

Attitudes on Policy and Punishment: Opposition to Inequality-Based Government Aid Predicts Support for Capital Punishment

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Abstract: *Objective:* There exists a well-developed body of research on the attitudinal correlates of support for capital punishment. Among the most robust of these is racism and racial attributions. The study presented here was designed to explore whether policy prescriptions reflective of racial attitudes can predict support for capital punishment.

Method: Data come from the 2018 iteration of the NORC General Social Survey. The dependent variable is a dichotomous measure of support for the death penalty for people convicted of murder. The independent variable is a 5-level Likert-type item of support for government aid to Blacks to help overcome discrimination. Binary logistic regression was used to analyze the relationship between variables net of standard controls.

Results: Over 63 percent of the total sample supported the death penalty. Support among those strongly favored government aid to Blacks was 41 percent. Support among those who strongly rejected aid to Blacks was 78 percent. Results of the regression analysis showed each decrease in the level of support for government aid to Blacks was associated with an 18.6 percent increase in the likelihood of supporting the death penalty.

Conclusion: Capital punishment support is not simply a function of abstract, hypothetical racial attitudes. The findings reported here suggest support for the death penalty is associated with concrete policy prescriptions that maintain racial inequalities. Given that capital punishment continues in large part due to public support, it should be recognized that this support is based on a desire to maintain racial inequalities through government action.

Keywords: Capital punishment opinion, race, racial attitudes, inequality, social policy.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Supreme Court in *Furman v. Georgia* (1972) suspended the use of capital punishment in the United States. A mere four years later, however, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Gregg v. Georgia* (1972) that the death penalty did not violate the Eighth Amendment, leading to most states subsequently enacting their own capital punishment laws with varying rates of execution (Fisher and Pratt 2006). What likely maintains the current system of capital punishment within the United States is a general level of widespread public support (Ellsworth and Gross 1994). Those who make up this demographic of support are consistently White (Bobo and Johnson 2004), conservative (Stack 2000), male (Cochran and Sanders 2009; Trahan, Dixon, and Nodeland 2019), protestant (Chuang, Harris, and Jones 2024; Miller and Hayward 2008), and married (Bohm 2014). However, support for capital punishment is at its lowest point since the 1970s, with a 2023 Gallup poll finding a majority of 53 percent of respondents in support and 44 percent in opposition (Gallup 2024). This is in contrast to the high levels of support seen during the mid-1990s, with support as high as 80 percent in a 1994 Gallup poll (Ellsworth and Gross 1994; Gallup 2024). In

line with a general decrease in support for capital punishment is a decrease in the number of individuals living on death row. The death row population peaked at 3,601 in the year 2000 but has steadily dropped by 29 percent to 2,570 by the end of 2019 (Masci 2024). New capital punishment sentences have also dropped in this timeframe, with 31 capital punishment sentences given in 2019 compared to the over 320 given between 1994 and 1996 (Masci 2024).

Capital punishment disproportionately affects African Americans with higher rates of capital sentences (Young 2004). Currently, 41 percent of those on death row are Black while only making up 13 percent of the U.S. population (Death Penalty Information Center 2024; United States Census Bureau n.d.). Considering that 75 percent of all murder victims in cases that led to execution were white, when nationally only 40 percent of murder victims are white, the disparity becomes more apparent (Death Penalty Information Center 2024). When rape was still an offense punishable by capital punishment from 1930 to 1972, 405 of the 455 executed were Black individuals (Death Penalty Information Center 2023). When capital punishment was declared an unconstitutional punishment for the crime of rape by the U.S. Supreme Court, it was a White defendant sentenced to death for the crime that was the vehicle for their decision (Johnson 2009). Numerous studies have supported

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claims that the disproportionate numbers behind capital punishment are due to racial discrimination. One of the most prominent studies to prove so was the Baldus study conducted in 1983. The Baldus study took into account 230 variables that could explain racial disparities on nonracial grounds, ultimately finding that defendants who were charged with the murder of a White victim were 4.3 times more likely to receive capital punishment than when the victims were Black (Baldus *et al.* 1983).

