FOOTING THE BILL: EVALUATING THE INFLUENCE OF PRIVATE PRISON CORPORATIONS ON INCARCERATION POLICY AGENDAS

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Abstract

The United States has become increasingly reliant on the use of private prisons to meet federal detention needs, especially in the context of ongoing developments like the modern immigration crisis. Private prison corporations such as CoreCivic and GEO Group financially benefit from increased detention, creating strong incentives to influence incarceration and detention policy. This paper examines whether these corporations exert measurable influence over related legislation through campaign contributions and lobbying. Using an observational research design, we analyze data from U.S. congressional sessions over the past decade, combining bill-level legislative data with campaign finance and lobbying records from CoreCivic and GEO Group, each spanning the last ten years. We then examine whether their political activity is linked to legislative success. Our findings indicate limited evidence of a direct relationship between corporate political activity and the success rate of private prison-related legislation, suggesting that financial influence is only one factor contributing to the likelihood of bill passage.

Introduction

In 2024, the United States spent approximately 3.9 billion dollars on the private prison system (Prison Policy Initiative, 2024). Behind this staggering number lies a network of private prison corporations whose profitability depends on keeping private prison beds occupied. CoreCivic and GEO Group, the largest operators of private prisons in the United States, not only manage detention facilities but also invest millions of dollars in lobbying and campaign contributions to shape the political landscape in favor of pro-incarceration policies (O'Neill, 2018). Despite widespread public criticism of mass incarceration, far less scrutiny is directed at how these companies attempt to exert influence on legislation. This paper therefore raises the question:

To what extent do private prison corporations influence the success of pro-incarceration policies through political funding?

Existing literature examines the connection between campaign funding and the resulting legislative outcome as well as the ethical implications of the private prison system (Powell, L. W, 2014; Pfaff, 2020; Craig, 2020). Additional research documents the scale of lobbying efforts by GEO Group and CoreCivic's (GEO Group, 2022; CoreCivic, 2022; Marko, 2021). However, less work directly evaluates how these corporations function as active political players and whether this political activity translates into measurable legislative success. By analyzing bill-level outcomes alongside campaign contributions and lobbying data, this paper addresses this gap in criminal justice, providing a clearer picture of how corporate political activity intersects with criminal justice policy.

This paper tests whether private prison corporations, such as CoreCivic and GEO Group, influence the success rate of proposed incarceration-related legislation through political funding and lobbying efforts.

The research design centers on a case study of two major private prison corporations: CoreCivic and GEO Group, selected due to the well-documented nature of their campaign contributions and lobbying efforts. This study identifies instances in which legislation aligns with the interests of these corporations and evaluates whether such legislation is associated with higher levels of corporate political activity. The data include campaign contributions, Super PAC donations, and lobbying expenditures reported by publicly available federal disclosure databases. Using a sequence of logistic regression models, we investigate whether an association exists between private prison corporations' political activity and the passage of incarceration-related policies that would support them. Accordingly, this research asks: to what extent do private prison corporations influence the success of pro-incarceration policies through political funding?

This paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we introduce the framework that we use to define a "pro-incarceration" policy and propose a systematic approach to evaluate the level of political activity of a corporation for any given legislation. Section 3 reviews the relevant literature on campaign finance, political lobbying, and private prisons, positioning the discussion within the broader debate about the role of private prisons in our federal incarceration system and building upon the contemporary paradigm that private prisons are motivated to seek higher incarceration rates. Section 4 outlines our theory framework, laying the foundation of the causal mechanisms that underlie our research design. Section 5 details our research methodology, describing the case study approach and the data sources used to evaluate the level of corporate political involvement. Section 6, as follows, presents the findings regarding CoreCivic and GEO Group's political activity and its relationship to the passage of legislative outcomes. Finally, Section 7 concludes by discussing the implication of these findings for the ongoing debate around campaign finance laws and mass incarceration, as well as areas for future research.

Pro-Incarceration Legislation

The dependent variable in this study is the likelihood that pro-incarceration legislation passes. Pro-incarceration legislation refers to policies that favor the growth or protection of private prison corporations or otherwise increase incarceration rates. These policies may expand funding for privately owned prison facilities, introduce legal measures that shield private prison companies from regulatory or financial hardship, or broadly seek to increase the rate of incarceration in the United States. Conversely, legislation that limits these advantages can be referred to as anti-private prison legislation. Legislative success is operationalized as a binary outcome based on whether a bill is enacted into federal law, where passed = 1 and failed = 0. This measure captures final legislative outcomes using formal codification as the primary indicator of success. However, there are limitations when using a binary classification that may constrain the analysis of the dependent variable. Given that the legislative process involves multiple stages of review and revision before final decisions are made, important bill nuance may be obscured, arbitrary distinctions may be introduced, and the highly complex judicial system may be oversimplified, possibly limiting the precision of the analysis. But although legislative outcomes may be shaped through channels other than final passage and at earlier stages of the policymaking process (e.g., committee review, amendment or agenda setting), this study focuses on final passage to maintain a clear and consistent dependent variable. Moreover, because positive legislative outcomes may not fully capture the broader influence of policy proposals, failed bills are treated as substantively meaningful observations rather than intermediate legislative progress.

