

Running Head: DEATH PENALTY

Support of the Death Penalty:

Data and Demographics on the Support and Opposition of Capital Punishment

NAME

Central Connecticut State University

Abstract

An analysis of the data collected from polls on American citizens' support of the death penalty. Collected data to see how Americans feel on the death penalty and how that support has changed over the decades. 5 articles were used from the website, Gallup, as well as a news story from CNN and a publication by the Constitutional Rights Foundation. The implications that support has changed over time.

Support of the Death Penalty:

Whether through shooting, hanging, electrocution, poison gas or lethal injection, the end result for the convict is still the same. The “Death Penalty,” also referred to as “Capital Punishment,” is the legal execution of a criminal. These legal executions have been taking place as early as 1630, when America was still a colony (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2012). In the 1630s, people simply picking pockets or stealing food would be punished by death. Into the 1800s, there were 270 crimes that were considered as capital offences, meaning crimes punishable by death. Eventually, capital offences were reduced until it focused mainly on first-degree murder. This is murder that has been thought out and done willingly (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2012).

As the years passed, the death penalty started becoming more and more restricted. Executions such as hangings were originally done in-front of an audience, but by 1834, Pennsylvania became the first state to end public executions. In 1846, Michigan paved the way for more states to come when they abolished the death penalty for all crimes, with the exception of treason. Between 1907 to 1917, nine states abolished the death penalty completely, but five reinstated it use by 1920. Through the years, different ways of execution were being invented and used on convicts. Electrocution was first used in 1890, cyanide gas was introduced in 1924, and lethal injection was first adopted in 1977. Hanging as a form of execution saw its final use in 1996 (CNN, 2020).

Many court cases on the death penalty have brought limitations to its use. Ford v. Wainwright case in 1986 brought the ban of executing insane people. Thompson v. Oklahoma case in 1988 declared it unconstitutional to execute offenders who were fifteen years old or younger at the time of their crimes. Then in 2002, the Atkins v. Virginia case declared that the

execution of mentally disabled defendants violates the Eight Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment (CNN, 2020).

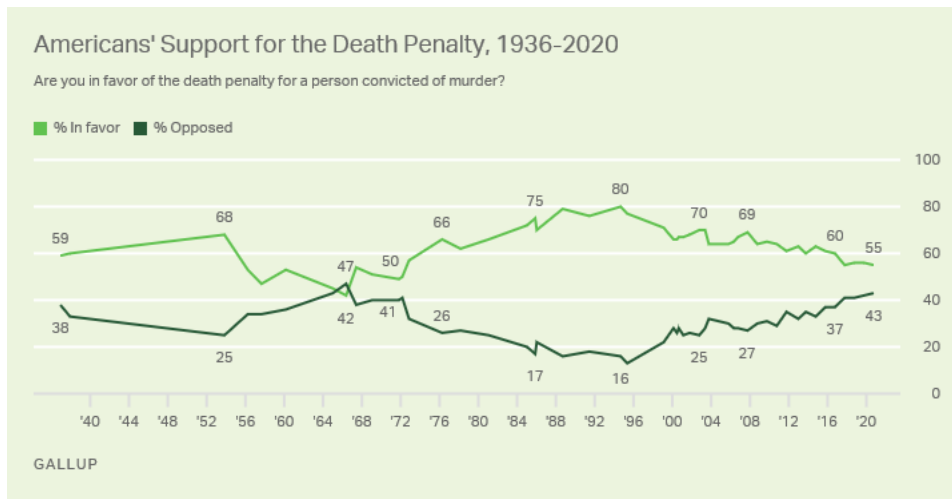
The history of the death penalty is a long one, filled with many more cases and information than what I provided. The point of going into as much detail as I did was to show how controversial this issue is. The death penalty is still used today. As of June 11, 2020, the death penalty is still legal twenty-eight states of the United States (CNN, 2020). This topic is so controversial because it is ending a person's life by the hands of another. Even though nowadays the people being executed are criminals who are convicted of murder, it is still a hot topic for debate. Whether the talk is about if the death penalty is applied fairly or simply if it is morally acceptable, there are people supporting it and those who oppose it.