Alongside racial disparities, capital punishment is also an expensive form of punishment to maintain. When combining the cost of the trial, following appeals, and the years spent housing a capital offender are added up, the cost becomes very high for the state (Spangenberg and Walsh 1989). An analysis done in the state of North Carolina between 2005 and 2006 found the state would have spent \$11 million less on the criminal justice system if capital punishment were abolished (Cook 2009). A study done in Colorado found that capital trials are not only more costly than non-capital trials, but the threat of capital punishment in the charging stages does not result in faster plea deals (Marceau and Whitson 2013). County budgets and taxpayers are especially vulnerable to the cost of capital conviction, with an increase of \$1.6 billion in expenditures and revenues between 1982 and 1997 across U.S. counties (Baicker 2001). The study presented here extends upon previous literature by exploring the relationship between capital punishment opinions and opinions towards the government giving aid to African Americans to address inequalities.

LITERATURE

Not only has past literature shown the current system of capital punishment in the United States is maintained by public opinion, but the Supreme Court has also set a precedent of changing capital punishment statutes when there is opposition. In *Atkins v. Virginia* (2002), the Supreme Court officially exempted those with intellectual disabilities from capital punishment. This ruling marked a shift from the *Penry v. Lynaugh* (1989) ruling that sanctioned capital punishment for those with intellectual disabilities. The Supreme Court realized in the *Atkins* ruling that, starting with Georgia in 1986, 21 states and the federal government banned the intellectually disabled from execution. This state legislative activity led the justices to view a turn in public opinion nationwide, leading to their majority ruling based on a nationwide consensus.

Roper v. Simmons (2005) marked another change made by the Supreme Court due to a change in public opinion. In *Roper*, the Court raised the minimum age at which one could be sentenced to capital punishment, ruling that an individual must not be under the age of 18 at the time of the offense. The ruling reached by the Court in *Roper* overturned their previous decision in *Stanford v. Kentucky* (1989), where the minimum age was set at 16. The Court reached its ruling by noticing a national trend of not prosecuting those under the age of 18 with capital punishment, displaying a shift in society's standards of decency. Since *Stanford v. Kentucky* specifically, five states abolished capital punishment for juveniles, none had established capital punishment statutes, and only six of the 20 states that maintained capital punishment for juveniles had executed a juvenile.

Alongside public opposition driving changes to capital punishment, public support is vital to maintaining capital punishment policy and its everyday administration (Bohm 2007; Cullen, Butler, and Graham 2021). This everyday administration is primarily executed through the decisions of local prosecutors and judges. The public is responsible for those in these positions, either through directly electing them or by representative elected officials appointing them. For contentious 'law and order' issues such as capital punishment, these elected officials are often averse to taking action that may not be in line with the general public out of fear of political consequences or the belief that it is their job to carry out the will of the people (Bohm 2014; Bright 2003; Dieter 1996). Legislators are also encouraged to maintain capital punishment due to general public support. In 2015, Nebraska legislators made capital punishment unlawful. Just a year later in 2016, however, Nebraska residents voted to reinstate capital punishment due to rising fears and anger toward crime (Kort-Butler and Ray 2018).

Research has generally found that a person's attitude toward capital punishment is based on their values rather than the rationality and efficiency of the policy (Bohm 2014; Vollum and Buffington-Vollum 2009). Even when an individual is exposed to the flaws of capital punishment as a policy - wrongful convictions, failure to deter, racial discrimination, and poor legal representation - their support of the policy generally does not waver (Vollum and Buffington-Vollum 2009). Change in support after education on the policy, if seen, has also been found to be relatively short-lived (Bohm and Vogel 2004), suggesting a return

to a values-based position over education. While these aspects of support are important to understand, the true meaning of death penalty attitudes and support is in how strongly people identify with the death penalty and why they support it (Zimring 2003). One's view of the death penalty is often a part of their self-identity – i.e., they declare their support for the death penalty the same way they declare their support for a political party or sports team (Gross 1998; Peshkopia and Trahan 2023a; Peshkopia and Trahan 2023b).