While policy can be framed as the basic principles and guidelines that are created and enforced by a governing body, public policy more specifically reflects "what public officials within government and by extension the citizens they represent chose to do or what not to do about public problems" (Stewart, 2014; Kraft and Furlong, 2009). A public problem is defined by what the public decides is unacceptable, and policy is created when the government addresses that problem (Stewart, 2014). Likewise, legislation can be summarized as the "enactment of laws by a legislative body through its formal lawmaking process" (Legal Information Institute, 2025). Legislation is passed by voting on proposed bills, which can address policy concerns or objectives (Legal Information Institute, 2025). As our sample will include passed legislation and failed legislation, our measure of our dependent variable defines failure using the following criteria: the failure to meet original objectives, be implemented as intended, and benefit the intended target group (McConnell, 2015). Because bills can fail at multiple points in the formal lawmaking process, we interpret failure in practice as non-enactment, while recognizing that non-enactment may still represent partial political success or meaningful influence depending on the bill's objectives and the extent to which it shapes subsequent proposals. For this reason, our analysis explicitly distinguishes between legislative success/failure.

There is substantial evidence that private prison corporations are interested in public policy and legislation. Although CoreCivic has said that they avoid legislative positions, it was documented that “one defeated bill that CoreCivic lobbied against last year would have subjected the industry to the Freedom of Information Act.” Similarly, an official stated that he ”got calls from elected officials encouraging him to privatize certain functions or back off from enforcing a contract” (Laird, 2017). Private prison companies have also been reported to have engaged in bribing an Alaskan legislator to improve their chances of influencing policy and legislation (Anderson, 2009). These instances demonstrate that even failed legislation and informal legislative activity is important in the context of our research, though we do not directly evaluate them here.

It has also been observed that private prison companies rely on strict criminal sentencing laws to benefit their interests, such as the California three-strike law, which GEO Group lobbied heavily for and was eventually passed (Anderson, 2009; Stephenson, 2020). This suggests that private prison corporations have a heightened interest in legislative outcomes. In another example of legislative and private prison relations, GEO Group and Core Civic were shown to be closely involved in the drafting of Arizona’s ”Support our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhood Act,” focused on apprehending undocumented immigrants (Rubenstein, 2024). Additionally, both companies were named on the American Legislative Exchange Council, an organization that drafts state legislation (Rubenstein, 2024). The situation in Arizona is an important scenario demonstrating how private prisons have influenced legislation. There have also been instances where private prison corporations have mobilized against anti-private prison efforts. When the Californian government attempted to limit private prison operations by closing multiple ICE facilities, GEO Group filed a federal lawsuit in *GEO Group, Inc. v. Newsom* (9th Cir. 2021). This highlights both the power legislative decisions can hold over major corporations and the stake that large corporations have in legislation (Burgess, 2024).

Private prison companies also pursue legislative outcomes that safeguard their financial growth. The United States operates the largest immigrant detention system in the world, with private facilities serving a core function as detention centers. Incarcerated immigrants are extremely valuable to the private prison system because when they occupy bed space, they fulfill the contracts made with the federal government and profiting from them (Gilman, 2019). Amidst the modern U.S. immigration crisis, corporations like CoreCivic and GEO Group have already been shown to have benefited tremendously from immigration enforcement (Burkhardt, 2024). We accordingly consider strict anti-immigration policies that result in detention or incarceration as under the umbrella of pro-incarceration legislation. GEO Group has even pushed for longer prison stays, which could potentially increase their profits (Gilman, 2019). At the same time, policies that can increase deportations and secure a border wall have been discouraged, emphasizing the fear these companies have of losing money to deportations (Rubenstein, 2024). Additionally, evidence shows that political developments can greatly affect corporate performance. After the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the stock values of CoreCivic and GEO Group rose immediately in conformity with Trump's fierce anti-immigration rhetoric (Collingwood, 2018). Similarly, legislators representing districts with privately owned detention facilities are three times more likely to introduce anti-immigrant bills, hinting at a close relationship between government punitive policies and private prison corporations' activities (Collingwood, 2018).

However, minimal research definitively measures the success rate of private prison legislation. We have found that although evidence relates lobbying efforts and financial contributions to proposed legislation, there are few studies that seek to explore the tangible effect that these companies have on the success rate of legislation. While scholars have explored the correlation between detention rates and corporate financial gain, far less research deeply explores how private prison corporations can influence the actual legislative process directly (Marks, 2022). In this study, we seek to address these influences by evaluating the success rate of pro-incarceration legislation.

Tracing The Private Prison Argument

The modern private prison system in the United States emerged from late-1980s "tough-on-crime" policies and neoliberal reform agendas. Stricter sentencing laws, restricted parole, and a shift away from rehabilitation toward punishment set the conditions for a steep rise in prison populations, culminating in overcrowded prisons and the current mass incarceration crisis. Between 1990 and 2000, the U.S. prison population nearly doubled, one of the most rapid growths in penal history (Bureau of Justice, 2001). While private financial interest is certainly not the only factor in the development of the modern prison-industrial complex, the increase in political power wielded by corporations (across all legislative issues) is a key concern, to which the prison industry is no exception.

