

SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Determinants of Public Opinion on the Death Penalty

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SPRING 2024

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Political Science
with honors in Political Science

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ABSTRACT

Capital punishment represents an interesting case in the context of public opinion. Support for the death penalty varies tremendously among different populations across the United States, as demonstrated through Gallup and many other national polling services. Which factors account for this variation in public opinion on the death penalty among US citizens? This research attempts to account for such influences, utilizing sociopolitical and demographic data from the American National Election Survey (ANES) to construct both cross-sectional and longitudinal models for death penalty support. My results find that variables such as partisanship, education level, gender, and perception of criminal activity have historically explained attitudes toward capital punishment over time. For example, those who are Republican, male, and in favor of increasing federal spending on crime are more likely to support capital punishment. These results mostly hold true both in 2020 and over the span of the longitudinal analysis. In addition, several other variables demonstrate significance, granting predictive power for whether or not a hypothetical individual with specific characteristics will support the death penalty. Finally, trends of variable significance over time suggest that social, political, and economic events may have impacted capital punishment support in the short-term. Such events include, but are likely not limited to, the rise of innocence movements around the year 2000, the financial crisis of 2008, and the hyper-partisanship of American politics surrounding the 2016 presidential election.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would foremost like to thank both Dr. Suzanna Linn and Dr. Marie Hojnacki for advising me throughout this process. Dr. Linn's enthusiasm in sharing her extensive knowledge of capital punishment research, as well as R coding software, were beyond helpful in crafting and conducting my research analyses. Every time I hit a dead end with some dataset or faulty line of code, Dr. Linn was always right there to help. I am even proud to say that I cited her own original research on capital punishment as a reference in my project. Likewise, I could not have completed this thesis without the help of Dr. Hojnacki, as she took an astounding amount of care in helping to read, revise, and edit every single one of my rough drafts. The guidance that I received from both of my outstanding advisers was essential in creating this final product.

I would also like to thank my peers in PLSC 306H for the time and effort taken in reading my rough drafts and providing their valuable feedback. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, who have always provided their love and support throughout my educational journey. To everyone who has helped me throughout the long road of this process, I am exceedingly grateful.

Chapter 1

Introduction

On January 25th, 2024, Kenneth Eugene Smith, a convicted murderer, was executed by the state of Alabama (Chandler, 2024). Although 24 death row inmates were executed in 2023 and eight more executions remain scheduled in 2024, Smith's execution sparked mass uproar, controversy, and fascination amongst the American public (DPIC, n.d.). For the first time in United States history, a man was executed using nitrogen hypoxia, a previously untested method with unpredictable effects on the human body (Chandler, 2024). Consequently, the issue of capital punishment was brought back into the forefront of American political discussion, with Twitter and other media platforms erupting into a firestorm of conflicting calls for both abolition and support (X, n.d.). Such intense public discourse raises questions about why individuals support or oppose the death penalty. As recent national polls from Gallup indicate that 53% of the public still favors the death penalty, capital punishment remains incredibly divisive among Americans (Brenan, 2024). Therefore, what explains this variation in public support for capital punishment?

As exemplified by the public response to Smith's execution, capital punishment is a highly contentious issue in contemporary politics. Just as well, it is also an important one to study in the context of public opinion. As states are left with the power to determine its legality, citizens are granted greater influence on death penalty policy compared to many other prominent social issues. For example, states have used direct democracy options to allow citizens to alter capital punishment laws in Nebraska, California, and Oklahoma, all within the past fifteen years (DPIC, 2021). A more-informed understanding of determinants of individual-level attitudes about the death penalty allows us to determine exactly which characteristics are conducive to

support, and which ones are resistant. With this knowledge, we will be better able to predict and explain implications for capital punishment policy in the future.

My thesis is focused on accounting for the determinants of public support for capital punishment at the individual-level. Please note that I also use the term, “death penalty” interchangeably with “capital punishment” throughout this thesis. Compared to existing research on the topic, my research model is distinct in a number of ways. In my analysis, I plan to test for the effects of demographic variables whose relationship has never previously been studied together, with respect to public support for capital punishment. Additionally, I test for the effects of twelve separate variables within a logistic regression model, making for a comparably larger model than is typically used in similarly-focused studies on public support for the death penalty. Furthermore, my model includes a variable measuring an individual’s perception of crime, which is unique among existing studies attempting to explain public support for the death penalty.

