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Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy

SPSSI WILEY

Between a prosecutor and a convicted felon? Political allegiance, abolition, and felon's rights in the context of the 2024 U.S. presidential election

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Abstract

U.S. Republicans endorse more punitive beliefs and support for current systems of law and order, while Democrats tend toward greater acknowledgement of flaws in these systems and endorsement of reforms or even abolition of carceral systems. Yet, following Donald Trump's 2024 convictions on 34 felony counts, Republicans questioned the legitimacy of the legal system and continued to endorse Trump as a fit presidential candidate, while Democrats praised the justice system and construed Trump as unfit for office due to his felon status. In a mixed-method study, we examined how political allegiance and abolitionist ideology shaped perceptions of Trump's felony charges and beliefs about the fitness of felons (including Trump specifically) to hold public office. Data from 196 politically diverse U.S. participants were collected immediately following Trump's re-election. Results indicated Democratic identification and voting for Harris/Walz (vs. Trump/Vance) were generally associated with heightened endorsement of abolition. Yet, political party allegiance consistently trumped abolitionist ideologies in predicting felon-in-office beliefs.

Republicans endorsed both general and Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs more strongly than Democrats; the role of abolitionist ideology in predicting felon-in-office beliefs was suppressed by political party identification. Qualitative analyses supported these findings; Republicans generally were unsupportive of Trump's convictions and endorsed his fitness for the presidency, while Democrats were supportive of Trump's convictions and argued his felony status rendered him unfit for the presidency. Our findings suggest that allegiance to one's political party, rather than one's ideology, appears to predict responses to Trump's convictions. We consider the implications of these findings for political and activist mobilization.

KEYWORDS

voting, carcerality, political ideology, prison abolition

Public significance statement

The 2024 presidential election highlighted contradictions between political party values and actions regarding crime and punishment, with Democrats endorsing punitive responses to Trump's felony convictions and Republicans crossing long-held tough on crime party lines to support Trump's run for office. We examine how political party allegiance and abolitionist ideologies shaped responses to and perceptions of Donald Trump's felony convictions, finding that allegiance to one's political party, rather than one's ideology, is the best predictor of support (or lack thereof) for Trump's convictions.

On May 30, 2024, then-former U.S. President Donald Trump became the first U.S. president to be convicted of a felony. Trump was convicted on 34 felony counts of falsifying business records in relation to hush money payments made to Stormy Daniels (Manhattan District Attorney's Office, 2024). The convictions and later sentencing of Trump ignited a firestorm of political and social commentary across the political spectrum.

Kamala Harris and her supporters went as far as framing the presidential race as one between a prosecutor and a convicted felon (Fayyad, 2024), a comparison that came to dominate the Democratic political narrative, and that also served to highlight racialized and gendered dynamics in the election, with a biracial Black woman prosecutor pitted against a White man convicted of felony crimes relating in part to his sexual conduct toward women. Democratic lawmakers and citizens largely lauded the verdict, expressing happiness with the convictions and satisfaction with the

legal proceedings (see Lebowitz, 2024). Meanwhile, the Associated Press described Republicans as reacting with "immediate fury" and "speaking out with near unanimity in questioning the legitimacy of the trial and how it was conducted" (Jalonick, 2024, para. 1); Republican senator Lindsey Graham described the verdict as "say[ing] more about the system than the allegations" (Jalonick, 2024, para. 9).

Though these reactions to Trump's conviction abide by party lines—including Republican allegiance to then-former President Trump and widespread Democratic distaste for the former president—they violate broader partisan associations with punitiveness and support for criminal systems. That is, while Republicans have historically tended toward "tough on crime" policies of law and order, justification of punitiveness, and the expansion of carceral systems (e.g., Brock-Petroshius, 2023; Smith, 2004), Democrats have been more prone to acknowledging the harms of the carceral state and tended toward non-punitive ideologies (e.g., Azevedo et al., 2022; Oswald et al., 2024). In particular, Democrats, relative to Republicans, are more supportive of policies to re-integrate felons, including through abolition of felon disenfranchisement laws and support for felons holding public office (e.g., Chiricos et al., 2012; Piniare et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2015; see also Kaplan, 2023).

In the current study, we sought to better understand the contradiction between longstanding party associations with punitiveness and partisan reactions to the Trump felony case. Specifically, we examined how political party identification (Republican, Democrat, and Independent) and abolitionist, anti-carceral values were related to perceptions of Trump's felony convictions, general and Trump-specific felony re-integration beliefs, and voting behavior in the 2024 U.S. presidential election.

Abolition

Since 2020's summer of racial reckoning in the wake of protests against police violence, abolitionist ideologies—manifesting most saliently as calls to defund the police—have penetrated national political discourse (Davies et al., 2021). Contemporary abolitionists argue for a divestment from carceral systems (e.g., prisons, police) and re-investment in communities, (e.g. Davis et al., 2022; Ritchie, 2023) alongside more targeted aims such as re-enfranchising and removing other restrictions from convicted felons in exchange for models of transformative justice (e.g., Bell, 2021; Hasbrouck, 2023; Roberts, 2008).

Despite its recent emergence in the mainstream consciousness, police and prison abolition has a long history dating back to the 1950s (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022). Over time, the abolitionist movement has built momentum to curb the expansion of the carceral state and at the same time channel funding into community resources such as education, housing, and social programs (Kaba, 2024). Abolition is distinguished by its drastic nature and often juxtaposed with reforms to emphasize its objectives. Whereas reformist campaigns aim to improve, adjust, or tinker with policies, practices, and institutions that enact and are otherwise complicit in state violence, abolitionist campaigns aim to completely eliminate such practices (Davis et al., 2022). Although specific strategies may differ across organizations and persons, abolition has overarching principles such as addressing the roots of oppression and avoiding creating new harm or benefiting some impacted communities at the expense of others. For instance, while reformist strategies include body cameras and diversity training for police officers as well as gender-expansive imprisonment, abolitionist strategies include decarceration, eliminating prisons, defunding policing, and restoring rights to currently and formerly incarcerated people (Gampa & Sawyer, 2024).

As one component of the ever-expanding carceral state, the U.S. imposes a number of restrictions on the rights of people who have been convicted of felonies. These include informal limitations on education and family activities, as well as explicit sanctions on certain civic activities such as employment, voting, and holding public office (Bushway & Sweeten, 2007; Chiricos et al., 2012; Chouhy et al., 2023; Steinacker, 2003)—though notably, there are no federal restrictions on felons holding the office of the president. These sanctions on felons, which in many states remain even after the individual has completed their state-sanctioned punishment, contribute to the carceral state by denying civic reintegration and reproducing stigma against criminalized people (Chiricos et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2015). Abolitionists argue for the abolition not only of prisons and policing, but also of these types of restrictions that represent the broad reach of the carceral state (e.g., Fletcher, 2018).