Today, the private prison industry is dominated by two groups: CoreCivic (Corrections Corporations of America, or the CCA) and GEO Group. Together, these companies account for nearly 85 percent of the private prison market, operating correctional models from leasing arrangements and facility contracting to full facility ownership and operation (American Federation of Teachers, 2019; Marks and Pope, 2022). In 2020, CoreCivic reported revenues of about 1.9 billion dollars, with over 82 percent coming from private prison operations, while GEO Group reported 2.3 billion dollars, with almost 70 percent coming from U.S.-based private prisons and detention facilities (Human Rights Defense Center, 2021). Incarceration is a profitable business.

Existing scholarship links private prison profitability to incarceration levels but rarely interrogates how these profit motives influence legislative behavior. The industry is an established political-economic incentive structure that seeks to maintain or even expand incarceration. Private prison corporations profit from every occupied bed, longer sentences, and the expansion of detention-based immigrant centers (Gilman, 2019; Burkhardt, 2024). In 2017-2018, both CoreCivic and GEO derived roughly half of their revenues from government contracts, implying that private prison firms are reliant upon federal and state policy outcomes (Center for American Progress, 2019). Consequently, these corporations are incentivized to maintain an active role in the policy process. Contracting data and lobbying records back up this claim: in 2016 and 2017 alone, private prison companies contributed 2 million dollars to state campaigns and 10.4 million dollars to lobbying state lawmakers (Follow the Money, 2018).

These contributions have real impacts on the passage of legislation. Corporate interests that shape policy agendas, bill sponsorship, and interest-group mobilization significantly influence the likelihood of a bill's success (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Moreover, corporations act as constituents that legislators must consider. The persistence of interest groups greatly influence the likelihood of legislators to introduce anti-immigrant or punitive legislation. (Collingwood, et. al 2018). It is also important to consider that beyond private prison corporations funding legislative districts, voter opposition is extremely limited. Given the marginal existence of the private prison argument, there is not much attention it brings to the general electorate, especially toward individuals with felonies who lack the ability to vote. Yet while research connects the profit incentives of private prisons to government policy agendas and the passage of pro-incarceration policies to an increase in profits, there is a gap in the literature about the scope of private prison corporations' influence on legislation. The expansive role of profit in both motivating private prisons to increase their incarceration rates and enabling them to lobby for favorable legislation lead us to the central question: how much do private prisons actually influence our federal policies?

A major claim made across private prison related literature is that private prisons are economically justified on the grounds that they reduce costs as compared to public incarceration. In the 1980s, CoreCivic and GEO Group advertised themselves as cheap and cost-effective solutions to the federal government's struggle with overcrowding and financing a punitive carceral model (Appleman, 2018; Logan and Rausch, 1985). From there, the private prison sector quickly industrialized. By the early 2000s, the private prison industry had become a central feature of the American correctional landscape.

This economic justification possibly explains why pro-private prison bills have been pushed to legislators, suggesting that efficiency arguments are an essential element in legislative success. However, studies challenge the premise that private prisons private prisons reduce costs compared to public prisons (Pratt, 1999). This hints that economic explanations may be illusory in the context of supporting private prison legislation (Mamun, 2024). A more accurate explanation of the relationship between private prison contracts and money points to a privatized system incentivized to maintain high incarceration levels as facilities receive daily rates per inmate (Lundhal, 2009; Gilman, 2019). While economic rationales help explain the link between private prisons and legislative interests, they cannot directly explain the success rate of related legislation (Mamun, 2024).

Another area of private prison research literature focuses on the ethical and institutional consequences of privatization. Scholars argue that private prison corporations prioritize profit over rehabilitation, leading to violence, staffing issues, and high rates of recidivism (Duus-Otterström, 2024). Scandals such as the "Kids for Cash" case in Pennsylvania illustrate how privatization can lead to unethical behavior, creating a negative view of private prisons (Galinato, 2020). Additionally, companies such as GEO Group profit from halfway houses, rehabilitation centers, and inflated fees on banking, healthcare, and communications for inmates (Appleman, 2018). All of these features highlight the ethical concerns that can arise from profit-seeking prison companies and suggest that ethical and institutional critiques can function as background influences that help shape policy debates. But while ethical critiques of literature identify key flaws of privatization, they provide limited insight into the legislative processes that enable private prison expansion and how in turn, private prisons can influence legislative outcomes.

Other research has shown that CoreCivic and GEO Group engage in extensive lobbying, campaign contributions, and advocacy to influence the content and passage of specific legislation (Galinato, 2019). For example, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, which increased criminal penalties and funding for law enforcement, received heavy lobbying support from Private Prison Corporations (Galinato, 2019). In recent years, immigration detention has been an active topic among private prison corporations (Gilman, 2019). These companies have secured contracts with ICE and strongly advocated for mandatory detention quotas, tying policy to their revenue (Gilman, 2019). When detention rates declined, corporations supported policies lengthening detention and restricting binds, ensuring a steady flow of revenue (Gilman, 2019). This demonstrates that lobbying can actively shape the legislative environment, and possibly increase the likelihood of bills being passed. However, most studies researching lobbying fail to measure legislation quantitatively, leaving a gap that this study addresses by systematically coding and analyzing pro-incarceration bills.