Another significant departure from the existing research is my chosen timeframe of study. I plan to incorporate data from five different election years, spanning from 1992 to 2020, within the context of a longitudinal research model. Currently, the existing body of academic work on determinants of public support for capital punishment has yet to account for much of the 2010s and thus far into the 2020s. I believe that these years are crucial for a modern understanding of capital punishment and the resulting impacts on public support at the individual-level. The increasingly polarized political climate of the 21st century, the 2008 financial crisis, the 2016 presidential election, and the 2020 global pandemic are all prominent historical events that have the potential to significantly impact the determinants of contemporary public support for the death penalty. The inclusion of these years within my time frame will only provide for more current and more relevant findings to our own sociopolitical landscape.

In carrying out this research plan, I will use data collected by the American National Election Survey (ANES). Specifically, I plan to use datasets from both the ANES 2020 Election Study and the ANES Times Series Election Study to conduct my analyses. Both of these datasets include a survey question asking respondents whether individuals support or oppose capital punishment in the United States, the results of which comprise my dependent variable of study. These ANES surveys also gather extensive information about the demographic characteristics of respondents, as well as their cultural and political attitudes. As the relevant literature demonstrates that many of these qualities are likely to account significantly for individual attitudes about capital punishment, the data for my independent variables will also come from these two ANES datasets.

Additionally, I conduct a qualitative assessment of the findings from the empirical analysis, in which I utilize the findings from my longitudinal regression model to explain any noteworthy variation among independent variables across time. As demographic indicators and sociopolitical attitudes are well-suited to systematically explain public support for capital punishment, I also recognize that there are likely many more determinants that affect public support at the individual level. In conducting a qualitative analysis, I analyze the historical contexts of time periods displaying interesting and/or counterintuitive findings in the longitudinal model. I use relevant sources of literature to identify contextual factors that significantly influence attitudes about capital punishment, despite being impractical to include within a quantitative model. In doing so, I hope to capture a greater range of determinants of individual-level support.

The results of my analyses yield some interesting conclusions. Based on my two logistic regression models, the most consistent indicators of support for capital punishment are being

Republican, white, male, and favoring an increase in federal spending on crime. In contrast, individuals who are Democrats, have higher educational attainment, live in urban areas, and favor a decrease in federal spending on crime are significantly less likely to support the death penalty. Moreover, I find that some of these variables are significantly related to support for the death penalty certain years, while not in others. To better explain these discrepancies within a historical context, I find it likely that the innocence movement of the late-1990s, the 2008 financial crisis, and the 2016 presidential election each influenced support for the death penalty at the individual-level.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Historical Overview of Public Opinion Research in Capital Punishment

What explains the variation in public support for capital punishment among individuals? In addressing this question, researchers have mainly relied upon two major national surveys that measure public support for capital punishment, one generated and collected by Gallup and the other by the National Opinion Research Center (2006; 1985). Roberts (1992) used both the NORC and Gallup data to identify a trend of increased favorability leading up to the 1990s. He proposed a criminological argument for this corresponding increase, holding that the death penalty had been increasingly favored as a method of retribution and deterrence of violent crime. Similar studies conducted years later suggested other potential mechanisms underlying attitudes toward the death penalty, including partisan beliefs, political culture, historical policy, and demographic factors, based on trends observed in quantitative data (Warr, 1995; Norrander, 2000; Fisher & Pratt, 2006). Further research has been conducted over the past few decades that sought to operationalize and test many of these initially-hypothesized factors. From analysis of this existing literature, I expect that several variables are likely to have an impact on the resulting variation of public support for capital punishment.

Perception of Crime

Existing research indicates that there are a few different ways that perception of crime can potentially influence public opinion about capital punishment. Based on the criminological arguments proposed by Roberts (1992), capital punishment is viewed as a method of retribution and deterrence against violent crime. In the sense that citizens view capital punishment as a

vehicle for retribution, studies have shown that public punitive attitudes and personal connection to crime tend to increase in areas where violent crime is more prevalent (Tyler & Weber, 1982). Known as “Pragmatic Theory”, this argument presupposes that the combination of increased punitive nature and personal connection to crime would thereby increase public support for harsher means of criminal justice (Tyler & Weber, 1982). With capital punishment being the most “punitive” form of legalized punishment available to the state, this argument implies that citizens’ willingness to punish offenders affects citizens’ outlooks on the death penalty (Tyler & Weber, 1982).

Additionally, level of concern about future crime has been found to influence public support for capital punishment. Evidence suggests that the public believes criminal punishment influences decisions made by potential criminals (Gibbs, 1968). The severity of the death penalty within the criminal justice system, combined with its reserved use for only the most violent of criminals, is therefore likely to have a more significant impact on criminal decision-making compared to other forms of punishment (Gibbs, 1968). Consequently, it makes sense that citizens who are more concerned about future crime would be more likely to favor capital punishment as a method of deterrence. Empirical evidence indicates that the belief in the deterrent effect of the death penalty is a stronger predictor of support for capital punishment compared to the inclination to view it as a form of retribution (Gibbs, 1968).