Empirical tests have found some rational explanations for why one may support capital punishment, such as the belief capital punishment has a deterrent effect (Bohm, Clark, and Aveni 1991). Those who do support capital punishment on its deterrent effect are unlikely to be influenced by evidence showing the contrary (Lee, Bohm, and Pazzani 2014). Others may support capital punishment as a sole means of retribution, believing that capital punishment is a form of 'just deserts' or revenge for the offense committed (Finckenauer 1988; Bohm 1992). Of those who support capital punishment, there is empirical support indicating that they are more likely to hold views supporting authoritarianism and fundamentalism (Stack 2004). Extroversion, neuroticism, and conscientiousness are other factors that are associated with capital punishment support (Robbers 2006). Those who are more open to debate and new forms of thought, along with being more agreeable are less likely to be supportive of capital punishment (Robbers 2006).

Other characteristics are consistently linked to capital punishment support such as racial attitudes and attribution style. Several studies have shown that White racism toward Blacks is a significant predictor of capital punishment support (Dovidio *et al.* 1997; Soss, Langbein, and Metelko 2003). Attribution style, or the way people interpret the causes of events in their lives, has been a significant differentiator between those that support and oppose capital punishment (Green *et al.* 2006; Robbers 2004). Studies have specifically found that those with dispositional attribution styles, where an individual's internal and personal characteristics motivate an individual's behavior, are at a greater likelihood of supporting capital punishment than those with a situational attribution style. Those who possess a situational attribution style assume environmental factors influence behavior and generally oppose capital punishment (Robbers 2004).

Racial Attitudes

Research on capital punishment opinion has provided well-documented evidence for a racial gap between White and Black respondents, with greater shares of White respondents supporting capital punishment (Peffley and Hurwitz 2007). Work done by Arthur (1998) found that a favorable view of capital punishment among White respondents is associated with racial attitudes and perceptions toward Blacks. Additionally, it was found that how people feel about lower-status groups and their views on the government's role in helping disadvantaged groups are strongly associated with their opinions on capital punishment. Soss, Langbein, and Metelko (2003) supported previous research findings that racial prejudice is a strong predictor of support for capital punishment among White respondents. Black people living in the close residential vicinity of Whites also functioned to polarize White opinion on capital punishment along racial attitudes, with this impact heightened as the percentage of Black residents increased. Research has also found that high racial prejudice can lead to Black defendants receiving stronger recommendations for the death penalty than White defendants among a sample of mock jurors (Dovidio *et al.* 1997).

A study done by Unnever and Cullen (2007) explored whether White racism could explain the gap in support for capital punishment between White and Black respondents. Data was sourced from the 2000 National Election Study, with respondents being asked for their level of agreement with four derogatory statements toward Blacks. A dichotomous measure of support for capital punishment was analyzed using a scale created from these four items. Results revealed that one-third of the racial divide in support for capital punishment can be explained by White racism. The analysis also revealed that among nonracist Whites, support for capital punishment was at a similar level to Black respondents. The work done by Unnever and Cullen (2007) has been supported by other studies, with Buckler *et al.* (2008) finding the racist sentiments held by Whites partially accounted for the divide in support between Whites and Blacks. Unnever and Cullen's (2007) work is also supported by Barkan and Cohn's (2005) study of General Social Survey data. Their analysis found that when only non-prejudiced White and Black respondents were considered, support for capital punishment would be almost evenly split. When prejudiced Whites were added to their analysis, support for capital punishment rose to 66 percent.

The role racism plays in support of capital punishment is not exclusive to the United States, as it has been observed across a diverse range of populations (see Trahan and Pierce 2022). Unnever *et al.* (2008) found that negative attitudes toward racial or ethnic minorities in Great Britain, France, Spain, and Japan predicted support for the death penalty. Among a wider pool of European and North American countries, Unnever and Cullen (2010) found additional support that racism and intolerance are an accurate predictor of support for capital punishment. McCarthy and Brunton-Smith (2022) found negative views of minorities increased support for capital punishment across countries with and without capital punishment. These findings suggest the connection between support for capital punishment and racism is more widespread within countries that possess conflict along racial and ethnic lines (Unnever and Cullen 2010).