The rights of felons—and particularly the voting rights of felons—held a notable place in public discourse following Trump's convictions, with numerous tweets and articles highlighting the irony of a presidential candidate who would be unable to vote in the presidential election in many states (e.g., Berry, 2024; Fields, 2024). Some commentators used this contradiction to highlight abolitionist principles and argue for an abolition of restrictions on felon's rights. For example, notable liberal ice cream company Ben & Jerry's, who publicly supported abolitionist principles in the wake of Black Lives Matter (Ben & Jerry's, n.d.), continued to embrace an abolitionist politic in their June 6, 2024 tweet on the matter, stating: "Donald Trump has been convicted of 34 felonies, but he still deserves the right to vote. Trump should be able to vote, and so should the other 4.4 million, disproportionately Black and Brown, people in the US who are barred from voting because of a felony conviction. There are 10 states where people with felony convictions may lose their right to vote permanently. A criminal record shouldn't leave you locked out of the ballot box." This discourse is one demonstration of how Trump's felony convictions brought abolitionist debates, particularly regarding the rights of felons to engage in political action, to the fore in relation to the 2024 election.

Political (Mis)alignments with contemporary abolition

Support for abolition is often conceptualized as following a partisan divide. Generally, more conservative political ideologies are associated with support for current carceral systems and opposition to abolitionist ideals, including those espoused by the Black Lives Matter movement (Azevedo et al., 2022; Drakulich & Denver, 2022). Indeed, a recent nationally representative study found that, among U.S. participants, higher political conservativism was associated with lower endorsement of abolitionist ideology (Oswald et al., 2024).

Gunderson (2022) links Republican investment in carceral systems to historical racism, outlining how tough-on-crime Republicans (e.g., Raegan, Nixon) used rhetorics of crime and punishment to capitalize on racial fears and resentment among the public. Punitive conservative policies held significant public appeal in their capacity to incarcerate and punish people of color and Black people in particular (Gunderson, 2022). Indeed, the surveillance and restriction of people of color's behavior continues to serve significant political ends for conservatives. For example, contemporary voter identification laws, which inequitably restrict voter turnout among Democratic-voting demographics, including racial minorities, are more likely to pass under Republican legislations (Biggers & Hanmer, 2017; Highton, 2017). Such laws are "driven in part by Republicans' incentives to reduce the voter turnout of racial minorities in the interest of political advantage" (Chouhy et al., 2023, p. 510).

Relatedly, Republicans often maintain the notion of the law, broadly, as identity-neutral—that is, as agnostic to characteristics such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status (e.g., Brown, 2022; Wilson et al., 2015). This construction of law as identity-neutral serves to justify the imposition of rights restrictions, including voter identification and felon disenfranchisement laws, by situating them in terms of individual merit (e.g., felons as undeserving of full political citizenship) rather than as manifestations of systemic biases (e.g., racism; see Chouhy et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2015). Conversely, Democrats tend toward acknowledging the systemic racism perpetrated by the contemporary carceral state. For example, Democrats have been at the forefront of calls to revise or abolish criminal systems in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement (e.g., Azevedo et al., 2022; Drakulich & Denver, 2022) and are more likely than Republicans to perceive the law as biased against minorities (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2021). Democrats are also more likely than Republicans to endorse abolitionist ideologies overall (Oswald et al., 2024), in line with abolition's roots in liberal Black feminism (e.g., Davis et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, contemporary Democrats have been acknowledged as strange bedfellows in support of the carceral state (Brock-Petroshius, 2023; Gunderson, 2022). For example, Democrats have supported and instigated publicly popular punitive policies (often in pursuit of political advantage, and particularly under conditions of stiff electoral competition; see Gunderson, 2022) and have aligned with expansions of the carceral state, particularly in areas of Democratic interest such as increasing punishments for sexual violence (see Brock-Petroshius, 2023; Oswald & Pham, 2025). Recent Democratic contributions to the carceral state include the Democratic Party's 2024 platform's explicit call to fund the police (Democratic National Committee, 2024), and, as noted above, the Harris campaign's predominant strategy of framing Harris as a prosecutor in contrast to Trump as a convicted felon. Thus, while Democrats tend toward less punitive and more abolitionist approaches than do Republicans, these trends are not clearly linear; one possibility is that the Democratic party itself tends more toward carcerality than do Democratic voters.

Overall, though, Republicans tend to approach the law with a more punitive eye than do Democrats, who are more supportive of abolitionist reimaginings of punishment. Yet, following former President Donald Trump's convictions, Democrats embraced punitiveness and challenged Donald Trump's eligibility for candidacy in the 2024 presidential election on the basis of past criminal behavior. Conversely, Republicans have tended away from this punitiveness and instead have taken to criticizing the legal proceedings in Trump's case and broadly embracing the notion that Trump—despite felony convictions—should be allowed to hold public office.

Political party allegiance

These contradictions suggest an allegiance to political party (or potentially to a particular candidate) over ideology. Indeed, prior research suggests that party influence dominates individual ideology. For example, attitudes toward welfare reform policies were driven by the alignment of policy content with their own ideology only when party information was absent; in contrast, when information about their own party's support for the policy was present, this information drove policy opinions such that people aligned with their party's position even when it conflicted with their individual political beliefs (Cohen, 2003). More recent work similarly demonstrates party loyalty among Republicans, who express policy positions at odds with their own political ideology when those policy positions have been endorsed by Trump (Barber & Pope, 2019).

Partisan bias and party allegiance, over and above ideology, shapes perceptions of a range of contemporary issues, including those related to elections, policy, and crime (see Ditto et al., 2025). Further, partisan identity is an increasingly important social identity for many people, particularly in times of political strife (West & Iyengar, 2022). In trying political environments such as the 2024 election, allegiance to one's party, and the salience of that allegiance as a core component of one's identity, may be more important than one's own beliefs and ideologies in predicting behavior and policy support (see also Barber & Pope, 2019). We thus expected that, in the current context, party allegiance might overwhelm abolitionist ideology in predicting perceptions of Trump's felony convictions and broadly support for felon's rights.

Contextualizing felon's rights

Restrictions on felon's rights are a part of the broader carceral state, and endorsement of these restrictions follows broader trends in political alignments with the carceral state. Relative to Republicans, Democrats—in line with their heightened endorsement of abolition—tend to be more likely to support the abolition of restrictions on felon's rights and policies of felon re-integration (e.g., Chiricos et al., 2012; Piniare et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2015; see also Kaplan, 2023). Republican discourses often construct restrictions on felon's rights as earned consequences and thus as appropriate punishment for individuals who are perceived as having violated norms of self-discipline and morality (see Wilson et al., 2015).

Despite these partisan tendencies, in the wake of Trump's convictions, the notion of Trump being unfit for office *due to his felon status* gained currency among Democrats. Meanwhile, many Republicans voiced an intention to support Trump's run for office despite his felon status (with 56% of registered Republicans saying convictions would have no effect on their support for Trump and 35% saying convictions would increase their support for Trump; Lange, 2024), and supported this intention with behavior in the 2024 election. In the current study, we sought to understand how abolitionist ideology and political party allegiance shaped support for felon-in-office policies, both generally and specific to the case of Donald Trump.

The current study

Though Republicans have historically tended toward "tough on crime" policies of law and order, justification of punitiveness, and the expansion of carceral systems (e.g., Brock-Petroshius, 2023; Smith, 2004), Democrats have been more prone to acknowledging the harms of the carceral state and tending toward non-punitive ideologies (e.g., Azevedo et al., 2022; Oswald et al., 2024). Yet, in the wake of Donald Trump's felony convictions, party lines seem to have flipped, with Democrats finding now-felon Trump unfit for office and lauding the success of the legal system in Trump's convictions, and Republicans questioning the legitimacy of the legal system and endorsing now-felon Trump as a fit candidate.