In further supporting this proposition, other studies have cited evidence that direct proximity to violent crime itself has impacted resulting public attitudes on capital punishment. On a state-level, it was found that states with high rates of murder and nonnegligent manslaughter have statistically significant effects on their resulting support for capital punishment (Nice, 1992). Additionally, a general belief that the death penalty deters crime was

found to have a significant effect on attitudes toward capital punishment (Nice, 1992). As a whole, these studies, taken together, indicate that citizen perception of crime is likely to have an effect on public support for capital punishment.

Partisan Preference

Research also demonstrates a strong correlation between partisanship and public attitudes toward capital punishment. As the Republican Party has directly supported capital punishment in its official platform, its focus on strict crime prevention has also contributed to a voter base largely in favor of the death penalty (DPIC, 2021). This level of support is much larger than the support offered in favor of capital punishment by members of the Democratic Party (DPIC, 2021). Survey data collected from Pew Research has indicated a difference between self-indicated Republicans and Democrats of over 30% (Nadeem, 2021).

Increased partisanship seen in the United States following the 2016 presidential election has also recently expanded Republican support for capital punishment (Jones, 2018). The greater polarization within America's socio-political climate widened the partisan gap in support for capital punishment between Democrats and Republicans (Jones, 2018). Additionally, the United States has an especially politicized notion of capital punishment, given its connection to the election of local and national political leaders (Garland, 2007). From the direct accountability of civil servants to their electorate, political leaders are more apt to act on the basis of party lines (Garland, 2007). Consequently, highly politicized issues, such as capital punishment, are more likely to have varying levels of support on the basis of party (Garland, 2007). Therefore, partisan attitudes are expected to influence capital punishment public support.

Citizen Demographics

Race

Given the United States' history of racism, slavery, and most importantly, lynching, it is intuitively likely that attitudes towards capital punishment are likely to differ based on race. This assumption has been supported by studies on capital punishment that have included race as an explanatory variable. Using data from the Gallup polls (2006), Wright, Jasinski, and Lanier (2012) have presented evidence suggesting that there is a significant difference in the level of support for capital punishment among white and black populations, with the latter showing significantly less support compared to the former. Additionally, a time-series analysis conducted by Shirley and Gelman (2015) concluded that blacks are less supportive of the death penalty, and that they have decreased their support for capital punishment more dramatically over time, relative to non-black members of the population (Shirley and Gelman, 2015).

Jacobs and Carmichael's (2002) "Racial Threat Theory" provides enhanced support for variation in public support based on race. It asserts that white populations attempt to maintain their superior position over minorities through increased law enforcement and enhanced criminal punishment (Jacobs and Carmichael, 2002). Furthermore, increased interaction between the two populations leads to greater pro-capital punishment sentiment among white populations, which remain the majority in most states (Jacobs and Carmichael, 2002). Given their argument that enhanced law enforcement and criminal punishment are used as tools by white populations to control minority citizens, it makes sense that white populations would be more likely to favor capital punishment compared to minority populations (Jacobs and Carmichael, 2002). Both of these studies demonstrate that race is a poignant variable in determining the outcome of capital punishment public support.

Gender

It appears likely that gender impacts support for capital punishment. Initially, it seems likely that women would generally be more opposed to capital punishment than men, as they are generally understood to exhibit higher levels of empathy and compassion, traits that may lead them to view capital punishment as morally objectionable or unjust. The body of existing research on the topic tends to agree. Shirley and Gelman's (2015) time-series analysis consistently estimates lower levels of support estimates for women compared to men, even when measured across race. A study conducted by Gonzalez-Perez (2002) has also found that women are significantly more likely than men to be excused for jury panels in death penalty cases, and that the citizens who survive voir-dire are more likely to be "conviction-prone" than the ones who are excused. Taken together, these results indicate a general difference in attitudes towards the institution of capital punishment.

Age

The impact of age is challenging to predict. One might assume that older people, who have more life experience and have lived through periods of American history where the death penalty was more widely legalized, would prefer to support the death penalty. Using age as a demographic factor in their analysis, Hong and Crowther (2016) found that young adults are more likely than older citizens to initiate liberal reform and collective activism. Given the national issue salience and established conservative favor of the death penalty, younger people may in fact demonstrate lower levels of public support for capital punishment (Vidmar and Ellsworth, 1974). However, the impact of age may be entangled with other demographic variables (such as political affiliation), and it may also be confounded with the cohort effects of

different time periods. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether age significantly affects attitudes on the death penalty.

