney

General (Bastaki & Dey, 2019). The cause of this statistic is one that has many disputed explanations.

While Republican-led regions undoubtedly show higher rates of incarceration, there is evidence to support that this does not inversely mean that Republican regions tend to have more crime than Democrat regions (de Benedictis-Kessner et al., 2023). In fact, Benedictis-Kessner's regression analysis of mayoral partisan affiliations strongly supports that there is actually “no detectable causal effect on overall levels of crime” when a Democrat is elected mayor rather than a Republican (de Benedictis-Kessner et al., 2023, p. 9). However, while party affiliation is not statistically relevant in the discussion of overall crime rates, it is a prominent indicator of how the racial share of arrests may look.

Though Benedictis-Kessner's essay does show that overall crime remains unaffected by mayoral partisanship, it also shows that a Democratic mayor is associated with “a statistically significant one percentage point reduction in the Black share of all arrests,” (de Benedictis-Kessner et al., 2023, p. 13). It is also indicated by Benedictis-Kessner's study that this overall reduction is not the result of less arrests made for violent crimes, but mostly for those involving drug crimes and “other” petty crimes like loitering or vagrancy.

However, a 2019 regression analysis done to examine the effect of a Democratic Attorney General shows a significant decrease in total violent crime rate in Democratic states, and thus directly contradicts this trend (Bastaki & Dey, 2019). This perspective is an interesting and clear refutation of the idea that party affiliation within state level officials has no impact on the frequency of crime in that state. This may be due to many factors, with one very likely being a lack of access to reliable public crime data.

Bastaki and Dey's essay also includes key elements of how partisanship affects the idea of reforming the criminal justice system. A solution offered is "if Democrats are more likely to hand out probations than prison sentences, then this may dis-incentivize criminals from re-offending" (Bastaki & Dey, 2019, p. 20). Supporting this theory is another modern regression analysis showing that Democratic district attorneys are 25% more likely to dismiss criminal cases and 16% less likely to incarcerate defendants compared to Republicans (Fischer & Ludwig, 2023).

The data limitations in each of these studies are partially remedied by the regression analysis performed here with data from the World Values Survey. Existing literature illustrates the concerning ongoing issue of manipulated crime data and its potential to only worsen issues in the judicial system (Gibilisco & Horz, 2023). State level, publicly available crime data fails to include crucial statistics regarding police stops that may not have led to an arrest or conviction. Yet, this is one of the many important factors in how often members of a community perceive crime to be happening around them.

Hypotheses

Considering the high degree of variation in the existing literature on crime frequency and partisanship, there is no obvious outcome to predict for a new regression model on the same topic. However, since the regression will model respondent political party alongside their recognition of crime and other specified questionable conduct, we can expect to see typical political ideology reflected in the reporting of these incidents. This will most likely manifest as differing definitions of the various types of crime specified in the survey, or possibly as denial that certain kinds of misconduct even exist in the first place.

There are plenty of other issues that may occur as a result of having a self-reported dataset, but most important to the regression itself is that these differences exist at all. The objective of this

research is to uncover how individuals of different political leanings report crime and their personal safety differently. It serves as a primary account of why crime reporting is increasingly difficult and how it is oftentimes misrepresentative of reality.

Because of the typical painting of Republicans as “tough on crime,” I expect that individuals who identify as further to the right on the survey’s 10-point political scale will reflect this by reporting less daily crime and other misconduct.

Taking this into account, the prediction for the regression is as follows:

H1: Controlling for other factors, I expect that crime reporting frequency will decrease as individuals move farther “right,” thus serving as a prediction for one’s political ideology.

Data and Methodology

The dataset used for this regression analysis comes directly from the most recent 7th wave of the World Values Survey. The data was meticulously collected over the years from mid-2017 to the end of 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the expanded dataset includes responses from people in dozens of different countries around the world about a multitude of different social, political, and cultural perspectives, the data cleaned and used in this regression includes responses only from those living in the U.S.

There were over 90,000 rows in the dataset initially, with hundreds of columns pertaining each to their own individual question. This means that I had to significantly limit the data and variables to be included in this depiction of larger trends.

The specific questions I wanted to include in my regression had to do with the frequency in which respondents experienced different misconduct happening in their neighborhood and also their self-reported political leaning.

The entire list of variables included in the regression are named in the dataset as follows:

Dependent Variables

Robberies - Q132

Alcohol consumption in the streets – Q133

Racist behavior – Q135

Drug sale in streets – Q136

Street violence and fights – Q137

Sexual harassment – Q138

Control Variable

Age of respondent – 262

Explanatory Variable

Political leaning – Q240

There are a couple important things to note about each of these variables. First, each of the dependent variables are asked to be identified by the respondent as occurring in frequency on a scale of 1-4. However, a unique part of this dataset is how the scale is seemingly backwards, with the coding for each response as follows:

Q: How frequently does [dependent variable] happen in your neighborhood?

