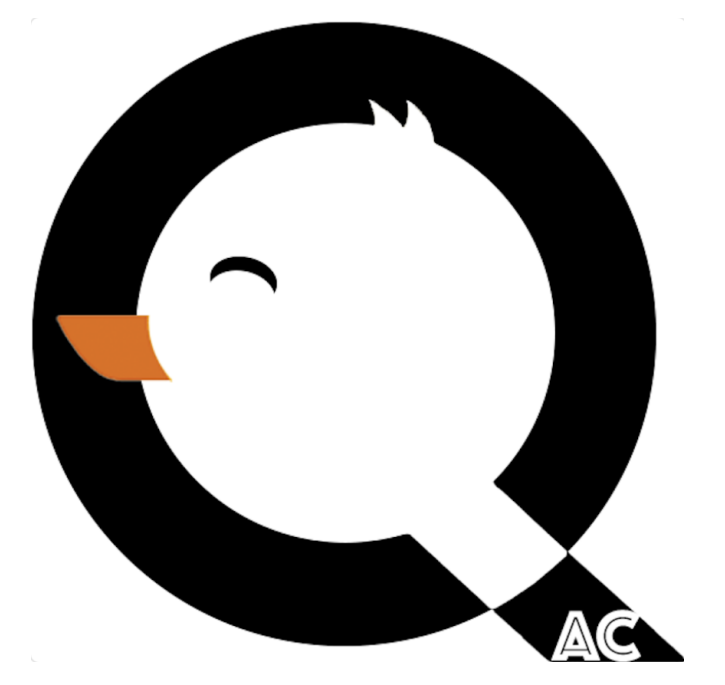




Correlates of Death Penalty Support: The Role of Education and Political Affiliation

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Introduction

- **Death Penalty Context:** In 2025, 47 executions occurred in the U.S. due to the death penalty (Death Penalty Information Center, 2025), with 4% of cases potentially involving innocent individuals (Innocence Project, 2023).
- **Key Predictors:** Educational attainment and political party identification are strong predictors of death penalty attitudes (Anderson & Schwadel, 2025).
- **Political & Educational Patterns:** Individuals who identify as Republican are generally more likely to support the death penalty than Democrats or Independents. Higher levels of education are linked to shifts in both political identity and attitudes (Anderson, Lytle, & Schwadel, 2017).
- **Gap in Literature:** few studies test whether education predicts attitudes independently of political affiliation.
- **Current Study:** This study examines how education and political affiliation relate to death penalty attitudes and whether this varies by political group.

Research Question

To what extent do educational attainment and political party affiliation independently predict attitudes toward the death penalty?

Methods

Sample

- Data were drawn from the 2024 General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults (n = 3,309). The analytic sample was restricted to respondents with valid responses on the dependent variable (death penalty attitudes). Individuals with missing or invalid responses (e.g., “don’t know,” “no answer,” or “not applicable”) on this measure were excluded (n = 2067).

Measures

- Death penalty attitudes were measured as a binary variable by asking participants whether they favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder, with response options of “favor” or “oppose.”
- Educational attainment was measured as the highest degree obtained by the respondent.
 - Responses were categorized into the five levels: “Less than high school,” “High school,” “Associate/Junior college,” “Bachelor’s degree,” and “Graduate degree.”
- Political affiliation was measured through asking respondents to identify their political party.
 - Categories included “Strong Democrat,” “Not very strong Democrat,” “Independent, close to Democrat,” “Independent,” “Independent, close to Republican,” “Not very strong Republican,” “Strong Republican,” and “Other party.”
- Chi-square analyses were conducted to assess bivariate associations between political party affiliation and education.

Results

Univariate

- 60.14% favored the death penalty (39.86% opposed); 45.55% of participants had a high school education and 25.37% of participants identified as politically independent.