Religion

The role of religion in the formation of capital punishment attitudes is particularly interesting because it can theoretically increase or decrease sentiment towards the death penalty depending also on the presence of surrounding factors. Miller and Hayward (2008) theorize that people who consider themselves religious, such as Catholics, may be more averse to the death penalty. They contend that many core religious doctrines place enhanced value on the sanctity of life, making individuals of most religions less likely to support capital punishment (Miller and Hayward, 2008). Given similar arguments made for the sanctity of life on issues such as abortion, this finding is intuitive and unsurprising.

However, regional variation in opinion towards the death penalty in the United States suggests a different perspective. According to Vidmar and Ellsworth (1974), populations in rural, southern areas of the United States, which are typically perceived to have higher proportions of religious and Christian citizens, tend to have increased support for the death penalty. Additionally, qualitative analysis from Steffen and Cooley (2014) presents the perspective that a history of Christian violence has ingrained a “power of execution” among their followers, causing present church authorities to grant sanction of the death penalty. This research suggests that elements of Christianity may positively impact support for capital punishment, while religiosity as a whole may decrease levels of support.

Education

Education also figures into the conversation surrounding capital punishment support. Presumably, like age, the effect of education is likely to be entangled with other demographic variables. Studies have shown that higher levels of education are associated with greater social liberalism (Feldman and Johnston, 2014). If this theory holds true, then it would be reasonable to theorize that citizens with higher educational attainment would have lower levels of public support for capital punishment (Feldman and Johnston, 2014). Additionally, Shirley and Gelman (2015) find that differences in educational attainment have a significant impact on public support for capital punishment at the state level. They contend that state populations with higher collective levels of education tend to demonstrate significantly less support for the death penalty (Shirley and Gelman, 2015).

Region

Existing capital punishment research identifies an individual's region of residence as a potential influence on support for the death penalty. According to Vidmar and Ellsworth (1974), populations in rural, southern areas of the United States have demonstrated increased support for the death penalty. Gonzalez-Perez (2002) argues that the "Deep South" exhibits a "southern subculture of punitiveness", which she believes may contribute to a generally higher level of support for capital punishment within the region. While it is possible that the region is merely a confounding influence, rather than a causal mechanism that explains support for capital punishment, the aforementioned research depicts a pattern of greater support among these southern citizens as compared to other regions in the United States.

Living Area (Urbanism)

Some research suggests that whether someone resides in an urban or rural area may affect their attitudes toward the death penalty. Vidmar and Ellsworth (1974) find in their analysis that a greater percentage of manual laborers and farmers favor capital punishment than do professionals and businesspersons. As professional occupations tend to be more often concentrated in urban areas, it may be that citizens in urban areas are less likely to support capital punishment as compared to those in rural areas. However, the effects of urbanism may also simply reflect the fact that the rural-urban divide is strongly related to the partisan divide in this country. Therefore, it is not yet determined if living area will have a significant effect on attitudes toward capital punishment.

Marital Status

Research conducted by Moran and Comfort (1986) finds that married people are generally more likely to support capital punishment as compared to unmarried individuals. This finding was echoed in Gonzalez-Perez's 2001 study on decision-making in capital juries. In addition, Anderson et al. (2017) attempt to explain this phenomenon as a result of increased punitive attitudes among married individuals, which in turn translate to greater support among this segment of the population. Each of these three studies found support for variation in support for capital punishment on the basis of marital status.

Household Income

Based on the existing literature, household income is likely to have a few distinct effects on individual attitudes on capital punishment. Firstly, household income itself is likely to be

impacted by marital status, as having a spouse is likely to increase the probability that a given household will have a higher income. Based on the explanation proposed by Anderson et al. (2017), married individuals will be more likely to support the death penalty. It is intuitively likely that married individuals will have higher household incomes, on account of having greater earning potential among two people rather than one. Therefore, individuals with higher household incomes may be more likely to support capital punishment, and marital status may play a substantial role in the explanation.

Additionally, Gonzalez-Perez (2001) contends that wealthier people are more likely to support capital punishment. Taking a different approach, Johnson and Johnson (2001) argue that lower-class members of society are more likely to be discriminated against through the use of capital punishment. In expanding this viewpoint, individuals with lower incomes may be more at-risk of being affected by the death penalty (Johnson and Johnson, 2001). Therefore, those at greater risk would be likely more averse to the practice of capital punishment, thus providing an explanation for the variation in support for the death penalty among different household incomes.

Unemployment Status

The final demographic variable I consider is unemployment status. The influence of unemployment on attitudes toward the death penalty may be mediated by income. Those that are unemployed are likely to have lower income levels than citizens with jobs, and as Johnson and Johnson argue (2001), they may be at greater risk of the death penalty compared to others. The societal marginalization that stems from being unemployed can potentially make the unemployed more susceptible to be convicted by juries in capital cases (Gonzalez-Perez, 2001). While much

of the effect of unemployment status may be tied to income and even marital status, it remains to be seen if unemployment has a distinct influence on attitudes toward capital punishment.

