

The Association between Race and Capital Punishment Support by Party Affiliation

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Introduction

- Capital punishment remains a long-standing site of public controversy in United States criminal justice history (Shepherd, 2004).
- Recent polling reveals that national support for the death penalty has **declined to 53%**, the lowest level recorded since 1972 (Gallup, 2024).
- Current research reveals that **Republicans consistently demonstrate higher levels of capital punishment support than Democrats**, with party support differing by roughly **40 percentage points** across different generations (Gallup, 2024).
- Prior studies also observed persistent racial disparities death penalty approval. Over a 30-year period, White Americans consistently expressed levels of support relative to Black Americans, **with an average difference of 29.9 percentage points** (Unnever, Cullen, & Jonson, 2008).
- To explain this disparity, prior studies revealed that white racial prejudice **accounted for roughly 39% of racial differences** in death penalty support (Unnever & Cullen, 2007).
- Recent reports have estimated that since 1976, nearly **two-thirds of wrongfully convicted death row inmates have been people of color, over half of whom were Black** (Death Penalty Information Center, 2024).
- Much of the existing research is based on data from the 1990s and 2000s, leaving remaining uncertainty about the nature of these relationships in contemporary socio-political contexts.

Research Objectives

- To evaluate whether racial differences in death penalty attitudes have persisted in current US public opinion.
- To determine whether this racial relationship varies on the basis of party alignment.

Research Question:

Does partisanship significantly alter racial trends in capital punishment support amongst American adults?

Methods

Sample

- White and Black Americans aged 18 years or older were drawn from the General Social Survey 2021 (GSS), a nationally representative survey.
- Participants were contacted via mail invite and offered to participate either through phone interview or web survey, responses were collected between December 1, 2020 and May 3, 2021.
- From the total sample of interest (N=3653), **86.45% of respondents identified as White** (N=3158), while **13.55% identified as Black or African American** (N=495).

Measures

- Partisanship** was measured on a categorical scale, responses ranged from 0 (Strong Democrat) to 6 (Strong Republican), with an additional option of 7 (Other Party).
- Death penalty support** was measured with the question, *“Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?”* with responses dichotomized as whether participants support the death penalty.
- Race** was self reported.

Results

Univariate Analysis

- Most common political affiliations within this sample included:
 - “Strong Democrat” (20.55%, N=822)
 - “Independent” (20.43%, N=817)
 - “Not Very Strong Democrat” (13.53%, N=541)
 - “Strong Republican” (13.1%, N=524)
- Overall, **56.15%** of the sample indicated a **supportive stance** of capital punishment (N=2222), while **43.84 % of participants opposed capital punishment usage** (N= 1735).

Bivariate Analysis

- A chi-square test of dependence revealed a **significant association between race and death penalty opinion**, ($\chi^2=87.70$, $p<0.001$).
- This analysis found that **White respondents were significantly more supportive of the death penalty than Black respondents**.
- More specifically, **59.6% of White respondents** within the sample supported capital punishment versus **37.1% of Black respondents**.
- A separate chi-square found that **party alignment was significantly associated with capital punishment opinion**, with Republicans showcasing higher support levels ($\chi^2= 583.23$, $p<0.001$).
- Logistic regression models revealed that **Black Americans were approximately 60% lower odds of death penalty support relative to White Americans** (OR=0.396, CI=0.33-0.48).
- Logistic regression also showed that **‘Strong Republicans’ had 12.86 times higher odds of supporting capital punishment usage than ‘Strong Democrats’** (OR=12.86, CI=9.76-17.11, $p<0.001$).

Multivariate Analysis

- A moderated logistic regression model revealed simple interaction between race and party affiliation when controlling for other demographic covariates (age, education level, economic status, & personal income).
- White ‘Strong Republicans’ had odds of supporting capital punishment **16.68 times higher** than White ‘Strong Democrats,’
- After controlling for other variables, racial differences in support **were not significant** within most party categories.
- However, among ‘Not Very Strong Republicans,’ **Black respondents had approximately 92% lower odds of supporting the death penalty** compared to White respondents in the same coalition (OR=0.086, $p=0.041$).

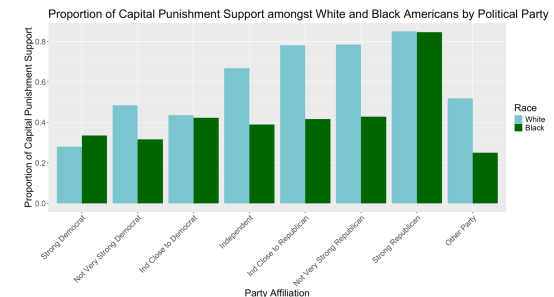


Figure 1. Multivariate bar plot recording levels of capital punishment support, sorted by political affiliation, for White and Black Americans within the observed sample.

Discussion

- These findings indicate that previously documented racial disparities in capital punishment support have continued in recent contexts, although the significance of these differences varies across partisan groups.
- Partisanship remains significantly associated with death penalty attitudes, however, racial differences are not entirely absent within political parties.
- The observed interaction of race and party identification among ‘Not Very Strong Republicans’ demonstrates that racial identity continues to influence capital punishment opinion, even in cases of shared political alignment.
- These findings are consistent with frameworks of racial distrust which argue that historical racialized enactment of punitive executions may continue to inform Black Americans’ perceptions of legal and penal institutions.
- Overall, the results suggest that partisan alignment, while a more consistent predictor of death penalty attitudes, does not entirely override collective racial experiences with the US justice system.
- A limitation of this study is the potential re-classification of multiracial respondents when isolating White and Black participants during the data management process.
- Despite this limitation, this analysis provides a strong assessment of contemporary public opinion, demonstrating that race remains a meaningful predictor of attitudes toward capital punishment, a valuable insight into how social identifiers shape modern political discourse.

References

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