The death penalty is an interesting topic to handle. If a person hears that someone committed murder, their first thought may be that the murderer should be put to death. However, this problem isn't quite so one-sided. As you dig deeper into the issue, you begin to think that life imprisonment without chance of parole may be a better sentence because it forces the killer to live with what they have done for the rest of their lives. Other points arise with the problem as well, such as it being wrong to take a life or the criminal will repeat the offense and kill again if they are not executed. The thing that struck me the most was how people that were wrongly convicted may be sentenced to death. This is the reason why this topic is so interesting, because you may feel strongly on a certain way, but feel differently once you dig deeper.

Public Opinion on Capital Punishment

I have examined many articles through the website “GALLUP” on how the public feels about the death penalty. The first article I read was “U.S Support for Death Penalty Holds Above Majority Level,” by Jeffrey M. Jones. This article was published November 19th, so it is the best source to see how public opinion has changed throughout the years all the way to how they feel this year on the issue.

Americans’ support of the death penalty has been continuously decreasing since it hit its peak of 80% in 1994. Public opinion of the death penalty was so high in that year due to the heightened public concern about crime. Since then, it has dropped all the way down to 55% who are in favor of the death penalty for convicted murderers. Last time support was this low was in 1972 when it was at 50%. Support was low during this time because there were many legal challenges being brought up during the 1960s and early 70s. During 1972, the U.S Supreme Court even invalidated state death penalty statutes. However, state death penalty laws were revised by the high court in 1976, causing support to grow to what it was in 1994 (Jones, 2020).



(source: GALLUP)

In the poll done this year, Americans were asked if they preferred the death penalty or life imprisonment without possibility of parole. The poll revealed that they favored life imprisonment over execution. Life imprisonment had 60% support to executions support of 36% (Jones, 2020).

Wording of poll questions has been proven to play a role in Americans' support of the death penalty. The article by Frank Newport, "Not Clear that Oklahoma Execution Will Affect Death Penalty Attitudes," provides explanation on why data of support may not be completely accurate. Instead of simply using a support or oppose question for how Americans feel about the death penalty, it should be compared to an alternative. The person taking the poll is given a choice on if they support the death penalty or rather the life of imprisonment without possibility of parole (Newport, 2014). "Given that choice, support for the death penalty can drop by as much as 15 percentage points compared with the 'standard' wording" (Newport, 2014)

A botched execution of a convicted killer in Oklahoma garnered little sympathy from Oklahoma residents. The convict was given a lethal injection but writhed in pain and convulsed for nearly forty-five minutes before dying. Top answers to why people support the death penalty are usually "an eye for an eye" and "they deserve it," so it is reasonable that they wouldn't protest the use of lethal injection (Newport, 2014). "It didn't appear to matter to Perry residents whether he died instantly or if took 45 minutes for him to die" (Newport, 2014).

There are top answers on polls for both supporting and opposing the death penalty. In "Americans: 'Eye for an Eye' Top Reason for Death Penalty," an article by Art Swift, shows data on what the top answers are for both sides. On the supporting side, as the title states, "eye for an eye" is the top reason with 35% of people mentioning it in 2014. The other answers in support "save taxpayers money" and "they deserve it" are tied for second with 14% each. In

1991, “stop someone from repeating a crime” was second with 19%, but has lost favor and now rests at 7% (Swift, 2014).

Reasons to Support the Death Penalty (Open-Ended)

Why do you favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?