These competing discourses raise an important contradiction worthy of further examination. Based on these discourses and the existing literature, we expected that Democrats would endorse abolitionist ideology more strongly, but Republicans would more strongly endorse the abolitionist principle of increased rights for felons (both generally and specific to Trump), which we operationalize as felon-in-office beliefs. Overall, we expected that political identification, rather than abolitionist ideology, would predict felon-in-office beliefs, defying the longstanding ideological

alignment between liberals and abolition as well as that between conservatives and traditional law and order.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data were collected as part of a larger longitudinal study which included initial validation of the Abolition Ideology Scale (see Oswald et al., 2024). We focus on a subset of variables from the larger study. The data we present here are from the third wave of this longitudinal study and were collected in the days immediately following Trump's re-election (November 6–10, 2024). All study procedures were approved by the relevant institutional ethics review boards prior to data collection.

Participants

We initially recruited a nationally representative U.S. sample ($N = 350$) based on age, sex, and ethnicity via Prolific, who were paid ~$12/h for their participation. 210 of these participants completed the third wave of the survey (the wave presently being reported). For the current study, we removed 10 participants who did not complete the full survey and four participants who did not respond to the critical open-ended question, resulting in an analytic sample of 196 participants.

Demographic data were collected in Wave 1 of the longitudinal survey. The average age of participants was 51.59 years ($SD = 14.38$). Most participants were women (53.6%) followed by men (43.4%), and nonbinary/agender/genderqueer individuals (2.6%). A majority of participants were White (66.3%), followed by Black (12.2%), Asian or Asian American (8.2%), Latino/a/x (8.2%), Indigenous or Native American (3.6%), Middle Eastern (2.0%), and multiethnic (4.6%); participants could select multiple ethnic identities. Most participants were heterosexual (84.2%), followed by bisexual (6.1%), asexual (3.6%), gay (2.6%), lesbian (2.0%), queer (1.0%), and 0.5% of the sample preferred not to answer.

Participants also indicated their political party identification by responding to the following question: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?" Response options included Republican, Democrat, Independent, No Preference, and Other. Participants who selected Other were able to specify their affiliation. Most participants were Democrats (42.3%) followed by Independents (34.2%), Republicans (17.9%), and Other (2.6%); another 2.6% of the sample indicated No Preference. Of participants with other affiliations, one participant (0.5% of the sample) identified with each of the following: Libertarian, MAGA, Marxist-Leninist, and Socialist.

Measures

Abolition ideology scale

The 26-item Abolition Ideology Scale (Oswald et al., 2024) captures the extent to which individuals endorse contemporary abolitionist ideologies, particularly in relation to policing and criminal systems. Three subscales capture Alternatives to State Violence (e.g., "Instead of responding to harm with punishment, we need to build infrastructures of support and care"), Revolutionary Abolitionism (e.g., "All people should be freed from prisons and jails"), and Abolitionist Identity

(e.g., "Being an abolitionist is important to who I am as a person"). Participants responded to each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating greater abolitionist ideology. Each factor demonstrated strong reliability; Alternatives to State Violence ($\omega = .926$); Revolutionary Abolitionism ($\omega = .897$); Abolitionist Identity ($\omega = .926$).

Candidate evaluations

On sliding scales ranging from 0 (*cold or unfavorable*) to 100 (*warm or favorable*), participants indicated their feelings toward presidential candidates Kamala Harris and Donald Trump.

Voting behavior

Participants indicated whether they voted in the 2024 presidential election (response options: Yes, No). Participants who responded *Yes* were then asked: "Who did you vote for in the 2024 presidential election?" Response options included Harris/Walz, Trump/Vance, Prefer not to Answer, and an Other option in which participants could input their selection.

General felon-in-office beliefs

On a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with three statements about policies related to convicted felons holding political office. These included "People who have been charged with a felony should be allowed to hold public office," "Someone with a criminal history is not fit to be in the government," (reverse scored), and "Having a criminal history should not prevent people from being in positions of political power." Scores were averaged such that higher scores indicated a greater belief that felons should be allowed to hold office ($\omega = .764$).

Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs

Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with three statements about policies related to Trump holding political office as a convicted felon. Based on the General Felon-in-Office Beliefs items, these included "Donald Trump should be allowed to hold public office even though he has been charged with a felony," "Donald Trump is not fit to be in the government due to his criminal history," (reverse scored), and "Having a criminal history should not prevent Donald Trump from being in positions of political power." Scores were averaged such that higher scores indicated a greater belief that Trump should be allowed to hold office despite his felony convictions ($\omega = .945$).

Open-ended beliefs

Participants responded to the following open-ended item: "How do your beliefs about police and criminal justice abolition (whether you support this movement or not) influence, align with, or challenge your perceptions of Donald Trump in relation to his felony convictions?"

RESULTS

Quantitative analysis

For descriptive purposes, we first provide descriptive statistics (Table 1A-B) and correlations between all primary variables (Table 2). Tables S1–S2 provide primary correlations split by participant race and gender.[1]

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[1] Though our sample is not large enough to examine interactions of race, gender, and political party, we include these analyses by race and gender for a number of reasons. First, we find these axes important given racialized and gendered dynamics in the 2024 election which situated a biracial Black and South Asian American woman prosecutor against a White man with a history of committing gendered and sexualized violence. Second, prior work (Oswald et al., 2024) demonstrates some differences in endorsement of abolition and related variables by race and gender. Finally, as addressed in the introduction, abolition is rooted in Black feminist theorizing and thus necessarily invokes race and gender.

TABLE 1A   Descriptive statistics for primary continuous variables.

	M	*SD*	Range
Alternatives to state violence	2.72	1.02	1–5
Revolutionary abolitionism	1.63	0.69	1–5
Abolitionist identity	2.23	1.16	1–5
Warmth—Kamala Harris	55.27	38.41	1–100
Warmth—Donald Trump	30.22	37.62	1–100
General felon-in-office beliefs	2.46	1.09	1–5
Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs	2.58	1.58	1–5

TABLE 1B   Descriptive statistics for primary categorical variables.

	Frequency	%
Party identification	–	–
Democratic	83	42.3
Republican	35	17.9
Independent	67	34.2
Other	5	2.6
No preference	5	2.6
Voted in 2024 election	–	–
Yes	175	89.3
No	21	10.7
Voting behavior	–	–
Harris/Walz	111	56.6
Trump/Vance	57	29.1
Other	3	1.5
Prefer not to say	4	2.0

Note: One participant did not provide political party identification data. Three participants who identified their political party as Republican reported voting for Harris/Walz. One Democrat-identified participant reported voting for Trump/Vance. 29 Independents reported voting for Harris/Walz and 22 for Trump/Vance.