Attribution Style

The idea of attributional styles originated from the work of Heider (1958) and Rotter (1966), exploring whether an individual finds the cause of certain outcomes within the person (dispositional) or from factors found externally (situational). The main argument of attribution theory is that a “hydraulic relation” exists between both internal and external attributional styles, leading individuals to favor one at the cost of the other (Unnever *et al.* 2009). Past studies have found support for a relationship between attribution style and the public’s attitude toward punitiveness (Cullen *et al.* 1985). As an extension of this line of thought, research has explored how attribution style might also affect opinions toward capital punishment. Studies have generally found that those who possess a dispositional attribution style are more likely to support capital punishment (Cochran *et al.* 2006; Grasmick and McGill 1994).

The relationship between religion, attribution style, and opinion toward capital punishment was explored by Robbers (2004). Data were collected from students attending a religiously affiliated institution within the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. Respondents were asked questions concerning whether offenders commit crimes due to personal (dispositional) or environmental (situational) characteristics. Findings revealed that attribution style and religious affiliation affect capital punishment opinion such that a dispositional attribution style is a strong predictor of supporting capital punishment. These findings are supported by the knowledge that Christian beliefs reinforce a more

dispositional attribution style due to Christianity (and those who subscribe to a more literal interpretation of the bible) emphasizing individual character and accountability (Grasmick and McGill 1994). Specifically, those who are evangelical Protestants are more likely to associate crime with an offender’s dispositional characteristics rather than situational ones (Grasmick *et al.* 1993). Evangelical Protestants are also more inclined to support capital punishment for both adults and juveniles.

Work done by Cochran *et al.* (2003) explored how attribution style influenced opinion on capital punishment for juveniles and the mentally disabled or incompetent. It was hypothesized that those who possessed a dispositional attribution style would have a more punitive view toward punishment and thus be more likely to support capital punishment. Those who held a situational attribution view towards punishment were expected to be less punitive, more rehabilitative, and less supportive of capital punishment. By using Likert scale questions developed by Grasmick and McGill (1994), a survey was given to 697 subjects from Florida called to jury service. The results provided strong support for attribution theory. Respondents who possessed a disposition attribution style were more likely to suggest a death sentence. Respondents who possessed a situational attribution style were less likely to support capital punishment for juveniles but not for the mentally disabled or incompetent.

Research has also explored whether attribution style can explain why conservatives and Republicans consistently support capital punishment in far greater numbers than liberals and Democrats. Cochran *et al.* (2006) sought to explain this with data from a pool of 696 jury surveys from Florida that were given during the winter of 2000. The questionnaire consisted of Likert scale measures derived from the Grasmick and McGill (1994) scale of criminal attribution. Their results were in line with expectations that Republicans are significantly more likely to support capital punishment for adults and juveniles than Democrats. This was due to conservatives identifying more with a dispositional attribution style rather than a situational style. Conservatives are more aligned to this dispositional style due to their greater emphasis on the personal responsibility of the offender and their moral culpability for the crime committed.

Racial Attribution

Research connecting capital punishment opinion, racial attitudes, and attributions style is sparse due to

past research viewing these three concepts as separate ideas. This is not entirely the case, however, as the way we process events and view other racial groups are not entirely separate. Racial attribution intersects racial attitudes and attribution styles, where individuals explain differences among racial groups based on dispositional or situational factors. Racial attribution has seen some empirical testing and support from previous studies (Gomez and Wilson 2006; Tarman and Sears 2005). Generally, studies have focused their attention on how racial attribution affects attitudes toward racially motivated social policies such as affirmative action and welfare (Sears *et al.* 1997). Research on racial attribution and capital punishment opinion is far more limited.