	1991	2001	2003	2014
	%	%	%	%
An eye for an eye/They took a life/Fits the crime	50	48	37	35
Save taxpayers money/Cost associated with prison	13	20	11	14
They deserve it	--	6	13	14
They will repeat crime/Keep them from repeating it	19	6	7	7
Deterrent for potential crimes/Set an example	13	10	11	6
Depends on the type of crime they commit	--	6	4	5
Fair punishment	--	1	3	4
Serve justice	3	1	4	4
If there's no doubt the person committed the crime	--	2	3	3
Support/believe in death penalty	--	6	2	3
Don't believe they can be rehabilitated	--	2	2	3
Biblical reasons	--	3	5	3
Life sentences don't always mean life in prison	--	2	1	2
Relieves prison overcrowding	--	2	1	2
Would help/benefit families of victims	--	1	2	1
Other	11	3	4	1
No opinion	2	1	2	4

Based on sample of those who favor the death penalty in murder convictions

GALLUP®

(source: GALLUP)

For the opposition side, “wrong to take a life” has been the top reason to not use the death penalty. This reason has consistently been 40% and over for all three polls. It was at 40% for the most recent poll done in 2014. Taking the second spot is “persons may be wrongly convicted” with 17% in 2014 (Swift, 2014).

Reasons to Oppose the Death Penalty (Open-Ended)

Why do you oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?

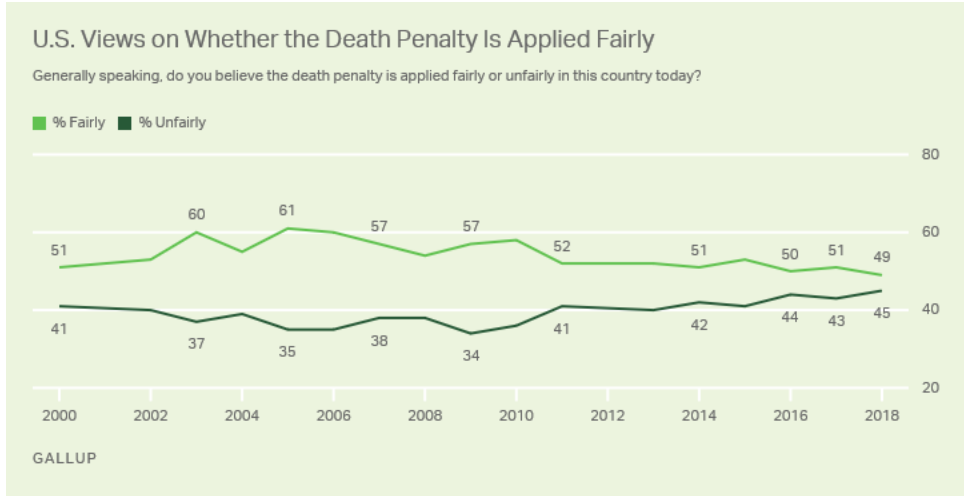
	2001	2003	2014
	%	%	%
Wrong to take a life	41	46	40
Persons may be wrongly convicted	11	25	17
Punishment should be left to God/religious belief	17	13	17
Need to pay/suffer longer/think about their crime	--	5	9
Depends on the circumstances	--	4	9
Unfair application of death penalty	6	4	5
Does not deter people from committing murder	7	4	4
Costs more to keep prisoners on death row	--	--	2
Possibility of rehabilitation	6	5	2
Other	16	3	1
No opinion	6	4	3