TABLE 2 Correlations between primary variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Alternatives to state violence	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
2. Revolutionary abolitionism	.697**	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. Abolitionist identity	.636**	.633**	–	–	–	–	–
4. Warmth—Kamala Harris	.368**	.102	.188**	–	–	–	–
5. Warmth—Donald Trump	−.454**	−.162*	−.194**	−.768**	–	–	–
6. General felon-in-office beliefs	−.070	.088	−.011	−.456**	.403**	–	–
7. Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs	−.420**	−.126	−.201**	−.805**	.832**	.646**	–
8. Voting behavior	.453**	.184*	.281**	.847**	−.906**	−.430**	−.824**

Note: Voting behavior presented as dichotomous and coded as Trump/Vance (0) and Harris/Walz (1). *N* for correlations including voting behavior = 168.

*= $p < .05$, **= $p < .01$.

TABLE 3 Means (Standard Deviations) for Endorsement of Abolition ANOVAs.

	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Alternatives to state violence	3.08 (0.86)$_a$	1.96 (0.81)$_b$	2.59 (1.04)$_c$
Revolutionary abolitionism	1.68 (0.68)$_a$	1.40 (0.50)$_b$	1.62 (0.64)$_{a,b}$
Abolitionist identity	2.39 (1.15)$_a$	1.79 (0.79)$_b$	2.18 (1.20)$_{a,b}$

Note: Differing subscripts (horizontally) indicate significant differences (*p*'s < .05).

For comparative analyses, we exclude participants who identified their political party identification as Other or No Preference due to small sample size.

Endorsement of abolition and party allegiance

In line with prior literature (Oswald et al., 2024), we expected that abolitionist ideology would be positively associated with Democratic allegiance and negatively associated with Republican allegiance. Supporting this hypothesis, correlational analyses indicated that higher endorsement of Alternatives to State Violence and Abolitionist Identity was associated with more positive evaluations of Kamala Harris; endorsement of all three abolition subscales was associated with more negative evaluations of Donald Trump (see Table 2). Endorsement of all three subscales was also associated with increased actual behavior of voting for Harris/Walz (versus Trump/Vance; see Table 2).

We also conducted ANOVAs to establish whether endorsement of abolition differed by political party identification as anticipated. Omnibus Welch tests were used to account for violations of homogeneity of variance (Levene's test *p*'s < .05). Welch tests were significant for the Alternatives to State Violence, $F_{\text{Welch}}(2, 93.84) = 23.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p2 = .173$, 95% CI: [.079, .264], Revolutionary Abolitionism, $F_{\text{Welch}}(2, 101.67) = 3.23$, $p = .044$, $\eta_p2 = .025$, 95% CI: [.000, .079], and Abolitionist Identity, $F_{\text{Welch}}(2, 104.97) = 5.37$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p2 = .038$, 95% CI: [.000, .100] subscales. Specifically, Games–Howell post-hoc tests indicated that in all cases, Democrats endorsed abolitionist principles to a greater extent than Republicans (see Table 3 for means). For Alternatives to State Violence, Independents also differed both from Republicans and Democrats.

TABLE 4 Means (Standard Deviations) for Felon-in-Office Beliefs ANOVAs.

	Democrats	**Republicans**	**Independents**
General felon-in-office beliefs	1.96 (0.95)$_a$	2.84 (0.89)$_b$	2.78 (1.11)$_b$
Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs	1.42 (0.78)$_a$	4.06 (1.24)$_b$	3.14 (1.53)$_b$

Note: Differing subscripts (horizontally) indicate significant differences (p's < .05).

Our overall findings thus indicated that endorsement of abolition was associated with Democratic party identification and allegiance.

Felon in office beliefs and party allegiance

We expected that Republicans, despite their carceral leanings, would more strongly endorse the abolitionist principle of increased rights for felons (both generally and specific to Trump). Supporting this hypothesis, correlational analyses indicated that general felon-in-office beliefs as well as Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs were negatively associated with warmth toward Harris and positively associated with warmth toward Trump (see Table 2).

Next, we examined whether felon-in-office beliefs differed by political party identification. For general felon-in-office beliefs, the overall test was significant, $F_{\text{Welch}}(2, 93.73) = 16.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta 2 = .150$, 95% CI: [.063, .240]. Games–Howell post-hoc tests revealed that Republicans and Independents supported felons in office to a greater extent than did Democrats (see Table 4). The same pattern emerged for Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs, $F_{\text{Welch}}(2, 77.18) = 89.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta 2 = .450$, 95% CI: [.342, .531]; see Table 4.

We also examined how general and Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs differed within-party. Democrats ($t(82) = 6.47$, $p < .001$, Hedge's g = 0.78), Republicans ($t(34) = 7.12$, $p < .001$, Hedge's g = 1.04), and Independents ($t(66) = 2.38$, $p = .020$, Hedge's g = 1.25) all differed in their general versus Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs (see Figure 1). Democrats were less likely to endorse Trump-specific than general felon-in-office beliefs, while the opposite was true for Republicans and Independents.

Abolition, felon-in-office beliefs, and party allegiance

Results presented thus far tell two competing tales: Although endorsement of abolition is associated with a Democratic profile, Democrats appear to endorse more punitive beliefs when it comes to convicted felons' rights to hold public office, both when considering this dynamic in general and specific to Trump. The opposite is also true: Republicans (and to a lesser extent, Independents) are less likely to endorse abolitionist principles, but simultaneously endorse less punitive felon-in-office beliefs, particularly when considering Trump specifically.

Tying these findings together, we next examined how political party affiliation and abolitionist ideology together predicted felon-in-office beliefs. For the purposes of these analyses, we excluded participants identifying as Independents, as we were particularly interested in the Republican–Democrat contradiction.

We conducted separate regression models for general and Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs to examine how political party affiliation and abolitionist ideology in tandem, as well as their
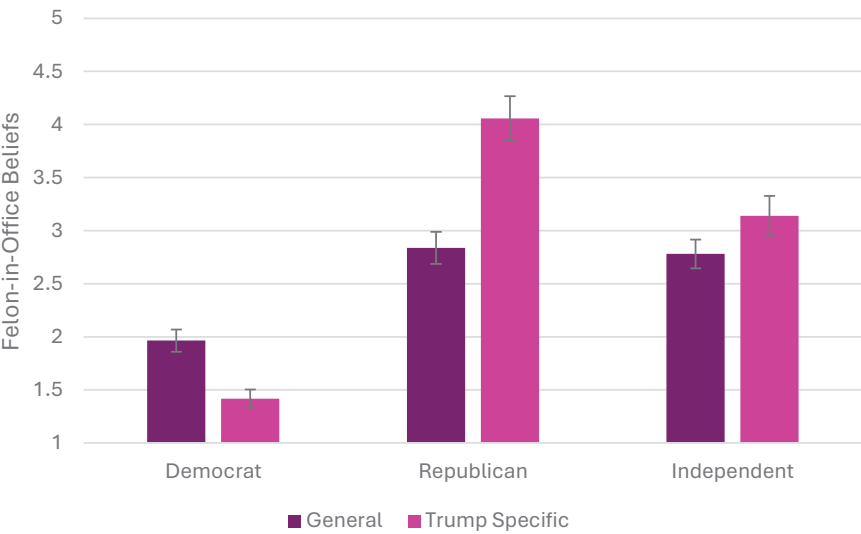
FIGURE 1 General vs. Trump-Specific Felon-in-Office Beliefs by Political Party Identification
Note: Error bars depict standard errors.