Across the existing literature, three broad explanations began to take shape. In economic arguments, cost efficiency and profit are cited, yet there is no tangible evidence of legislative manipulation. In ethical and institutional critiques, how private prison legislation ought to be is highlighted, but there is an unclear connection to tangible legislative outcomes. Corporate Lobbying provides the strongest argument, but there is a lack of strong quantitative analysis to measure its generalized effects. These gaps reveal that there is a fragmented but hopeful approach to studying private prisons. By conceptualizing the success rate of pro-incarceration legislation as the dependent variable, we build on contemporary analyses of the relationships between private prison profitability, political contributions and lobbying, and increased passage of legislation that expands incarceration to better focus on how legislative outcomes are skewed by private prisons.

Theory Framework

We establish our research by focusing on how corporate profit incentives link to legislative behavior through the functions of campaign finance and lobbying. Private prison corporations operate within an institutional environment where their revenues depend almost purely upon incarceration levels and government contracts (American Federation of Teachers, 2019; Marks and Pope, 2022). This creates strong incentives to maintain and expand prison populations through the promotion of pro-incarceration policies. (Center for American Progress, 2019; Gilman, 2019). The profit motive therefore acts as the primary force driving the political actions of these companies.

These incentives connect to active political efforts through the actions of interest groups representing private prison corporations and through direct financial contributions to campaigns. Organized interests shape policy long before a final vote, with influence on various levels like agenda setting or bill drafting (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Campaign contributions signal corporate policy preferences and can alter legislators' perceived consequences or benefits of supporting specific bills (Powell 2014). Legislators representing districts with private prison or detention center locations are particularly responsive to these incentives, linking corporate presence to policy outcomes (Collingwood et al., 2018; Collingwood et al., 2019).

The resulting causal chain is cyclical. First, incarceration is a market with detainees and prisoners functioning as the "goods" by which these companies profit, thereby providing an incentive to maintain or increase the number of the "goods" to generate a greater profit. (Logan and Rausch, 1985; Mamun et al., 2020). Next, these incentives give motivation to private prison corporations to invest in lobbying and provide campaign contributions that impact pro-incarceration and anti-immigrant legislation. These steps create a feedback loop; successful pro-incarceration legislation generates higher levels of incarceration and detention, increasing corporate profits and, in turn, expanding the resources available for further political activity (Marks and Pope, 2022).

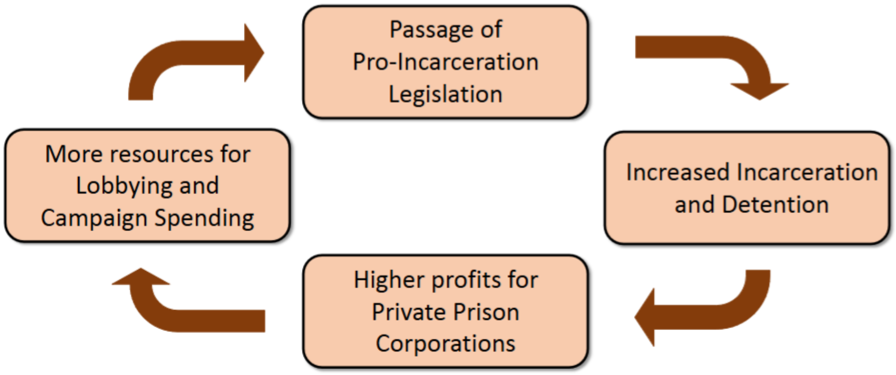

Figure 1: Theory Framework

Together, these mechanisms suggest that the political behavior of private prison corporations is not incidental nor inconsequential, but rather a thread of predictable consequences and an additional instigator of their underlying economic incentives. By viewing these firms as strategic actors facilitating the constructed carceral political economy, we can better understand how their financial resources and actions translate into policy outcomes that reinforce their profitability. This framework ultimately positions corporate political activity as a key causal mechanism shaping the success of pro-incarceration legislation, forming the foundation for the empirical analysis that follows.

Research Design

The goal of this research is to assess the extent to which private prison corporations' political spending is associated with federal carceral policy outcomes. The unit of analysis is the bill, defined as any piece of legislation introduced in the U.S. Congress that substantively affects federal incarceration or detention authority, capacity, funding, or contracting. We construct our sample using a binary inclusion rule requiring that the bill contains statutory provisions related to federal carceral institutions or detention contracting/funding.

To evaluate the relationship between private prison corporate political activity and the success rate of pro-incarceration legislation, we estimate a series of logistic regression models that predict whether a pro-incarceration bill is passed. Given the binary nature of the dependent variable, where passed = 1 and failed = 0, a logit specification is used to model the probability of legislative success while respecting the discrete nature of our bill passage variable.

The primary independent variable is corporate political activity, measured as the combined lobbying expenditures and PAC contributions of CoreCivic and GEO Group. We estimate three models accordingly. First, we run a bivariate logit model including only corporate spending and bill passage. Second, we estimate a multivariate logit model that adds bill-level and institutional controls, including bill length, chamber, total prison population, and Congress fixed effects. Third, we estimate a final logit model that retains these controls while introducing a one-year lag of corporate spending in order to better capture the temporal ordering between political spending and legislative outcomes.

The final model can be represented as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}\operatorname{logit}\big(\Pr(\text{PassFail}_{it}=1)\big) &= \beta_0 + \beta_1\,\text{corp\_total\_lag}_{t-1} + \beta_2\,\text{bill\_pages}_{it} \\ &\quad + \beta_3\,\text{Senate}_{it} + \beta_4\,\text{total\_prison\_pop}_t + \gamma_c + \varepsilon_{it}\end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

This specification allows us to assess whether corporate political spending is systematically associated with bill passage while additionally accounting for institutional and bill-level features that may independently shape legislative success. Congress fixed effects are included to account for broader legislative context across sessions, including time-invariant institutional and political differences that may affect the passage of incarceration-related bills.