Based on sample of those who oppose the death penalty in murder convictions

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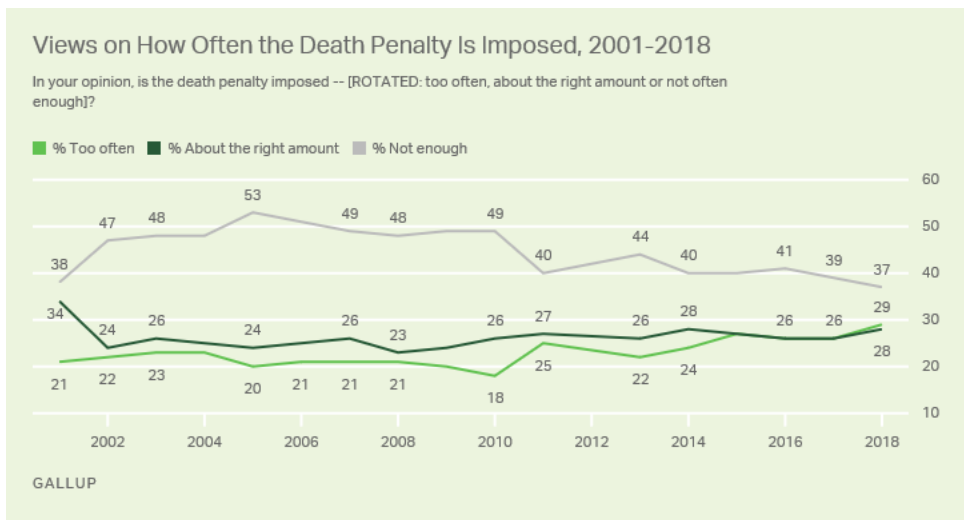
(source: GALLUP)

“New Low of 49% in U.S Say Death Penalty Applied Fairly” by Justin McCarthy shows the public opinion of how fairly the death penalty is applied to convicts. Americans who believe the death penalty is applied fairly has been decreasing and has fallen below 50% for the first time (McCarthy, 2018). The polls go as far back as 2000, so this data shows change over an eighteen-year period. As of 2018, 49% of Americans say that the death penalty is applied fairly while 45% say it is applied unfairly (McCarthy, 2018). This shows that 2018 also has the highest percent of people that believe it is applied unfairly in the past eighteen years.



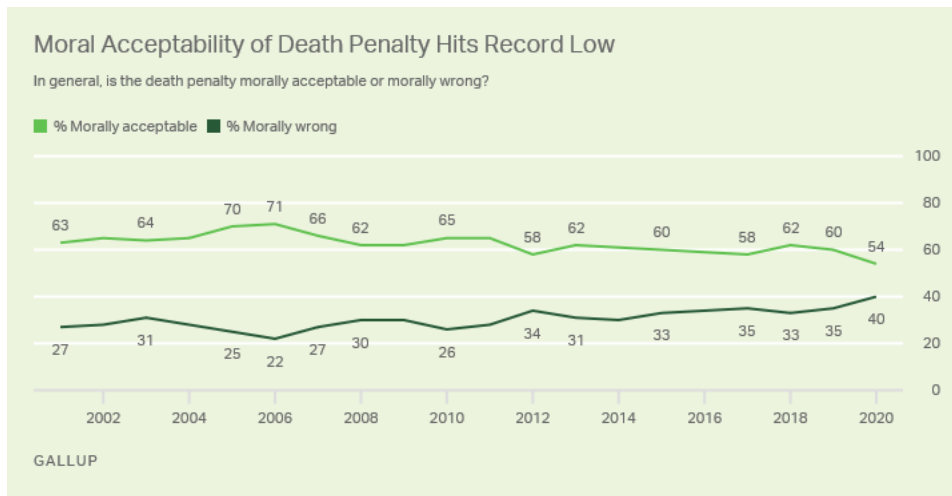
(source: GALLUP)

2018 also shows that Americans have been shifting their opinions on how often the death penalty is imposed. This year shows a new low for people who believe the death penalty is not imposed enough. This number steadily decreased from 2005 when it was at 53% all the way down to 37%. As this number decreased, the number of people believing it is imposed too often has steadily grown. This number has increased up to 29%, finally passing out for the first time those who believe the death penalty is imposed the right amount (McCarthy, 2018).



(source: GALLUP)

Moral acceptability of the death penalty has also decreased as shown in Megan Brennan’s article, “Record-Low 54% in U.S Say Death Penalty Morally Acceptable.” In Gallup’s May 1 to 13 poll, acceptability of the death penalty has reached a new low in 2020 since first starting polls in 2000. The new low is 54% while the highest value was in 2006 when acceptability was at 71%. People who believe that the death penalty is morally wrong is at a new high in 2020 at 40% (Brennan, 2020).