TABLE 5 Linear regressions predicting felon-in-office beliefs.

	B	SE(B)	β	t	p	95% CI(B)
General felon-in-office beliefs						
Alternatives to state violence (ASV)	−.099	.164	−.097	−.604	.547	−.423, .225
Revolutionary abolitionism (RA)	.307	.204	.195	1.502	.136	−.098, .711
Abolitionist identity (AI)	.026	.117	.028	.223	.824	−.205, .257
Political party identification (PPI)	2.422	.644	1.100	3.760	<.001	1.146, 3.699
ASV*PPI	−.116	.324	−.114	−.357	.722	−.784, .402
RA*PPI	−.708	.406	−.487	−1.745	.084	−1.512, .096
AI*PPI	−.191	.299	−.175	−.638	.525	−.784, .402
Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs						
Alternatives to state violence (ASV)	−.253	.154	−.164	−1.637	.104	−.558, .053
Revolutionary abolitionism (RA)	.402	.192	.169	2.087	.039	.020, .783
Abolitionist identity (AI)	.064	.110	.046	.581	.562	−.154, .282
Political party identification (PPI)	4.022	.608	1.208	6.618	<.001	2.817, 5.226
ASV*PPI	−.550	.305	−.360	1.803	.074	−1.156, .055
RA*PPI	−.123	.383	−.056	−.321	.749	−.881, .636
AI*PPI	−.150	.282	−.091	−.532	.596	−.710, .410

Note: Political party identification coded as 0 = Democrat, 1 = Republican.

interactions, shaped these beliefs. The overall models were significant for both general felon-in-office beliefs, $F(7, 110) = 4.65$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .228$, and Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs, $F(7, 110) = 36.55$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .699$. Overall findings in both models indicated that political party affiliation was the primary predictor of felon-in-office beliefs (see Table 5).

Specifically, being a Republican increased endorsement of both general and, even more so, Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs. Interestingly, endorsement of revolutionary abolitionism was positively associated with endorsement of Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs. Together, our quantitative findings indicate that, though abolitionist ideology is generally linked to Democratic tendencies, political allegiance appeared to overwhelm abolitionist ideologies (or their inverse) in predicting felon-in-office beliefs. To better understand how participants themselves made sense of these contradictions, we next analyzed data from open-ended responses where participants reflected on the links between their beliefs about abolition, criminal justice, and Trump's felony convictions.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Grounded theory approach

We used a grounded theory approach to code the open-ended data from the survey, as in prior survey research (e.g., Winslow Edwards et al., 2023). We opted for a grounded theory approach given the novelty of studying abolition through a psychological lens and the concurrent lack of extant applicable theoretical models (see Gampa & Sawyer, 2024; Oswald et al., 2024); a grounded theory approach emphasizes the generation of theory that is *grounded* in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2017; Charmaz, 2006). In particular, our approach was inspired by Charmaz's (2005) articulation of a constructivist grounded theory approach to social justice research. We sought to develop a theoretical model to understand how our politically diverse participants made sense of the links between their own perceptions of Donald Trump's felony convictions and their ideologies pertaining to abolition, punishment, and carceral policies.

Two coders reviewed the data. The two coders represent differing standpoints and brought their own perspectives and assumptions to bear on the data; in acknowledgement of this, we provide positionality information for both coders (see Charmaz, 2005). The first coder identifies as a queer non-citizen cisgender white woman living in the United States, a feminist academic and activist, and a liberal abolitionist. The second coder identifies as a Vietnamese cisgender gay man, a non-immigrant noncitizen in the United States, and a researcher-activist who frequently organizes and engages in political education and resistance on abolitionist and decolonial issues.

We identified initial themes through a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2017). In the first phase of analysis, the two coders independently reviewed all de-identified open-ended responses to familiarize ourselves with participant responses. We identified initial codes that captured how participants conceived of the relationship between their perceptions of Trump's felony convictions and their ideologies relating to abolition, punishment, and carceral policies. The two coders then met to discuss these codes and reached consensus about the initial coding structure (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2017). The coders then returned to the data in an iterative process to ensure that the codes captured all salient themes (see Charmaz, 2005). This process yielded 11 codes that best captured the data (see Table 6).

We then generated definitions and began to identify participant responses characteristic of each code. One coder completed this process, which was then reviewed alongside the full dataset by the other coder to ensure the coding structure represented the data. We then proceeded to write up our findings and clarify the theory generated from the data. In particular, we attended to Charmaz's (2005) emphases of resources, hierarchies, and policies and practices when considering our data and the relationships to power that participants articulated in their responses. To ensure trustwor-

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TABLE 6 Themes and descriptions.

Theme	Theme description	Table 7 Quadrant location
1. Trump convictions demonstrate functioning of the system, especially because of his power	Trump's felony convictions demonstrated proper functioning of the system: The fact that Trump was convicted despite his position of power—in terms of wealth, demographics, and presidency status—showed that the justice system holds all people accountable for their actions.	supportive/supportive
2. Trump convictions demonstrate that system is necessary because Trump needs to be punished	Trump's convictions are utilized as an argument against abolition of the system.	supportive/supportive
3. Trump's actions should be constrained due to his felon status	Desire for carceral ethic to be enacted against Trump in the wake of his convictions, including constraints on his rights as a felon.	supportive/supportive
4. The lack of punishment following Trump's convictions demonstrates flaws in the current system	The lack of enacted punishment following Trump's convictions demonstrates that the system is flawed because it is not effective at punishing.	supportive/against
5. Trump received favorable or light treatment	Trump should have received harsher treatment and the system failed to provide this punishment, likely because of Trump's position of power.	supportive/against
6. Desire for reform over abolition	The system should be reformed to be more effective at punishing people like Trump, and should not be abolished because people like Trump must be punished.	supportive/against
7. Disparity in the legal process should promote abolition	Trump's convictions demonstrate flaws in the system, particularly with regard to disparities in treatment; these and additional flaws should be reasons to abolish the system.	against/against
8. The system failed by allowing Trump to be convicted	The justice system was too easily contrived to work against Trump, demonstrating its flaws and need to be strengthened.	against/against
9. Trump convictions are flawed but the system is good	While Trump's convictions themselves were flawed, they were specifically targeted and did not reflect the broader state of the justice system, which is good.	against/supportive
10. Trump's crimes are not that bad	The justice system works appropriately, but Trump's crimes are simply not that bad, and there are worse crimes that deserve actual punishment.	against/supportive
11. The two are wholly unrelated	Trump's convictions are unrelated to the concept of abolition.	n/a

Note: Table 7 quadrant location indicator is supportive/against convictions, then supportive/against current justice system.

TABLE 7 Matrix of key features shaping participant responses.

	Supportive of current justice system	Against current justice system
Supportive of convictions	Trump's convictions, despite his structural power, reinforce that the justice system is working properly	Although Trump was convicted, he got off lightly or received favorable treatment due to his structural power, demonstrating flaws in the justice system
Against convictions	Trump's convictions were personally targeted and are irrelevant to the broader state and typical functioning of the (properly working) justice system	Trump's convictions were entirely bogus and politically motivated, demonstrating flaws in the justice system

thiness and analytic rigor, once the writeup of findings was complete, we once again cross-checked the final presentation of codes against the raw data (Charmaz, 2005).