1 – Very frequently

2 – Quite frequently

3 – Not frequently

4 – Not at all frequently

This was a factor that was crucial to perform the regression, and the course of action taken to best understand the results included flipping these scales so that 4 corresponded to “Very frequently,” 3 with “Quite frequently,” and so on.

For each dependent variable, this was done with a simple *recode* command, such as:

```
recode q132 (1=4) (2=3) (3=2) (4=1)
```

Controlling for age hopefully mitigates the trend that respondents are likely to answer a certain way just because they are of a certain age. Age is coded as a simple two-digit integer in the dataset. This is an important part of political leanings, and that is reflected in the full regression.

Another factor for consideration were the seemingly random values for many of the dependent variables that occurred in the dataset. While responses were expected to all fall between 1 and 4, occasional negative values were inputted as responses. Upon further inspection of the WVS questionnaire and its underlying code, these values corresponded to respondents that did not have an answer, did not want to give an answer, or otherwise could not answer.

Using a *drop* command, each of the variables were cleaned to only include responses that matched the frequency scale, for example:

```
drop if q133 < 0
```

A similar issue occurred with the independent variable depicting political leaning on a 10-point scale. The question asked respondents to identify on a scale of 1-10 where they stood politically, with 1 being “left” and 10 being “right.” There were occasional random negative variables

coded as responses in this variable as well, which was cleaned using the same method as the dependent variables:

```
drop if q240 < 0
```

Another part of the cleaning process is renaming the variables to correspond with their question content and help with clarity in interpreting the results:

```
rename q132 robberies
```

```
rename q133 alcohol
```

```
rename q135 racism
```

```
rename q136 drug_sale
```

```
rename q137 street_violence
```

```
rename q138 sexual_harassment
```

```
rename q262 age
```

```
rename q240 political_leaning
```

The last step in ensuring the data is cleaned and organized properly is running a *summ* command for each of the variables, with the results showing limited variation between variables:

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
robberies	2,495	1.954709	.8024327	1	4
alcohol	2,495	1.977555	.9251765	1	4
racism	2,495	1.976353	.8722775	1	4
drug_sale	2,495	1.937074	.9696932	1	4
street_violence	2,495	1.716232	.8474436	1	4
sexual_harassment	2,495	1.750301	.8068068	1	4
age	2,495	43.54269	16.23345	18	90
political_leaning	2,495	5.207214	2.511391	1	10

Results

After using the *regress* command with all the aforementioned variables in their respective places, the results are as follows:

```
. regress political_leaning robberies alcohol racism drug_sale street_violence sexual_harassment age
> exual_harrassment age
```

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	2,495
Model	888.290524	7	126.898646	F(7, 2487)	=	21.26
Residual	14841.5796	2,487	5.9676637	Prob > F	=	0.0000
Total	15729.8701	2,494	6.30708506	R-squared	=	0.0565
				Adj R-squared	=	0.0538
				Root MSE	=	2.4429

political_leaning	Coefficient	Std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
robberies	-.0361316	.0826214	-0.44	0.662	-.1981454	.1258821
alcohol	.0848074	.0811687	1.04	0.296	-.0743578	.2439726
racism	-.5580431	.0773651	-7.21	0.000	-.7097498	-.4063364
drug_sale	.1490133	.0899266	1.66	0.098	-.0273254	.3253519
street_violence	.4215437	.1037371	4.06	0.000	.2181237	.6249637
sexual_harassment	-.2221265	.0932974	-2.38	0.017	-.4050752	-.0391778
age	.0220894	.0030936	7.14	0.000	.0160231	.0281558
_cons	4.627858	.2167373	21.35	0.000	4.202854	5.052862

The outcome of the regression model shows an interesting correlation between frequency of crime reports and its prediction for political leaning. The dependent variables with the highest t-

statistic and thus with the highest statistical significance are those that correspond to reports of racism, street violence, and sexual harassment respectively. Another key control variable is respondent age, which is also highly statistically significant and exemplifies that with each unit increase in age, there is a predicted .02 increase in political leaning. This would mean, by nature of what the scale represents and considering the true cause of this trend, that respondents are more likely to lean farther to the right as their age increases.