Research Implications

Public support for capital punishment is complex. It is influenced by a multitude of interconnected concepts and potential factors, making it difficult to disentangle the effects of individual variables on support for the death penalty. The existing literature has identified several variables that are likely to contribute to the variation in public opinion. Perception of crime is likely to impact public attitudes on capital punishment based on ideas of retribution, as well as deterrence of future crime. Partisanship implies that support for a given political party can influence that perception of capital punishment through ideological differences. Finally, the presence of demographic differences between citizens is likely to affect the outcome of public support in various forms. My study, which I describe in the next chapter, will focus on testing the impacts of these factors on the existing public support data in order to better understand the significance of these variables.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Approach

Capital punishment is currently a complex and highly divisive issue in the United States. Attitudes towards capital punishment can be affected by a wide range of factors, whether they stem directly from life experiences, community consensus, a person's age, gender, or partisan preferences. Specifically, prior research indicates that there are twelve main determinants of variation in support of capital punishment at the individual level. Consequently, I theorize that perception of crime, partisan preference, and a set of various demographic indicators each have significant influence on the variation of public support levels for capital punishment.

Concepts and Theory

The first concept I examine is "Public Support for Capital Punishment", my dependent variable, which for my purposes is defined as, "the level of favor for the sentencing of convicted offenders to death for capital crimes and carrying out that sentence" (Glynn et. al, 1999; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021).

Of the twelve independent variables of interest, the first, "Perception of Crime", is defined as an individual's preference to increase, decrease, or keep stable federal spending on crime. An individual's opinion regarding federal spending on crime serves as an indicator of how one perceives the current state of crime, as well as any government action needed to best prevent it. Public perception of violent crime may cause public support to increase in order to deter criminals or to provide a seemingly justified punishment for their actions. Therefore, I expect that those favoring increases in federal spending on crime will be more likely to support the death penalty, while those favoring a decrease will be less likely to do so.

The second variable, “Partisan Preference”, is defined as, “an individual’s affiliation with a political party within the United States”. In the context of my research, political ideology and partisan preference account for much of the variation in public attitudes towards capital punishment (Nice, 1992). Conservative Americans often hold beliefs in favor of capital punishment, in contrast to a majority of liberal Americans (Jacobs and Carmichael, 2002). A majority of conservative-leaning citizens believe that the death penalty is necessary to deter crime and to provide a justified punishment for violent criminal activity (Nice, 1992). However, many liberal-leaning citizens believe the death penalty is unnecessary when rehabilitation is possible (Nice, 1992). Given the conservative-liberal associations present in the bipartisan American political system, I believe that this divide will also occur among Republicans and Democrats. Additionally, the 2016 party platforms regarding capital punishment are split on party lines between Democrats and Republicans, with Republicans favoring and Democrats opposing (Jones, 2018). Echoing the sentiments of both ideology and partisan policy, I expect to see greater support for the death penalty among Republicans than among Democrats.

The third set of variables, “Citizen Demographics”, is defined as “qualities of a specific population, specifically race, gender, age, religion, education level, region of residence, living area, marital status, household income, and employment status”. This set of variables comprises the final causal mechanism within my research. While demographics can take on many different forms, I have chosen to focus specifically on these aforementioned ten variables due to their likelihood in explaining capital punishment support based on previous research. Each of these demographic factors may play a role in explaining the dependent variable, given that population identity generally plays a significant role in the formation of public opinion on many socio-political matters in the United States.

Race refers to the classification of different societal groups based on given shared physical, social, and cultural qualities. Within this project, I will view race in terms of “white” versus “non-white” groups, where the former group comprises members of the non-Hispanic white race and the latter group includes members of every other race excluding those identifying as non-Hispanic white. When looking at racial effects, states with higher populations of “non-white” citizens have historically had higher incarceration rates, increased spending on jails and prisons, and enhanced efforts by law enforcement to control street crime (Jacobs and Carmichael, 2002). This can be explained using the aforementioned “Racial Threat Theory”, in which white populations strive to maintain their dominant position over minority populations through the mediums of law enforcement and enhanced criminal punishment (Jacobs and Carmichael, 2002). Therefore, I expect to observe greater public support for capital punishment among “white” individuals in the United States.

Age refers to the number of years a member of the population has lived. Older citizens are more likely to have experienced periods of time when the death penalty was more frequently legalized among US states. Assuming that this life experience plays a role in shaping opinions on capital punishment, many older Americans may be more likely to favor the death penalty on account of being “set in their ways”. When applying the issue of capital punishment in this context, it becomes likely that those with higher ages can be expected to support the death penalty.