Findings

Our analysis revealed three distinct axes that shaped participant responses. The first was perceptions of the Trump felony convictions as related or unrelated to the notion of police and criminal justice abolition. We first separated participant responses based on this axis, as those who found Trump's convictions to be unrelated to abolition—though nonetheless important—did not articulate responses to the question of interest. Some participants articulated a belief that the two were wholly unrelated. For example, one participant indicated that, "To my way of thinking one has nothing to do with the other" (62-year-old Democratic Black gay man) and another described the opinion that, "They don't really. I don't think Trump did anything wrong and shouldn't have been charged. It seems like the Democrats were just grasping for anything to keep him out of office. This is unrelated to the larger issue of crime in society and in my community" (48-year-old Independent White straight woman).

However, most participants articulated responses indicative of a perceived connection between Trump's convictions and broader evaluations of policing and the criminal justice system. Upon reviewing these responses, the coders identified how the connections that participants articulated varied on two primary axes. These included opinions that were either for or against the current criminal justice system, and opinions that were either for or against Donald Trump's felony convictions (see Table 7). Participant responses populated all four quadrants of the possible combinations of these two axes. Participant responses generally flowed from this broader structure and highlighted the centrality of power in considerations of the relationships in question (see Table 6).

Participants supportive of Trump felony convictions

Many participants, particularly those who identified as Democrats, explicitly expressed support for Trump's felony convictions. For example, one expressed that, "I believe he was rightly convicted and should be punished the same as any citizen", (58-year-old Democratic White straight woman) while another opined that, "I believe that Donald Trump is guilty of those convictions and many other crimes that he has gotten away with" (38-year-old Democratic Latino straight man).

However, among participants supportive of Trump's convictions, opinions differed on how these convictions related to broader perceptions of abolition, policing, and criminal justice. Some participants argued that Trump's felony convictions reinforced their belief in the justice system or demonstrated the proper functioning of the system. In particular, these participants expressed that the fact that Trump was convicted despite his position of power—in terms of wealth, demographics, and presidency status—showed that the justice system holds all people accountable for their actions. For example, one 58-year-old Democratic White gay man described his belief that "I think the justice system worked as intended and he was found guilty of 34 felonies." A 42-year-old Republican Latino straight man described how he perceived Trump's convictions as an instantiation of justice:

> "…Donald Trump's felony convictions reinforce my belief in the justice system's responsibility to hold individuals accountable, regardless of their status or position. His role as a former president amplifies this expectation, as leaders should be held to high standards and exemplify respect for legal principles. I view these convictions as necessary actions by the justice system, not as examples of political targeting or as proof of systemic flaws that abolitionists might argue."

Others who were supportive of Trump's convictions also used these convictions to argue against abolition of the justice system. For example, a 37-year-old Independent White asexual transmasculine participant articulated the perspective that,

> "If we abolished current systems of criminal justice, Donald Trump would never be effectively punished for his crimes. He would, in essence, get away with his illicit behavior and face no real consequences."

Many participants, then, endorsed a perception that Trump's convictions demonstrated the capacity of the current justice system to hold Trump accountable, and therefore did not endorse the application of abolitionist principles in this case. However, a larger portion of participants who were supportive of Trump's convictions nonetheless argued that the justice system is flawed. Many participants with this perspective articulated a desire for reform (over complete abolition), but nonetheless expressed beliefs that Trump's convictions—and particularly, a perceived lack of punishment following these convictions—demonstrated flaws in the current justice system. For example, a 63-year-old Independent White straight participant expressed his support for the convictions while simultaneously condemning the justice system's functioning, stating, "I believe justice has been partially done as regards trump (conviction). I suspect his election will shield him from punishment. This is contrary to my view of a well- functioning criminal justice system."

Many participants expressed a belief that Trump received favorable or light treatment, often explicitly drawing upon discourses of wealth, race, and power to situate this argument. For example, expressing a desire for Trump to face incarceration for his felonies, a 46-year-old Democratic multiethnic straight woman stated,

> "The country is racist. It also caters and idolizes the ultra-wealthy. Donald Trump is a swindler. A user, loser, and abuser and would have never made it this far economically or politically if he was born a person of color, especially Black. If Trump wasn't White, the media would have a field day incriminating by digging into his past, broadcasting his mugshot, disgracing his mother, asking does he know who his father is etc…I am

unsure how a criminal with multiple children from multiple women can be elected twice as president. It's because he is an old white man with White Male Privilege. How can a convicted felon NOT be in jail, but a POC would be otherwise and practically burned at the stake?"

Other participants similarly drew upon comparisons to people of color's treatment by the justice system to highlight the perceived ease with which Trump evaded punishment. The punishment itself tended to be the assumed correct response to Trump's misbehavior, and the ethic of punishment was therefore not often called into question. Embodying this, a 48-year-old Independent multiethnic straight man expressed that, "I believe that he was given favorable treatment versus how someone of a different status or race would have been which is not fair or right." Similarly, a 36-year-old Democratic White asexual nonbinary participant stated, "I think that Trump would be rotting in jail right now if he weren't rich, and it is a failure of our justice system that we don't hold the rich to the exact same standards as the poor." Notably, and in line with many others in our sample, these participants do not question whether the harsher punishment received by people of color or people of low socioeconomic status is an appropriate response but instead articulate a desire for Trump to receive that same treatment.

Accordingly, many participants expressed a desire for an ethic of punishment to be enacted. This included traditional punishment such as incarceration, but many participants also articulated a desire for Trump's actions to be constrained due to his felon status. In particular, participants expressed a desire to bar Trump, and by extension people with felony convictions, from certain forms of civic engagement such as holding public office. A 50-year-old Democratic White straight woman embodied this sentiment, stating, "Anyone who has a felony conviction(s) should NOT be able to run for office! A felony is a CRIME. I don't believe that is a hard concept to understand." A 75-year-old Democratic White straight man similarly argued that:

> "Anyone with a felony conviction should not be allowed to run for the Presidency. That person couldn't vote in many states, due to a felony conviction. It's a terrible message to young people and other countries."

Such sentiments were common in our sample, particularly among Democratic participants, suggesting that these participants were not engaging abolitionist principles in their considerations of Trump's convictions. A small number of participants, however, used the perceived disparity in the legal process as evidence to argue for abolition of the justice system. One 27-year-old Independent Latino straight man argued, in regards to Trump's convictions, "It showed that money and influence allows you to bypass punishment. It makes Trump look better because it makes him look untouchable. It makes me think the whole system needs to be thrown away and redone."

Thus, even among (primarily Democratic) participants who were supportive of Trump's convictions, orientations toward abolition (or lack thereof) in relation to those convictions varied greatly. Although some participants believed that the convictions demonstrated the capacity of current justice systems to hold even those in power accountable, others argued that the convictions, and particularly the perceived lack of punishment following those convictions, demonstrated flaws in the justice system. Yet the majority of participants, including those who opined that Trump's convictions highlight flaws in the system, did not argue for an abolitionist response to these perceived flaws. Indeed, many participants, despite liberal leanings, articulated a strong desire for Trump to face punishment, often in the form of incarceration.