Research done by Green *et al.* (2006) explored whether Whites' support for punitive and preventative crime policies was associated with racial attribution. Data were analyzed using a sample of 849 white adults from the Los Angeles County Social Survey. Racial attribution was measured using the Symbolic Racism 2000 scale created by Henry and Sears (2002). The scale measured internal (dispositional) racism through (1) work ethic and individual responsibility and (2) excessive demands. External (situational) racism was measured through (1) denial of discrimination and (2) undeserved advantage. They found significant evidence for Whites cognitively associating Black individuals with the crime problem and possible crime solutions. Internal racism was a strong predictor of support for more punitive policies, including support for capital punishment. External racism was in contrast a strong predictor of opposition to capital punishment specifically and punitive policies in general. In turn, results suggested that internal racism, which blames Black individuals for their low social status and individual deficiencies, was associated with a more punitive response to crime. The denial of institutional discrimination of Black individuals within society works to justify rejecting efforts to promote their inclusion in society.

Peffley *et al.* (2017) further explored the intersection of racial attribution, punitiveness, and capital punishment opinion. Data were sourced from the 2012 Justice in Washington State survey, with a sample consisting of 611 Whites, 305 Latinos, and 288 Blacks. Internal racial attributions (dispositional) were measured through agreement with the following statements: (1) Blacks are more aggressive by nature and (2) Blacks are just more likely to commit crimes. External racial attributions (situational) were measured

through agreement with the following statements: (1) the police are biased against Blacks and (2) the courts and justice system are stacked against Blacks and other minorities. Respondents' answers were summed into two scales based on their responses to the internal and external attributional measures. Their analysis found dispositional judgments were significantly related to a negative sentiment towards Black people.

To measure the intersection of racial attribution and capital punishment opinion, Peffley *et al.* (2017) used an experimental design. Respondents were assigned one of three questions randomly: a baseline measure from a standard Gallup question "Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for convicted murderers?", or one of two argumentative measures questioning the fairness of capital punishment. In the argumentative conditions, there was a racial argument and an innocence argument. The racial argument preceded the baseline question with "[s]ome people say that the death penalty is unfair because African Americans convicted of the same crimes as Whites are much more likely to be executed. What about you?" The innocence argument preceded the baseline with "[s]ome people say that the death penalty is unfair because too many innocent people are being executed. What about you?" Findings showed that when Black people were presented with both arguments questioning the fairness of capital punishment, their support for capital punishment dropped. For White and Latino individuals, this was not the case. Their support for capital punishment was more strongly tied to their racial attributions and negative dispositions of Black people. When examining the effect the racial argument had on support for capital punishment, endorsement of negative black dispositions were the strongest predictor of supporting capital punishment among all three groups.

Trahan and Laird (2018) further explored the connection between racial attribution and its ability to explain support and opposition to capital punishment. A general gap in past studies that the authors sought to address was the fact past studies focused entirely on attributions associated with criminal behavior. It has been relatively unknown if other attributional domains can explain capital punishment support and opposition. Using data from the General Social Survey, the effect of internal and external racial attribution on capital punishment opinion was analyzed among (1) an aggregate sample, (2) White respondents, and (3) Black respondents. Four items were used to measure racial attribution, two concerning whether racial

inequalities were due to structural disadvantages and two concerning personal characteristics. Their analysis found respondents who supported a situational racial attribution style opposed capital punishment at a higher rate than respondents who supported a dispositional racial attribution style. Among White respondents, all four measures of racial attribution significantly predicting opinion on capital punishment in the expected directions. Regarding Black people, three out of the four measures significantly predicated capital punishment opinion in the expected direction. Certain Black respondents believed racial inequalities were in some part due to a lack of motivation and willpower. These Black respondents were 34 percent more likely to support capital punishment than Black individuals who disagreed with the statement. Overall findings suggest that intergroup racism should not be ignored when examining racial attitudes and their influence on capital punishment opinion. It is also of note that measuring racial attribution need not be tied to criminality, as attitudes toward race and inequality are not solely tied to crime.