Bivariate

- Chi-square analysis showed a **significant association between political party affiliation** ($\chi^2 = 217.46$, $p < .001$) **and education** ($\chi^2 = 25.407$, 4 df, $p < .0001$) **in regards to death penalty attitudes.**
- Bivariate tables showed a strong, consistent pattern: as **Republican identification increased, support for the death penalty increased**, while stronger Democratic identification corresponded with decreased support (Table 1).
- Additionally, bivariate tables revealed **lower education groups were more likely to favor the death penalty** (e.g., high school: 64.8% vs. 35.2%), while **higher education groups were more balanced or opposed** (e.g., graduate: 49.3% vs. 50.7%), with **weaker differences than political affiliation** (Table 2).

Multivariate

- Logistic regression including both education and political party affiliation found **no significant association between education and death penalty attitudes (all $p > .05$).**
- Compared to “**Strong Democrats**” (reference group), several political party affiliation categories had significantly **higher odds** of favoring the death penalty (Figure. 1):
 - Category 3 (“Independent”): OR ≈ 1.23 (~23% higher odds)
 - Category 4 (“Independent, close to Republican”): OR ≈ 1.42 (~42% higher odds)
 - Category 5 (“Not very strong Republican”): OR ≈ 1.47 (~47% higher odds)
 - Category 6 (Strong Republican): OR ≈ 1.54 (~54% higher odds)
- Overall, results indicate **political party affiliation—not education—is a key correlate of attitudes toward the death penalty.**

Discussion

- While education appeared significant in bivariate analysis, its effect disappeared in the multivariate model, suggesting the **initial relationship was likely confounded by political party affiliation.**
- Graphical results show stronger and more consistent differences across political groups than education, indicating **political affiliation, not education, is the primary predictor of death penalty attitudes.**
- These findings have broader implications for understanding how **political identity shapes criminal justice attitudes**, suggesting that individuals may filter information through partisan lenses. Consistent with prior research, these findings have relevance for jury decision-making and legal outcomes.
- **Limitations:**
 - Missing data reduced the sample size and may affect generalizability.
 - Use of categorical groupings may oversimplify complex political and educational identities.
- **Future research should consider:**
 - Larger and more representative sample size
 - Examining additional variables (e.g., region, age, race) that may interact with political affiliation to influence views on capital punishment