Religion refers to a particular system of faith and/or worship. Christianity is a particular religion dominant in America that focuses on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, and my research includes those who practice Catholicism, Protestantism, and other Christian denominations. Catholics are differentiated from Protestant Christians based on a variety of

conflicting theological beliefs, including but not limited to the authority of the Pope and the form of the Eucharist. The “Other Christian” category comprises all Christians identifying neither as Catholic or Protestant in the US. Additionally, I include both Judaism and other non-specific religions practiced by US citizens. Religion’s impact on public support for capital punishment is hard to predict. An emphasis on the sanctity of life in most major American religions would lead to less support for the death penalty, although the historical effects of Christianity suggest otherwise (Steffen and Cooley, 2014). Combined with other demographic effects found in the relevant literature, the historical emphasis on “power of execution” as a core concept of historical Christian beliefs leads me to expect that Christian citizens will have more favorable outlooks on capital punishment (Vidmar and Ellsworth, 1974; Steffen and Cooley, 2014). However, given that these historical elements have been less present in religions outside of Christianity, I believe that those practicing Judaism or any other religion will show less support for capital punishment.

Gender indicates the particular sex assigned to a citizen at birth. Evidence suggests that women are more averse to violence and punishment when compared to men (Gonzalez-Perez, 2002). Following this logic, it is likely that men are more likely to show greater public support of the death penalty.

Education level refers to the degree of education that a member of the population has obtained in his/her lifetime. When looking at the literature, it has been shown that education level is significantly correlated with social liberalism (Feldman and Johnston, 2014). As capital punishment has typically been less popular among those with liberal ideologies, it becomes more likely that individuals with higher levels of educational attainment would be less supportive of capital punishment.

The region of residence indicates the region within the United States where an individual currently lives. Specifically, I am to analyze the impact of living in the US South. Region is likely to impact capital punishment support through exposure to similar public attitudes over time. Those living in a specific region may gravitate towards a region due to coinciding beliefs, and people within a region may cultivate or reinforce certain attitudes among one another over time. The US South represents the most interesting example within the United States, given the long histories of slavery, political conservatism, and its comparably insular social environment. I believe that those living in the US South will be more likely to support the death penalty.

“Living Area” is designated as whether or not an individual lives in a rural or urban area. Those living in urban areas are more likely than citizens of rural areas to interact with others, implying that they are also more likely to follow newer social trends and ideologies through this increased socialization. While this may indicate that residents of urban regions are more likely to support liberal ideologies that dissuade capital punishment, the increased level of socialization may also make them more sympathetic to the lives of other people in general. Both mechanisms support the implication that urban individuals will be less likely to support the death penalty.

The concept of marital status refers to whether or not an individual has a legally-recognized marital relationship. I aim to look at whether or not an individual is married, and the subsequent impact of marital status on capital punishment support. Theoretically, those that are unmarried are less likely to subscribe to traditional familial values and conservative attitudes, and they are thus less likely to exhibit punitive attitudes towards outgroup populations. This comparative lack of punitive attitudes is likely to translate into lower support for capital punishment, as compared to those who are married. Therefore, I argue that unmarried people will be less likely to support capital punishment.

Household income refers to the quantity of US dollars an individual's household is able to earn in a given year. Those with higher household incomes are generally considered to be wealthier than those with lower incomes, and they have greater power and capability to purchase goods and services as a result. Presumably, this access to greater funds should decrease any need to engage in violence and criminal behavior, and it should theoretically provide individuals with greater legal protection if these circumstances do happen to arise. Individuals with lower incomes, however, are disproportionately affected by the death penalty due to a greater tendency to engage in criminal activity and violence. This implies that wealthier people are less at risk of the death penalty, while those with lower annual incomes are at greater risk. Therefore, I argue that individuals with higher household incomes are more likely to support capital punishment.

Finally, unemployment status indicates whether or not an individual is employed within a given trade or profession. Similar to the concept of household income, those without employment may have less access to money, leading to a greater risk of criminal activity and violence. Additionally, those without a steady job are more likely to have greater time to engage in criminal and/or risky activities that make them more susceptible to criminal behavior. This too can make unemployed individuals more susceptible to the death penalty, as compared to those considered employed. Both mechanisms indicate that those that identify as unemployed will be less likely to favor capital punishment.

Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical logic presented above, I derive multiple testable implications in reference to the research question at-hand.

1. Individuals with higher concern towards perceived criminal activity are more likely to show support for capital punishment.