Extant research has consistently shown that racial attitudes are linked to support for capital punishment. The study presented here is designed to build upon this literature by examining whether policy prescriptions reflective of racial attitudes can predict support for the ultimate sanction. Specifically, we analyze general population data in the U.S. regarding support for government aid for Black people and its impact on respondents' support for capital punishment. Focusing on the potential relationship between these two policy positions can enhance the discussion of racial attribution in social support and government aid and how it impacts support for capital punishment. This is important given that state support and administration of capital punishment is linked to disproportionate racial impacts by continued reliance on public support for the death penalty.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data for the current study come from the 2018 iteration of the NORC General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is designed to collect data on opinions, attitudes, and behaviors to monitor and explain trends across contemporary American society. Surveys were administered to full-probability samples of English-speaking adults in the continental United States. Prior to conducting any analyses, all missing data were imputed using a multiple chained equations imputation to retain as many cases as possible and mitigate bias

that might result from missing data. This method uses non-missing data to predict the values of missing data. The imputation was carried out using an automatic method command that customizes the imputation method to the data based on characteristics such as level of measurement. The initial sample included 2,348 respondents.

Dependent and Independent Variables

Capital Punishment

Response categories for the item that asked whether respondents favored or opposed the death penalty for persons convicted of murder included "favor," "oppose," and "don't know." A dichotomous variable was created to indicate whether respondents favored (1) or opposed (0) capital punishment. "Don't know" responses were coded as missing.

Government Aid to Blacks

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they think the government should provide aid to Blacks to help them overcome the effects of discrimination. Responses were coded along a five-level Likert-type scale from "the government should help Blacks" (1) to "the government should provide no special treatment" (5). "Don't know" responses were coded as missing.

Controls

Several demographic variables were included to control for the effects of known correlates of death penalty support. These include respondents' age as measured in years, race (White = 1, Black = 0),¹ education (high school or less = 1, post-high school = 0), sex (male = 1, female = 0), marital status (currently married = 1, other = 0), religious affiliation (protestant = 1, other = 0), and religious salience. Religious salience was measured using a scale for how often respondents attended religious services, ranging from "never" (0) to "more than once a week" (8). Lastly a seven-point scale that measured political ideology from "extremely liberal" (1) to "extremely conservative" (7) was included to control for the known association between political conservatism and support for capital punishment.

Several attitudinal measures were also included in the model to control for potential confounding effects.

¹The GSS data include only one additional racial category – "other." Given this category is comprised of persons with diverse racial identities, this category was coded as missing.

Given that prior research suggests that support for capital punishment is linked to a “just deserts” perspective (Cook 1998; Wiecko and Gau, 2008), a measure of the respondents’ punitiveness was included. This measure reflects whether the respondents felt the courts deal with criminals “too harshly (1), “about right” (2), or “not harshly enough” (3). Extant research also suggests fear of crime is positively associated with support for capital punishment (Keil and Vito, 1991). Thus, a variable was included that asked whether respondents were afraid to walk alone at night (yes = 1, no = 0).

Analytical Strategy

Because the dependent variable is dichotomous, binary logistic regression was used to analyze relationships between variables. Due to coding “don’t know” responses to the dependent and independent variables and racial groups “other” than Black and White as missing, listwise deletion paired the final sample for the full regression model to 1,541, which represents over 65 percent of the initial sample.²

RESULTS

Table 1 presents basic descriptive statistics for all variables in the model. The number of respondents in each category and the percent that supported the death penalty are provided. To act as a baseline measure, we also provide the percent of support for the death penalty for the entire sample. Just over 63 percent of the sample expressed support for capital punishment. Respondents who neither agreed nor disagreed that the government should aid Blacks supported the death penalty at approximately the same rate as the total sample (64.5 percent). Support for the death penalty among respondents who felt the government should aid Blacks was more than twenty percentage points lower (42.1 percent). Respondents who felt the government should not aid Blacks supported the death penalty at the highest rate of any variable in the model (78.1 percent).