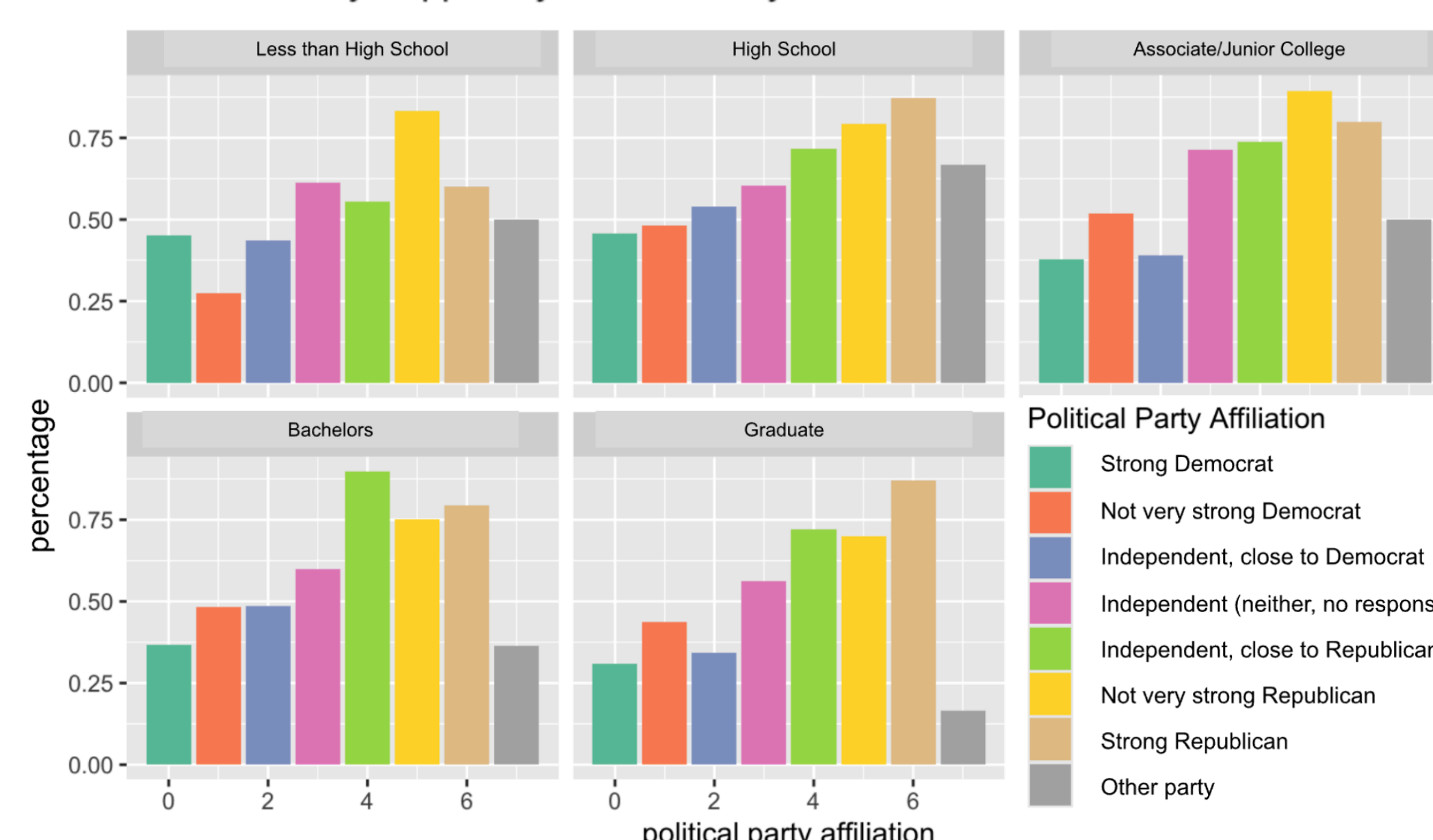
Table 1. Association Between Political Party Affiliation and Death Penalty Opinion

	FAVOR %	OPPOSE %
STRONG DEMOCRAT	39.1	60.9
NOT VERY STRONG DEMOCRAT	45.9	54.1
INDEPENDENT, CLOSE TO DEMOCRAT	46.5	53.5
INDEPENDENT (NEITHER, NO RESPONSE)	60.9	39.1
INDEPENDENT, CLOSE TO REPUBLICAN	75.4	24.6
NOT VERY STRONG REPUBLICAN	78.4	21.6
STRONG REPUBLICAN	83.7	16.3
OTHER PARTY	50.0	50.0

Table 2. Association Between Highest Degree Attained and Death Penalty Opinion

	FAVOR %	OPPOSE %
LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL	55.1	44.9
HIGH SCHOOL	64.8	35.2
ASSOCIATE/JUNIOR COLLEGE	61.9	38.1
BACHELORS	59.0	41.0
GRADUATE	49.3	50.7

Figure 1. Death Penalty Support by Political Party Affiliation Across Education Levels



Anderson, A. L., Lytle, R., & Schwadel, P. (2017). AGE, PERIOD, AND COHORT EFFECTS ON DEATH PENALTY ATTITUDES IN THE UNITED STATES, 1974–2014. *Criminology (Beverly Hills)*, 55(4), 833-868. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12160>

Anderson, A. L., & Schwadel, P. (2025). College Education, Politics, and Attitudes Towards Capital Punishment. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 50(1), 119-141. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-024-09782-8>

Innocence Project. (2023). *Innocence and the Death Penalty*. Innocence Project. <https://innocenceproject.org/innocence-and-the-death-penalty/>

Jones, B. E. N. (2018). THE REPUBLICAN PARTY, CONSERVATIVES, AND THE FUTURE OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT. *The Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, 108(2), 223-252.

List of Defendants Executed in 2025 | *Death Penalty Information Center*. (2025, February). Death Penalty Information Center. <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/executions/2025>