Successful Pro-Incarceration Legislation

Bills are classified as pro-incarceration if they increase incarceration/detention capacity, increase length of sentences or parole, initiate or increase privatized prisons or detention contracts, decrease regulation of private prison corporations, or increase immigration detention tools. Anti-incarceration bills are defined as legislation that decrease incarceration/detention capacity, shorten the length of sentences or parole, reduce privatized prisons or detention contracts, increase regulation, or limit immigration detention tools. We use a binary indicator of legislation that has been passed, where passed = 1, and failed = 0. Failed bills, defined as proposals that did not advance beyond key legislative stages, such as floor consideration, are included in our analysis to capture variation in legislative outcomes related to private prison interests.

Given the sparse documentation of legislation related to incarceration, we draw from multiple sources of data including state incarceration trends data from the Vera Institute of Justice's Incarceration Trends dataset, Lobbyview's Firm-level & Congressional Bills Database, and the Bills and Amendments dataset from bicam.net. We incorporate Congress fixed effects into our bill-level framework to account for heterogeneity across legislative sessions. Congress fixed effects control for time-invariant institutional and political characteristics specific to each Congress, such as partisan control and committee leadership. Because each Congress corresponds to distinct legislative periods, these fixed effects capture broader national-level contexts, such as the political climate, social issues (e.g., the immigration crisis), and economic disruptions (e.g., financial crises) that may influence legislative outcomes. Additionally, we include demographic information where appropriate, such as the partisan majority in Congress.

The initial sample is constructed using keyword-based filtering for words relating to prisons and detention like "prison" or "immigrant." Additionally, since each set of data contains a plethora of years, we narrow down the data to between the years 2015 and 2025. Each dataset that contains duplicates such as duplicate state names is cleaned to reflect only one observation. In total, our dataset consists of pro-incarceration bills over a ten-year period, allowing us to evaluate the factors associated with the success of pro-incarceration legislation while accounting for differences across Congressional sessions.

Corporate Political Activity

Corporate political activity is operationalized as federal campaign contributions and lobbying expenditures by CoreCivic and GEO Group. We build our dataset with data obtained from FEC.gov. To reduce concerns of reverse causality, each political spending variable is lagged by at least a year to ensure that political spending precedes legislative outcomes. The analysis also controls for a small set of bill-level and institutional variables relevant to legislative success, including bill length, chamber, total prison population, and Congress fixed effects. A later section then considers partisan alignment as a supplementary lens on the relationship between spending and legislative outcomes.

Results

To analyze whether private prison corporations influence legislative outcomes, we examine whether variation in lobbying expenditures and campaign contributions by CoreCivic and GEO Group predict bill passage after accounting for institutional and policy controls, including partisan context and broader legislative conditions. If private prison corporations indeed influence legislative outcomes through political spending, we would expect higher levels of lobbying expenditures and campaign contributions by CoreCivic and GEO Group to be associated with a higher probability of pro-incarceration bill passage. Specifically, bills receiving higher levels of corporate political attention should exhibit higher success rates, meaning that there should be a notable financial distinction between passage (higher spending) and failure (lower spending)

Across the full sample, passage of incarceration-related bills is relatively rare, with the majority of bills failing to become law. Incarceration-related legislative activity as a whole varies modestly across the 2015-2025 time period, which observable increases in 2015 and 2019 and a notable decline in 2020, likely reflecting broader disruptions in congressional during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The overall low rate of legislative passage suggests a low baseline probability for incarceration related bills, indicating that any systematic relationship between corporate political spending and legislative outcomes must uprate within a constrained legislative environment.

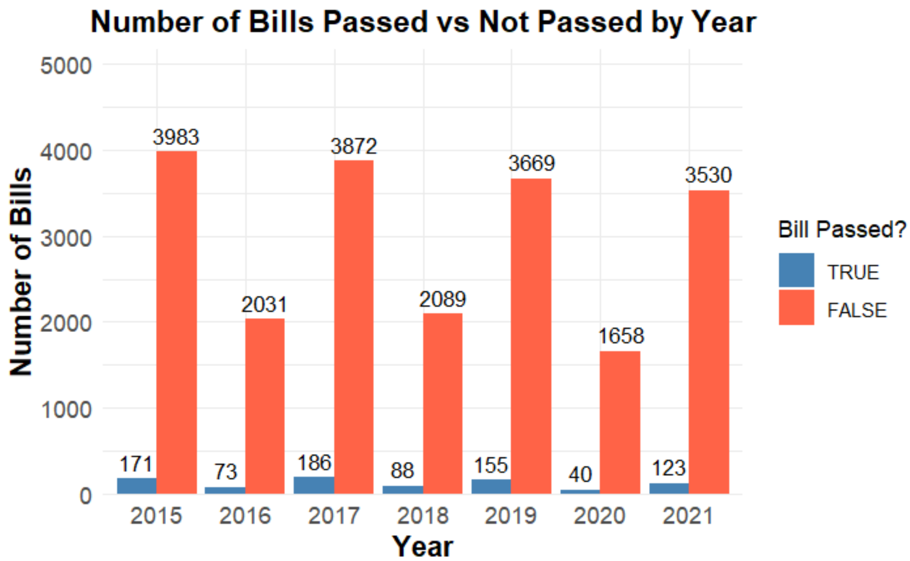

Figure 2: Bill Contrast

Figure 2 shows the distribution of passed and failed pro-incarceration bills across the sample period. As expected, and consistent with broader legislative patterns, failed bills consistently outnumber passed bills in every year observed. This disproportionate relationship highlights how difficult it is to pass incarceration-related legislation and supports the use of a binary outcome model for analyzing bill passage.