Table 2 presents the standardized logistic regression coefficients, odds ratios, and standard errors for the model. Given standing interest in the demographic and attitudinal correlates of capital punishment opinion, the effects observed for some

control variables are worth noting. Findings show that, net of other variables, White respondents were more likely than Blacks to support the death penalty. Men and respondents whose formal education did not extend beyond high school were more likely to support the death penalty. Respondents who expressed punitive attitudes and those who identified as politically conservative were more likely to support the death penalty. Regarding religious salience, respondents who attended religious services less regularly were more likely to support the death penalty. Respondents who were not fearful of crime were more likely to support the death penalty. Regarding the independent variable, the results show that respondents who felt the government should not aid Blacks were more likely to support capital punishment. Specifically, each increase in the value of the independent variable was associated with an 18.6 percent increase in the likelihood of supporting the death penalty.

The following section discusses the implications of the findings reported here.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There appears to be a pronounced relationship between supporting capital punishment and rejecting government aid to Black people based on discrimination. At the bivariate level there was a 35 percent-point difference in support for capital punishment among those who said “yes, provide aid to Black people” and those that said “no, do not provide aid to Black people.” For comparison, the difference between Black and White respondents when it comes to supporting the death penalty is only 22 percent, with White respondents having higher levels of support for capital punishment. Comparable variables that demonstrate this magnitude of difference at the bivariate-level were political ideology and punitiveness. With political ideology there was nearly a 30 percent-point difference in support of the death penalty among liberal and conservative respondents, with conservative respondents supporting capital punishment more. Additionally, there was a 35 percent-point difference in support of the death penalty between those who thought punishments issued by the courts were “too harsh” and those who thought punishments were “not harsh enough.”

In the logistic regression analysis, support for giving government aid to Black people for discrimination significantly predicted support for capital punishment. This is an important finding given that a number of

²Although nearly 35% of the initial sample was lost due to listwise deletion, this is far preferable to analyzing data with missing values. The final sample size of 1,541 is beyond adequate for the number of variables included in the model.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Independent Variable and Controls by Support for the Death Penalty

		Support Death Penalty (%)	n
Overall	63.1%	2,217	
Government Aid to Blacks (IV) [*]	Yes, Provide Aid	42.1	592
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	64.5	702
	No, Do Not Provide Aid	78.1	827
Race	Black	46.3	354
	White	68.0	1,611
Education	High School or Less	68.8	911
	Post High School	59.3	1,303
Sex	Males	67.4	1,014
	Females	59.6	1,203
Marital Status	Currently Married	64.6	948
	Other	62.1	1,267
Religion	Protestant	66.0	1,076
	Other	60.6	1,124
Religious Saliency [*]	Never Attend	64.5	676
	Attend Annually	65.2	638
	Attend Monthly	61.4	316
	Attend Weekly	60.2	573
Political Ideology [*]	Liberal	45.4	621
	Moderate	66.9	804
	Conservative	74.9	705
Punitiveness	Too Harsh	40.7	430
	About Right	59.5	333
	Not Harsh Enough	74.2	1,220
Fear of Crime	Yes	59.7	689
	No	68.4	1,330
Age [*]	< 35	59.1	591
	35 – 44	64.4	393
	45 – 60	66.3	597
	> 60	63.2	634

*The response categories for these four variables are collapsed in this table. Age was collapsed by calculating quartiles and rounding to the nearest multiple of five.