2. Individuals with lower concern towards perceived criminal activity are less likely to show support for capital punishment.
3. Individuals aligned with the Republican Party are more likely to demonstrate support for capital punishment.
4. Individuals aligned with the Democratic Party are less likely to demonstrate support for capital punishment.
5. White individuals are more likely to show public support for capital punishment.
6. Men are more likely to show public support for capital punishment.
7. Older individuals are more likely to show public support for capital punishment.
8. Individuals who consider themselves to be Catholic are more likely to show public support for capital punishment.
9. Individuals who consider themselves to be “Other Christian” are more likely to show public support for capital punishment.
10. Individuals who consider themselves to be Jewish are less likely to show public support for capital punishment.
11. Individuals who consider themselves to be “Other Religion” are less likely to show public support for capital punishment.
12. Individuals who consider themselves to be Protestant are more likely to show public support for capital punishment.
13. Individuals who have attained higher levels of education are less likely to show public support for capital punishment.
14. Individuals living in the southern region of the US are more likely to show support for capital punishment.

15. Individuals living in urban areas are less likely to show support for capital punishment.
16. Unmarried individuals are less likely to demonstrate support for capital punishment.
17. Individuals with higher household incomes are more likely to show support for capital punishment.
18. Unemployed individuals are less likely to show support for capital punishment.

Short-Term Effects on Support for Capital Punishment

I have argued that twelve variables are likely to explain support for capital punishment on an individual level. However, these variables do not account for events that may have a sizable influence on attitudes in the short-term. For instance, historical events such as mass killings or particularly graphic media coverage of violent crime can affect the ways in which the public views the institution of capital punishment. As a more specific example, the Ted Bundy serial murders likely had more of an effect in the 1980s rather than in other years, causing an atypical spike in support that would be difficult to quantitatively explain. Other potential influences include widespread social and/or political movements, media coverage of botched executions, and depictions of violent crime and execution within popular culture.

Consequently, I plan to examine some of these sporadic, short-term influences to determine how they impact support for the death penalty within a historical context. Specifically, I include a brief qualitative assessment of the empirical findings to account for some of the variation over time resulting from influential policies, events, and sociopolitical factors that may have also contributed to differences in public opinion about capital punishment. While not intended as a full-fledged case study analysis, this additional element allows for some greater flexibility in determining the more short-term influences on public opinion variation while also using a sufficiently large number of cases and observations within the empirical model.

Prior Research and Competing Approaches

My model is unique, as it studies the relative significance of twelve variables that have not been previously evaluated in a single analysis. Moreover, I study the effect of these variables both cross-sectionally in 2020 and longitudinally throughout the past 32 years. The ability to test for significance among such a wide variety of different factors allows for a greater sense of which ones are truly impactful. Additionally, the qualitative explanation of yearly variation using historical events provides a better sense of the socio-economic and political trends that have also impacted capital punishment support.

Secondly, the inclusion of both violent crime rate and partisanship as explanatory variables, in addition to demographic variables, is especially intriguing given their relevance to both criminology and political science. It provides an interdomain look about how these interactions subsequently impact public opinion. In previous research efforts, much of the analysis on capital punishment opinion has been focused mostly on demographic variables, with a select few studies also looking at crime rate as a variable. The inclusion of a more diverse group of explanatory variables provides for a more complete analysis compared to a large majority of the existing research. In using a wider timeframe of study, as well as a larger, more diverse range of explanatory variables, this analysis should yield unique results among established studies on similar topics.

Chapter 4

Research Methods

Research Design

In order to account for the variance in individual-level opinion about capital punishment, I use data collected as part of the American National Election Studies (2021; 2022). The ANES seeks to better understand factors that influence individual vote choice across the American population, and it conducts surveys every two to four years, both prior to and following the general election. The ANES has been running since 1948 as a collaborative effort among Duke University, University of Michigan, The University of Texas at Austin, and Stanford University. This long-term study regarding major questions about the American population's election preferences allows for the possibility of both cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses of individual opinions on the death penalty. In my research, I use data from the ANES Times Series Election Study for the years 1992, 2000, 2008, 2016, and 2020. I also use data specifically from the ANES 2020 Election Study to construct the 2020 cross-sectional model of public support, as it contains additional variables that are not included in the time series study, ones which I would ideally include in the analysis for all years. The 1990 survey includes 2,485 respondents, the 2000 survey has 1,807 respondents, the 2008 survey includes 2,322 respondents, and the 2016 survey contains 4,270 respondents. Finally, the 2020 study consists of a comparably larger 8,280 participants. Each respondent included in the study was contacted through either telephone, teleconference, or computer self-assisted interviews.