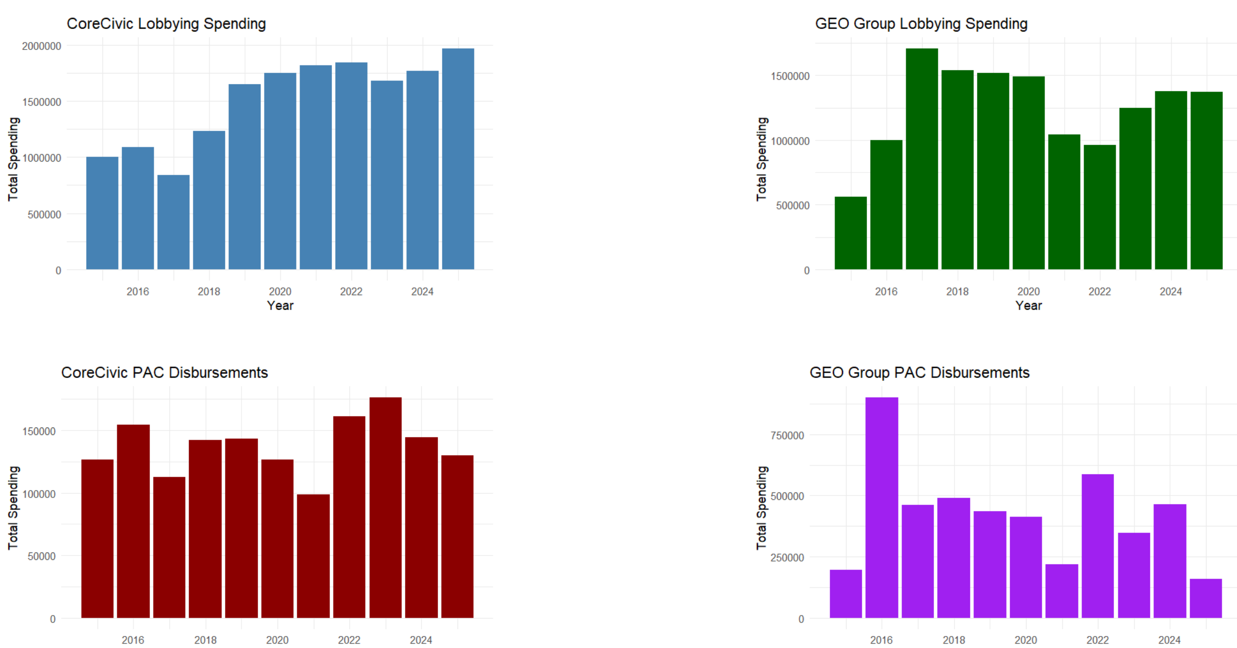

Figure 3: Corporate Political Activity of GEO Group and CoreCivic

Our independent variable, corporate political activity, is measured as the total lobbying expenditures and PAC contributions from CoreCivic and GEO Group. To improve temporal ordering between political spending and legislative outcomes, our analysis includes a model where spending measures are lagged by one year.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of corporate political spending across our sample. Overall, most observations show that spending activity is high. However, there is an exception in GEO Group's PAC disbursements, which are relatively small compared to the other data in Figure 3. It is also important to note that there are substantial increases in lobbying and PAC contributions in the year 2016, the election of President Donald J. Trump. Furthermore, the skews of each graph are diverse, suggesting that there is a disproportionate influence regarding corporate activity. This illustrates that corporate political activity may not be distributed in the same capacity across legislative contexts.

To evaluate the relationship between corporate political activity and the success rate of pro-private prison legislation, we estimate a sequence of three logistic regression models. The first is a bivariate logit model including only corporate spending and bill passage. The second adds bill-level and institutional controls, including bill length, chamber, total prison population, and Congress fixed effects. The third maintains these existing controls while additionally introducing a one-year lag in total corporate spending in order to better capture the temporal ordering between political spending and legislative outcomes. All together, these models allow us to test whether corporate spending is truly associated with legislative success, both individually and with the additional context of the aforementioned relevant controls.

Table 1 reports the results of the three baseline logistic regression models.