Table 2: Logistic Regression of Support for the Death Penalty

	β	Odds	SE
Government Aid to Blacks	.171***	1.186	.042
Race	.551***	1.734	.164
Education	.323*	1.381	.126
Sex	.293*	1.340	.126
Marital Status	-.029	.972	.124
Religion	.162	1.176	.131
Religious Saliency	-.067**	.935	.024
Political Ideology	.298***	1.347	.045
Punitiveness	.564***	1.757	.079
Fear of Crime	-.289*	.749	.129
Age	-.005	.995	.003
R ²	.210		
n	1,541		

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

control variables known to be associated with support for capital punishment were also present in the model. Giving government aid to Black people for discrimination was related to support for capital punishment in the expected direction, with those less willing to give aid more supportive of capital punishment. While the bivariate relationship suggested a strong difference between the two anchor points of the government aid variable, this was somewhat attenuated in the logistic regression model when compared to other variables that exhibited similar percentage point differences in supporting capital punishment among the anchor points—namely political ideology and punitiveness. The odds ratio for supporting capital punishment increased roughly 18.5 percent for each category that became less supportive of this government aid to minorities policy. Political ideology and punitiveness increased their odds of predicting support for capital punishment by 34.7 percent and 75.7 percent, respectively. In all this suggests that the variable government aid to Black people for discrimination predictably is associated with support for capital punishment in a manner that cannot be ignored.

What is important is determining the causal mechanism in which support of government aid to Black people for discrimination (or lack thereof) is related to support for capital punishment. It is inferred that support for government aid to Black people for discrimination sits at the intersection of racial attitudes and attribution style. Supporting a government policy to offer aid to a minority group for discrimination aligns with having lower levels of racist attitudes and a situational attribution style. This is important given that Robbers (2004) found that attribution style was linked to Protestant religion, with Protestants adopting more of a dispositional attribution style (rather than a situational attribution style), thus, greater support for capital punishment. The logistic regression model here accounts for both religious affiliation and religious salience, with the finding that supporting government aid to Black people for discrimination still exerts a significant impact on support for capital punishment. This suggests that a situational attribution style, where factors external to an individual explain structural and external remedies to a particular problem, are important explaining support for capital punishment.

The findings here also square with the results found by Green *et al.* (2006) by revealing that decreased support for governmental aid based on discrimination

increases the support for capital punishment. Green and colleagues measured external racism as the denial of discrimination and receiving undeserved advantages with corresponding denial of structural remedies, which denies rejecting efforts to promote minority inclusion in society. In a complimentary fashion, internal racism was linked with more punitive policies and support for capital punishment. When respondents fail to support government, or structural, remedies for racial discrimination they would generally fall into this category of possessing higher levels of external racism. As such the findings here align with the finding of Green and colleagues where such attitudes predict increased punitiveness. In all, the exploration between support for capital punishment and giving aid to minority groups to address inequalities was fruitful in that support for their relationship exists and is in line with past research on situational attribution and racial attitudes.

A limitation of this research is that it comes from a secondary data analysis, where the results relied on already constructed variables that did not necessarily match with all points of the perspectives being tested, instead of partial aspects of the theories being tested here. Measuring respondents support for giving government aid to black people for discrimination measures a component of situational attribution and how it intersects with individuals' racial attitudes. Additionally, the General Social Survey data analyzed here were collected in a cross-sectional manner not linked to data available from longitudinal design or corresponding analysis. This does not allow causality to be assessed in a rigorous manner. A longitudinal panel design could allow for greater confidence in assessing the relationship between support for capital punishment and administering state aid to minority groups.

One recommendation for future research is to include controls for attribution style and general racist attitudes while still measuring internal and external racist attitudes. This could allow for greater precision in measuring and assessing racist attitudes and attribution style along with a more nuanced view of racial attribution when it comes to discerning the impact of these attitudes and beliefs on support for capital punishment. Future research should also explore relationships between support for capital punishment and endorsements of other policy perspectives, particularly those related, directly or indirectly, to racial equality and social justice. It is possible, for example,

that support for capital punishment may be related to policy perspectives in economic, political, educational, and other social structures. That is, support for the death penalty may be a constituent part of a larger web of policy orientations.

It is difficult to offer policy implications based on the findings reported here. Our study was designed to explore theoretical explanations pertaining to why people support capital punishment and, by extension, harsh punishment. One implication is apparent, however. The findings reported here add to a plethora of research that has conspicuously shown that capital punishment is buoyed, in large part, by racism and the desire to maintain discrimination. As such, capital punishment should be abolished.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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