Participants against Trump felony convictions

Conversely to the above, many participants, particularly those who identified as Republicans, explicitly expressed a lack of support for Trump's felony convictions. For example, a 60-year-old Republican White straight man expressed the belief that, "Donald Trump did not do anything wrong, the democrats attacked him with fake charges, The Bidens should be in jail along with Tim Walz yet they go after Trump?" Similarly, a 58-year-old Republican White straight man stated, "I think Trump was unfairly convicted."

Among participants who were not supportive of Trump's convictions, perceptions of how these convictions related to the state of the broader justice system varied. Some participants expressed the belief that, while Trump's convictions themselves were flawed, they were specifically targeted and did not reflect the broader state of the justice system, which was perceived as good and/or functional. For example, one participant expressed that, "Police should do their job and fairly convict people who committed crimes depending what they did. Donald Trump's charges were all false to try to trick people into not voting for him" (63-year-old Republican White straight man). Similarly, a 34-year-old Republican White straight man articulated that, "Trump's conviction was a weak ploy by leftist politicians, attorneys and judges to try to scare him out of running for the office of President of the United States. Thankfully they failed and it has nothing to do with the regular law enforcement systems in the United States." Another participant described a similar perception of this disconnect, stating, "I don't think Trump did anything wrong and shouldn't have been charged. It seems like the Democrats were just grasping for anything to keep him out of office. This is unrelated to the larger issue of crime in society and in my community" (48-year-old Independent White straight woman).

Some participants also argued that the justice system is good, and Trump is good (or at least, not that bad). For example, a 63-year-old Republican White straight woman expressed that, "Donald Trump might have done wrong, but there are worse crimes. The police need to be there for us. If someone is trying to rob me, kill me, etc I want the police to be there for me" Another participant similarly expressed the belief that, "Trump was not giving a fair trial in New York. We need a justice system and police to maintain order in our country. It is nothing new just radicals wanting to do away punishment for serious crimes" (58-year-old Independent White straight man). These participants articulated the necessity of a justice system that was perceived as fundamentally good and distinguished this goodness from a uniquely unfair and targeted treatment of Trump.

However, other participants who were not supportive of Trump's convictions viewed these convictions as demonstrating flaws in the justice system. Many participants with this perspective argued that the justice system was too easily contrived to work against Trump, and argued that the system needed to be strengthened, rather than reformed or abolished, though some argued for this strengthening as a type of reform. A 73-year-old Republican White straight man articulated a desire for change via the firing of parties seen as politically motivated:

> "Donald Trump was railroaded by woke prosecutors and juries with no real charges in order to keep him from running for election. These losers failed in their attempts and should go to jail themselves for wasting tax payer money on phony charges and trials. There are good judges and bad judges who are political hacks. They need to be thrown out of their jobs."

Similar sentiments were expressed by a relatively large proportion of participants. For example, one participant described the belief that, "…Donald Trump has not committed any crime and

is not a felon. The liberal courts and judges are all a fraud, along with democrats" (60-year-old Republican Middle Eastern straight man). Another participant expressed that,

> "Trump was directly targeted by his political opponents and falsely charged with invented crimes in an effort to remove him as a contender. His felony convictions are false and make me disgusted with the department of justice for being weaponized instead of targeting actual violent criminals" (30-year-old Independent White straight man).

These participants thus articulated a perception that Trump's convictions demonstrated flaws in the criminal justice system. Taken together, our data show that, even among (primarily Republican) participants who were not supportive of Trump's convictions, orientations toward abolition and beliefs about the justice system in relation to those convictions varied greatly. Some participants expressed a belief that though the convictions themselves were flawed, the broader justice system was unrelated to this unique and specific, politically motivated targeting of Trump. Others thought that Trump's convictions demonstrated broader flaws in the justice system, and particularly expressed distaste that liberals were perceived to be able to control and harness the system to target Trump. Although these participants tended to lean toward reform rather than abolition, they nonetheless perceived systemic flaws in existing justice systems and related these to Trump's convictions.

DISCUSSION

In a politically diverse sample, we used a multi-methodological approach to examine how abolitionist and carceral beliefs were related to political party allegiance in the context of the 2024 U.S. presidential election. We collected data at a critical time point, assessing perceptions of politicized variables in the days immediately following Trump's re-election as president. We sought to untangle the contradiction that arose following Trump's convictions, with Democrats shifting to endorse a tough-on-crime approach and Republicans contrarily divesting from this long-held conservative tenet.

Our results revealed an expected relationship between party identification and abolitionist ideology, with Democratic identification and actual behavior of voting for Harris/Walz (versus Trump/Vance) generally being associated with heightened endorsement of abolition, in line with prior work (Oswald et al., 2024). Given abolition is associated with anti-punishment ethics and endorsement of increased rights for felons and formerly incarcerated people (e.g., Sheikh, 2021; Taylor, 2011), one might expect abolitionist ideology to predict greater endorsement of the notion that felons should be allowed to hold positions of power and engage in civic duties such as holding public office.

Yet, we found that political party allegiance consistently trumped the role of abolitionist ideologies in shaping felon-in-office beliefs. Republicans endorsed both general and Trump-specific felon-in-office beliefs to a greater extent than did Democrats, and the role of abolitionist ideology in predicting felon-in-office beliefs was rendered negligible by the inclusion of political party identification in predictive models. These findings are supported by our qualitative data; Republicans generally were not supportive of Trump's convictions and endorsed that he should still be able to hold the presidency, while Democrats tended to be supportive of Trump's convictions and to argue that he should not be allowed to hold office as a result of his felony status.

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Our grounded theory analysis articulated how participants navigated conflicting perceptions of the justice system as it relates to Trump's convictions. Participants supportive of Trump's convictions—who tended to be Democratic—used these convictions either to justify the efficacy of the existing criminal system in convicting Trump or to highlight the inefficacy of this system based on perceptions of a lack of action or punishment following the convictions themselves. Participants unsupportive of Trump's convictions—who tended to be Republican—argued either that these convictions were personally targeted and irrelevant to the broader (good) functioning of the criminal system, or that these convictions were bogus and indicative of flaws in the criminal system. Rather than reaching consensus within-party or within those who identified the justice system as flawed or as efficacious, participants' perceptions of Trump's convictions were shaped both by party loyalty and beliefs about the role and capacity of carceral systems.

Overall, our findings indicate that allegiance to one's political party, rather than to one's ideology, appears to predict responses to Trump's convictions. Additional research supports this prominence of party loyalty over ideology, including in the specific case of support for Trump (Barber & Pope, 2019; see also Cohen, 2003; Ditto et al., 2025). In particular, defying abolitionist principles, Democratic participants were particularly likely to call for punishment, including carceral punishment and other restrictions of rights, for Donald Trump. Despite often acknowledging flaws in the justice system, participants seemed more likely to argue that the justice system should be applied to Trump than to argue that it should not be applied to anyone. Others acknowledged these flaws and suggested a concomitant need for reform, but not abolition—a common response to acknowledgement of flaws of the justice system (e.g., Davis et al., 2022; Schenwar & Law, 2020). There were very few exceptions where Democrats grappled with the contradiction of demanding accountability for Trump's crimes and simultaneously a complete abolition of carceral systems.