Table 1: Baseline Logistic Regression Models of Bill Passage

	Model 1: Bivariate	Model 2: Controls	Model 3: Controls + Lag
Corporate Spending ($ millions)	-0.076	-0.116	
	(0.054)	(0.111)	
Lagged Corporate Spending ($ millions)			0.749
			(2.126)
Bill Pages		0.002***	0.001***
		(0.000)	(0.000)
Senate		-0.283***	-0.380***
		(0.077)	(0.089)
Total Prison Population		0.000***	0.000
		(0.000)	(0.000)
Num. Obs.	21661	21661	17508
AIC	7083.1	7049.3	5625.1
BIC	7099.1	7121.1	5687.2
Congress Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Across all three models, we find no strong or consistent direct relationship between corporate spending and legislative success. In the bivariate model, corporate spending does not significantly predict whether a pro-incarceration bill passes. This pattern remains after adding controls in Model 2 and continues in Model 3 that introduces lagged spending. Taken together, these results suggest limited evidence of an association between private prison corporate political activity and the success rate of pro-incarceration legislation.

These findings are inconsistent with our hypothesis that higher levels of corporate politicla spending are associated with increased legislative success for pro incarceration bills. Instead, corporate political activity does not appear to be a reliable predictor of bill passage in any of the estimated models.

Several control variables exhibit statistically significant relationships with legislative outcomes. Bills with more pages are slightly more likely to pass, suggesting that longer or more developed proposals may have slightly greater legislative traction than comparatively shorter bills. Senate bills are less likely to pass than House bills, indicating that chamber-level institutional dynamics do impact legislative success. The total prison population is statistically significant in Model 2 but substantively very small in magnitude, and it does not remain meaningful in the lagged specification. This suggests that the incarceration context may matter at the margins, but it does not drive the main results. Instead, institutional factors and the bills themselves are what consistently matter.

In terms of model fit, the controlled models improve modestly over the bivariate specification, as reflected in lower AIC values. Model 3 also includes fewer observations than Models 1 and 2 because lagging the spending variable necessarily removes observations at the beginning of the time series. The primary takeaway is that the spending factor stays weak across all three models.

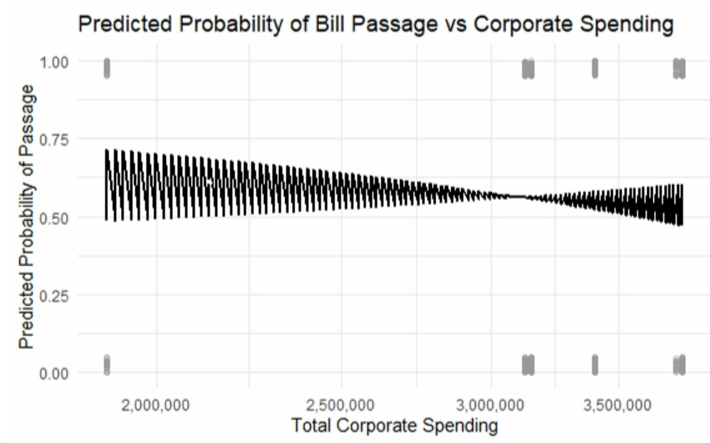

Figure 4: Predicted Probability of Bill Passage by Corporate Spending

To further illustrate the baseline relationship between corporate spending and bill passage, Figure 4 demonstrates the predicted probability of legislative success across observed levels of total corporate spending, consistent with the regression results in Table 1. The predicted probability of bill passage remains relatively flat across most of the observed range of spending, with at most a weak and slightly downward trend. Overall the patterns reinforces the conclusion that corporate spending alone does not reliably predict whether a pro-incarceration bill passes.

Although the baseline regression models and Figure 4 do not reveal a strong overall direct relationship between spending and bill passage, this does preclude the possibility of conditional effects. To further explore whether the weak direct relationship in the baseline models may mask a more conditional pattern, we next consider partisan alignment as a supplementary lens on the relationship between spending and bill passage. When incorporating partisanship and the interaction between partisanship and political spending, the results suggest that the effect of corporate spending is conditional on the partisan environment. Substantively, this implies that partisan alignment could be a more accurate lens for analyzing the influence of political spending. The results suggest that as spending increases, Republican-sponsored bills are more likely to pass, while Democrat-sponsored bills are less likely to pass.

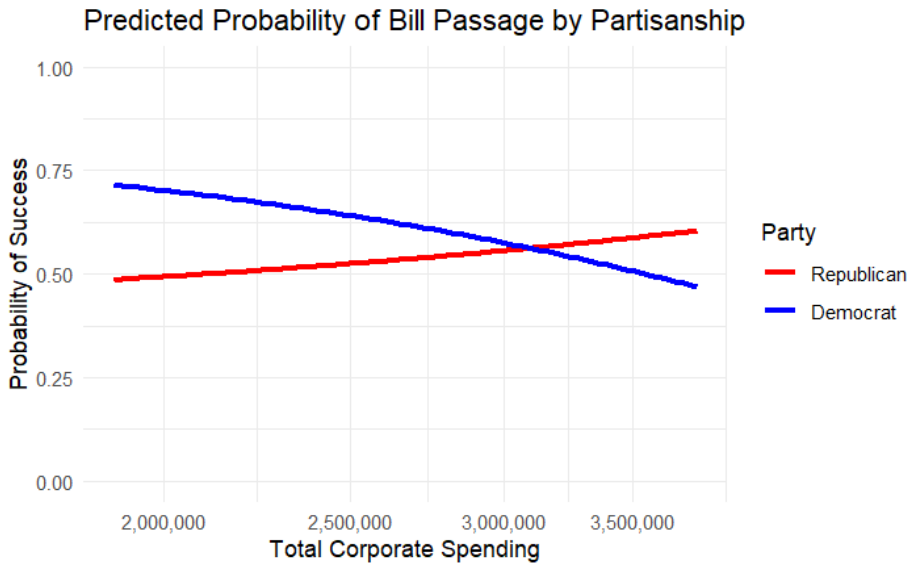

Figure 5: Partisanship

This pattern has two interesting implications. First, when ideological alignment is already present, corporations may not need to spend as much to achieve their desired outcomes. Second, corporate spending may operate less as a direct causal driver of legislation and more as a mechanism reinforcing preexisting ideological divides. For instance, Republican policymakers prefer policies that already align more closely with the interests of private prison corporations, such as stricter immigration enforcement, punitive justice, and stronger sentencing. In contrast, Democrat legislators often demonstrate higher skepticism toward incarceration policy.