(source: GALLUP)

Who is Responsible for the Decrease?

Republicans continue to have high support of the death penalty, sitting at 80% between years 2000 to 2010 and only dropping by one point to 79% between years 2011 to 2020. Part of the reason why there is a decrease in support of the death penalty lies with Independents and Democrats. Independents started at 64% support between 2000 to 2010 and dropped by ten points to 54% between 2017 to 2020. Democrats started with an even lower percent of support and still took a larger decrease in recent years. They started at 55% in 2000-2010 and dropped by

sixteen points to 39% between 2017-2020 (Jones, 2020). Of course, political party alignment is not the only reason why people support or oppose the death penalty.

Changes in Support for the Death Penalty, by Political Party

Figures are the percentage who say they are in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder

	2000-2010	2011-2016	2017-2020	Change since 2011-2016
	%	%	%	pct. pts.
U.S. adults	66	61	56	-5
Republicans	80	79	79	0
Independents	64	61	54	-7
Democrats	55	47	39	-8

GALLUP

(source: GALLUP)

The generations people are born in also have seem to have an impact on how they support the death penalty. All generations have a decrease in support of the death penalty over the years, but the older the generation is, the higher the percentage of support. Traditionalists, who were born before 1946, went from 67% in 2000 to 2010 down to 62% in 2017-2020. Baby boomers, born between 1946-1964, also started at 67% then dropped down to 59%. Generation X, born between 1965-1979, started at 66% and dropped to 57%. These three generations are very close in support but there is still a decrease as you move to the younger generation. The Millennials, born 1980-1996, are the first generation to really deviate from the rest. Millennials had 61% support in 2000 to 2010 which then dropped to 51% in 2017 to 2020. This was a large drop but every generation still hovered above 60% when they first took the poll. Generation Z, born 1997-2002, had the lowest starting support of 45% in 2017 to 2020 (Jones, 2020).

Changes in Support for the Death Penalty, by Generation, Race and Educational Attainment

Figures are the percentage who say they are in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder

	2000-2010	2011-2016	2017-2020	Change since 2011-2016
	%	%	%	pct. pts.
Generation				
Generation Z (born 1997-2002)	n/a	n/a	45	n/a
Millennials (born 1980-1996)	61	55	51	-4
Generation X (born 1965-1979)	66	63	57	-6
Baby boomers (born 1946-1964)	67	64	59	-5
Traditionalists (born before 1946)	67	65	62	-3
Race/Ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic White adults	70	67	61	-6
Non-White adults	52	46	46	0
Education				
College graduates	60	53	46	-7
College nongraduates	69	65	60	-5

GALLUP

(source: GALLUP)

As you can tell from the chart, generation isn't the only demographic that impacts views on the death penalty. Race and ethnicity as well as education also play roles in people who support the death penalty. White adults started with a high percentage of support, 70%, in 2000 to 2010. This dropped nine points to 61% in 2017 to 2020. Support may have dropped for white adults but their percentage of support in 2017 to 2020 is still greater than non-white adults had back in 2000 to 2010. Non-white adults had a support of 52% which dropped to 46% in 2011 to 2016, and remained the same in 2017 to 2020.

For education, college graduates started at a lower percentage of support and decreased more than that of people who didn't graduate college. College graduates had 60% support in 2000 to 2010 and dropped fourteen points to 46% support in 2017 to 2020. People who didn't graduate college started higher at 69% support and only dropped nine points to 60% in 2017 to 2020.

My Conclusion

The data shows that Americans are becoming more and more opposed to the death penalty in recent years. Will support continue to decrease or will it pick up again? It is hard to tell where support will go in the future. Support for the death penalty decreased in the last century but picked up again. This may be the case, but I think that by looking at the demographics of people who support the death penalty, opposition will become greater than those in favor. As I mentioned before, Generation Z had the lowest percentage of support out of every generation, and it was by a greater percentage than Millennials had with Generation X. If this trend continues and only based on data, I think that support will continue to decrease.

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