Though Democrats endorsed alternatives to state violence significantly more strongly than did Republicans, this partisan difference was much less substantial for revolutionary abolitionism, where endorsement was low across parties. Prior work demonstrates that anti-carcerality does not equate with abolition (see Oswald et al., 2024). These findings thus bring to the forefront the question of whether it is that Republicans are more pro-carceral, or that Democrats are more abolitionist, that mainly drove previous findings on Democrats' greater support for felon-reintegration policies (e.g., Piniare et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2015). Together, these mixed-method data reveal that Democrats seem to rarely subscribe to radical abolitionist politics. This lack of radical commitment is particularly salient in a politically trying circumstance where Trump's crimes amidst his run for presidency tested the Democratic commitment to challenging, let alone abolishing, the current criminal justice system. The greater endorsement of felon-in-office beliefs among Democrats suggest their willingness to advance their political agenda against Trump at the expense of incarcerated people and those affected by carceral systems broadly.

Theoretical and practical implications

Our findings suggest an important distinction between the three subscales of Abolitionist Ideology, notably with Revolutionary Abolitionism most closely aligning with radical abolitionist politics as they are conceptualized in prior literature (e.g., Davis et al., 2022; Kaba & Ritchie, 2022). Prior work demonstrates that only the Revolutionary Abolitionism subscale, but not the Alternatives to State Violence or Abolitionist Identity subscales, predicted greater tenacity in pursuing activism against state-sanctioned violence, above and beyond carceral justification (Oswald et al.,

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2024). Consistent with this finding, Revolutionary Abolitionism in the present research predicted greater endorsement of Trump-specific felon-in-office belief and was simultaneously negatively associated with attitudes toward Trump. Further, Revolutionary Abolitionism was the only abolitionist subscale that did not correlate with attitudes toward Harris, who has at times enacted pro-carceral policies throughout her career and branded herself as such in the 2024 presidential race (e.g., Barkow, 2019; Fayyad, 2024). Together, these patterns highlight the unique capacity of the Revolutionary Abolitionism subscale in capturing beliefs and behaviors rooted in radical abolitionist politics. Simultaneously, this difference reflects how people may endorse some parts of abolitionist politics such as recognizing the need for alternatives to state violence without desiring a complete elimination of the carceral systems (Oswald et al., 2024). We encourage future research to further understand the nuances among different abolitionist subscales as well as the diverse positionalities endorsed within the abolitionist movement through developmental, internationalist lenses.

The present study offers timely insights and movement-building and policymaking. The overpowering influence of political allegiance over abolitionist ideology in shaping the belief of Trump holding office speaks to the challenge of passing abolition-leaning policies. Even on the ground, political identification could pose as a potential barrier in mobilizing people into the abolitionist movement. Invoking political allegiance, possibly as simply as checking a box in a survey, may backfire in educating people about abolition. Specifically, as theorized by Social Identity Theory (e.g., Ellemers & Haslam, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 2004), when a social identity—in this case, political partisanship—is salient, people perceive the world through the lens of their political group's membership. Thus, if the political party is not genuinely committed to abolitionist values, as evidenced by the Democratic Party's complete switch from calling an end to carceral systems in 2020 to funding the police in 2024 (Democratic National Committee, 2020), acting based on one's political party's lens would hamper people's progress toward endorsing abolition.

Our findings highlight critical points of intervention to increase abolitionist consciousness. The failure to commit to abolitionist principles in the face of Trumps's felony charges in this study highlights the importance of people understanding abolition as a project of continuous experimentation and grappling with contradictions in order to build a sustainable abolitionist movement (Herzing & Piché, 2024). Further, qualitative data on people who challenged both Trump's felony charges and the criminal justice system underscore the role of intersectional awareness (Crenshaw, 1989), especially the centrality of race and class in the U.S., in encouraging people to understand and endorse abolition sustainably. Zooming out, our findings reinforce the need to bridge the gap in education about abolition to move people from endorsing Alternatives to State Violence to endorsing Revolutionary Abolitionism—that is, moving from reformist to abolitionist approaches (see Oswald et al., 2024).

Limitations and future directions

The present data captured only a singular time point, during which Trump's felony charges were established. Thus, although we asked participants first about their general beliefs about felons holding political office, it is likely that due to the saliency of Trump's convictions at that time, participants were responding to the general felon-in-office beliefs questions with Trump's unique situation in mind. Concurrently, at the data collection which occurred extremely close to the 2024 election, participants may have felt particularly attached to their political party. Such a heightened association could partly account for the predictive power of political allegiance in the current

study. Therefore, it would be important for future research to investigate the role of time and context in people's endorsement of abolitionist ideology and associated beliefs. Additionally, given participant attrition in our larger longitudinal study, the sample size for the present study is relatively small and not evenly distributed across political party affiliation or demographic characteristics. This prevented us from examining intersections of interest, including how race and gender together shape abolitionist dynamics in the context of the presidential election. Future research should orient specifically to these dynamics with samples appropriate for robust tests.

Although the qualitative data delineate the four main ways people may respond to Trump's felony and abolition, researchers should work to unveil the psychological underpinnings of these responses. For example, one could investigate the role of cognitive dissonance in people's articulations of links between their beliefs about abolition and beliefs about Trump's felon status by examining people's feelings of threat and need to regain balance after exposure to Trump's felony (Aronson, 2019; Heitland & Bohner, 2009). Others have noted how cognitive dissonance may play a role in ongoing support for Trump in the wake of the stolen election narrative (Pope, 2023) and the sexual assaults he has perpetrated (Harmon-Jones et al., 2020). Experiences of cognitive dissonance provoked Trump supporters to emphasize the wrongdoings of Trump's opponents (Hillary Clinton at the time point in question; see Harmon-Jones et al., 2020), suggesting that partisan allegiance may paradoxically be strengthened when one's underlying ideology is challenged (e.g., by Trump's actions).

Future research should also integrate social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) to better understand the extent to which responses of people from both parties derive from their need to restore their own self-esteem as well as the image of their political party. Understanding these questions will reveal methods to engage people in critical thinking about the carceral systems and their harm. Further, future work can adopt in-depth qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups to understand how and why certain people are able to hold on to or even strengthen their abolitionist ideology in response to strong contradictory arguments. Influential factors could range from personal experience with discrimination and criminal justice system, critical consciousness, to dialectical thinking (e.g., Cheng, 2009; Diemer et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

The 2024 U.S. presidential election offered voters a unique choice between two primary candidates: A former prosecutor and a convicted felon. Despite a Republican legacy of punitive policy and allegiance to law and order, Republicans endorsed the fitness of felons in general, as well as Trump specifically, to hold the office of the president. Contrarily, Democrats—despite heightened endorsement of abolitionist ideology and historical alignment with abolitionist principles including supporting the fight for felon's rights—argued that Trump's felon status made him unfit for office. Our findings suggest that political allegiance trumps ideology in informing beliefs about the capacity of felons to hold public office and offer insights into how Americans across the political spectrum navigate these contradictory beliefs.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.