Differences in political party ideology is particularly salient when considering our measurement of the independent variable. PAC spending, one of the most prominent avenues of corporate political activity, often takes the form of campaign support for candidates rather than direct legislative lobbying. As a result, if we account for the ways in which private prison corporation agendas and Republican ideological platforms align, it is reasonable to expect that firms such as CoreCivic and GEO Group strategically allocate PAC contributions toward candidates they believe will advocate for pro-incarceration policies. This supports the results of our interaction model where Republican-backed bills are more likely to pass than Democrat-backed bills as political spending increases. Considering the structure of PAC spending therefore suggests that corporate influence may operate primarily through partisan pathways.

This has important implications for our theoretical framework. Rather than treating partisanship as a simple control variable, it may be more appropriate to view it as a central channel through which private prison corporations exert influence. Partisanship should thus be considered as a component of the causal mechanism through which corporate political activity translates into policy outcomes.

Overall, the results suggest that private prison corporation spending does not operate as a strong indicator of legislative success throughout the baseline regression models. However, the partisan-alignment discussion indicates that corporate influence may be more conditional and a part of a broader political structure than a simple direct-effects model may suggest. One possible counterargument is that the existing observed patterns are less driven by the corporate activity than by the broader institutional and ideological dynamics at present. The interpretation of these findings must be done cautiously, and more broadly, the results in no way generalize neatly all forms of incarceration and detention related legislation, especially in considering the rarity of passage and limitations of a binary pass-fail outcome. Regardless, the findings remain important as they suggest that money alone, as initially assumed, does not explain legislative success, and leave open the possibility that corporate political influence may operate through partisan and institutional channels.

Conclusion

In this study, we evaluate whether private prison corporations influence the success rate of pro-incarceration legislation. To accomplish this, we analyze the total corporate spending of GEO Group and CoreCivic. We hypothesize that higher levels of corporate political activity will increase the likelihood that pro-incarceration bills are successfully enacted into law. This hypothesis is grounded in a theoretical framework that conceptualizes private prison corporations as profit-driven political actors with incentives to influence policy outcomes in their favor.

However, the empirical results show limited support for our hypothesis. Across all models, corporate political spending does not exhibit a statistically significant relationship with the success rate of pro-private prison legislation. Our results instead suggest that corporate spending may only be a small part of a broader multi-mechanism process, especially in the context of partisanship. Specifically, the association between corporate spending and legislative outcomes appears to differ between Republican and Democrat sponsored bills, though these effects are not robust across all specifications. Overall, these findings suggest that corporate influence may not operate as a direct driver of legislative success.

There are several essential limitations that should be considered when interpreting our findings. First, the analysis of the dependent variable using a binary system simplifies the very complex legislative system that exists in America. There are multiple stages of a bill besides passage and failure, stages that our measure cannot adequately capture. Many bills exert influence as they fail, pass, and become amended. When this information is taken into account, this analysis may have underestimated the relationship between the legislative system and the finality of corporate influence.

Second, the current size of incarcerated-related legislation limits the statistical significance of our results.

As noted earlier in this study, incarceration-related legislation is passed with great sparingness compared to other legislative topics. This limits the variation that we can observe in our data and the real effects of corporate political spending on legislative success. Furthermore, we measure corporate influence using PAC contributions and lobbying expenditures, but other informal mechanisms of influence may exist between corporate actors and the legislative system. These unobserved mechanisms could greatly shape legislative success and our estimates, leading to omitted variable bias. In addition, the measurement of corporate spending and legislative analysis may be better suited for a longer-term analysis. More research is needed to thoroughly address our concerns, especially through a partisan lens.

Future research on corporate influence in a legislative context can build on this study in very important ways. An expansion in the method of measurement in legislative success beyond a binary measure would provide a much needed nuanced understanding of corporate influence. Incorporating multiple stages of the legislative process will better capture how corporations shape policy even in the failure of legislation. Additionally, a more specific analysis beyond a broad federal analysis (e.g. state policy) will improve validity and provide a more comprehensive view of the private prison industry's role in politics.

This research matters because it addresses concerns about the role of private interests in a democratic system of policymaking. Although we do not find evidence of a strong relationship between corporate spending and the success of pro-private prison legislation, conditional effects in this study suggest that these corporations may have partisan agendas. Given that prior research has addressed the existing ethical concerns, political costs, and economic costs, it is imperative to further understand how corporate actors interact with the legislative process. This study contributes to a broader call of transparency, accountability, and the role of money in the American political system, raising substantial questions on who is truly represented in our democracy.

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