The main aspects of each of the coefficients in the regression is their sign. With the exception of racism and street violence, the coefficients do not substantively differ in size. Looking more into the variables that do seem to have a larger correlation with the independent variable, the regression also predicts that individuals who report more racism, as well as less street violence, are likely to identify further to the left. More than anything else, this is likely a reflection of political ideology accounting for varying definitions of what these behaviors look like.

For the other variables in the regression, robberies and sexual harassment are reported less frequently as respondents move closer to 10 on the scale. The opposite is true for alcohol consumption and drug sale in the streets, being reported more frequently as respondents identify farther right.

One of the largest coefficients in the regression predicts that, for each unit increase in reports of racism, political identification decreases by a significant 0.56. Considering that political affiliation is reported on a scale of 1-10, a half a point reduction accounts for a 5% decrease in where a respondent identifies. It is also important to note that respondents could only identify themselves on the scale with a whole number, so this seemingly .56 decrease may present as an entire point reduction in some cases. Inversely, this would mean that respondents that identify as farther left report racism occurrences more often than their right leaning counterparts. While this

still may be considered only a moderate overall correlation, it is the largest effect of all dependent variables.

Similarly, but with the opposite relationship, is the coefficient corresponding to reports of street fights and violence. The regression predicts that for each unit increase of street violence reports, political identification increases by 0.42. By extension, this predicts that individuals farther right report street violence as occurring more frequently than individuals that are farther left. As with reports of racism, this still may be considered only a moderate overall relationship.

Another key to understanding the regression results is the Root Mean Squared Error (MSE), which comes out to be about 2.44. This means that, on average, the predicted political leaning of a respondent will miss the true value of the political leaning by about 2.44 points. On a 10-point scale, this number seems substantive without considering its context. However, the scale does not have standardized unit differences and thus is dependent upon the interpretation of each individual respondent.

Also worth mentioning is that, in the scope of American political ideology, many times a difference of 2.44 points in either direction does not significantly change an individual's political standpoint. For example, a respondent that identifies as a 4 on the political scale is likely to still share many of the same perspectives as a respondent that identifies as a 6. Because this may hold less true for the extremes of the scale, it is simply a limitation that is accepted by performing the regression with this data.

Conclusion

While the regression did not perform perfectly or without error, it does affirm that in some cases, political leaning is a significant variable to consider in crime reporting. Regarding the original

hypothesis the model was based on, the regression performed as expected only in some cases. Respondents did seem to report less robberies, sexual harassment, and racism as they identified further right. However, this did not hold true for alcohol consumption, drug sale, or street violence.

An interesting trend in the results of this regression is how variables that are more ambiguous or are regularly at the center of many partisan debates have higher coefficients. Racism, street violence, and sexual harassment have the highest correlation to political leaning most likely because their interpretation is dependent upon where one falls on the political scale. This subjectivity acts as one of the largest limitations of this study and exists with any research with self-reported data.

Another point of subjectivity in this regression is the respondent interpretation of the political scale. As priorly mentioned, the 10-point scale respondents identified themselves on has no standard of measurement for each unit increase. If this study were to be revised, it would be helpful to include a quantitative measure of political ideology, like number of elections voted in for a particular party.

Though this regression does imply that differences in crime reporting exist for individuals on opposing sides of the political spectrum, it does not effectively support that one party is tougher on crime than the other. In fact, these differences in crime reporting serve as examples of how politics influences the perception and interpretation of crime, and not necessarily its frequency.

As a whole, this analysis highlights that there is an existing relationship between political ideology and the reporting of crime and misconduct. However, it cannot establish a definitive link between political orientation and the true frequency of these incidents. As the 2024 presidential election nears and partisan issues get inevitably more charged and hostile, it is crucial to keep in

mind that trends even as seemingly small as the ones in this study can have immense, dire repercussions.

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Appendix

```
drop if b_country_alpha != "USA"
drop if q240 < 0
drop if q132 == -1
drop if q132 == -2
recode q132 (1=4) (2=3) (3=2) (4=1)
drop if q133 < 0
recode q133 (1=4) (2=3) (3=2) (4=1)
drop if q135 < 0
recode q135 (1=4) (2=3) (3=2) (4=1)
drop if q136 < 0
recode q136 (1=4) (2=3) (3=2) (4=1)
drop if q137 < 0
recode q137 (1=4) (2=3) (3=2) (4=1)
drop if q138 < 0
recode q138 (1=4) (2=3) (3=2) (4=1)
rename q132 robberies
rename q133 alcohol
rename q135 racism
rename q136 drug_sale
rename q137 street_violence
rename q138 sexual_harrassment
rename q240 political_leaning
rename q262 age

regress political_leaning robberies alcohol racism drug_sale street_violence
sexual_harrassment age
```