The vast majority of the variables utilized in my study come from questions that have been asked repeatedly throughout the duration of the ANES's existence. Each of the survey questions have been pre-tested by experienced field interviewees prior to their addition to the

survey data. Additionally, the reputation of the ANES within the scholarly community is highlighted through its association among some of the world's most prestigious universities, as well as the National Science Foundation. Finally, it should be noted that the ANES provides for a nationally representative sample through its large number of respondents. This makes it possible to generalize the results among the American population.

Using this data from ANES, I conduct three analyses to explain the variation in public support for capital punishment at the individual level. The first of these analyses focuses on the ANES 2020 Election Study, and I will use a logistic regression model to identify variables that account significantly for death penalty support. I conduct this analysis of 2020 separately due to the additional variables present in the 2020 data that are not also included in the time series study. From these results, I will also present a predictive model to evaluate the relative impacts of significant variables on predicted levels of support for capital punishment. I will next use the ANES Time Series Election Study to identify any prominent trends and variation in variable significance over the four additional years of study, encompassing 1992, 2000, 2008, and 2016. Including 2020, each of these selected years represents the previous five election years in which a presidential administration shifted in both victor and party. Presumably, this timespan will account for some interesting and rather turbulent occasions in recent US history. Finally, I conduct a short qualitative analysis explaining potential causes for any longitudinal variation the quantitative model cannot as easily identify.

Analytic Approach

My dependent variable is *Support for Capital Punishment*. To measure this variable, I used the ANES question that asks, "Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons

convicted of murder?” The respondents could either answer, “Favor” or “Oppose”, based on individual opinion. The variable itself is dichotomous, and I have coded the responses so that the variable equals 0 for “Oppose” and 1 for “Support”. Given the dichotomous nature of this variable, I conduct a logistic regression to explain individuals’ support for capital punishment as a function of the following twelve independent variables.

I expect that *Perception of Crime* is a significant factor in determining personal attitudes towards capital punishment. Although the ANES does not ask a question to specifically address individuals’ perceptions, it does ask, “What about dealing with crime? Should federal spending on dealing with crime be increased, decreased, or kept the same?” I argue that an individual’s opinion towards federal spending on crime is indicative of his/her perception of crime as a problem. Fundamentally, the more an individual is concerned about the prospect of crime, the greater likelihood he/she would be in favor of increasing federal spending to prevent crime. I have coded the responses so that -1 represents support for funding to “Decrease”, 1 reflects support for an “Increase”, and a belief that funding should stay the same is coded 0. I will test the effects of both “Increase” and “Decrease” responses against the omitted coded value of 0. Therefore, I believe that those supporting an increase in federal spending will also be more likely to support capital punishment. Likewise, I expect those favoring a decrease in spending will be significantly less likely to show support for the death penalty.

The next independent variable demonstrates individual *Partisan Preference*. I measure partisanship based on individuals’ responses to the question, “What political party are you registered with, if any?” The responses were grouped into the categories, “Democrat”, “Republican”, and “Independent/Other”. I have coded these responses so that -1 represents members of the Democratic Party, 0 represents those considered Independents or belonging to an

“Other” political party, and 1 represents members of the Republican Party. Both Democrats and Republicans will be tested for significance against those who had selected “Independent/Other”, which I have labeled as the reference category. I expect that Republicans will be more likely to support capital punishment, while I expect that Democrats will be less likely to show support.

To operationalize *Race*, ANES asks the respondents to self-identify their respective race and/or ethnicity. The potential responses to this question are “White”, “Black”, “Hispanic”, “Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander”, “Native American/Alaska Native or Other Race”, or “Multiple Races”. For the sake of my analysis, I created a dichotomous variable by grouping together all non-white race responses into a categorical variable titled, “Non-White”, which I have coded as 0 to serve as the reference category. I then compared this group against respondents categorized as “White”, which I have coded as 1. Thus, I expect that those considered “White” will be more supportive of capital punishment than those in the “Non-White” group.

Gender is accounted for by the ANES survey through the question, “What is your sex?” The respondent is able to answer either, “Male” or “Female”. Males are given a value of one, and females are given a value of zero as the reference category. I expect that males will be more likely to support capital punishment than females.

For *Age*, the ANES survey asks the respondent to self-report his/her age. There are no set answers to this question, and the respondents’ provided ages are included as the response values. I decided to keep this variable unfactored within my model, as I am more concerned about the effects of age in a general sense, rather than isolating the impacts of specific age groups. I expect that older citizens will be more likely to support capital punishment.

For *Religion*, ANES asks each respondent to self-report one of the following options: “Protestant”, “Roman Catholic”, “Other Christian”, “Jewish”, “Other Religion”, or “Non-Religious”. In my analysis, I decided to treat religion as a factor variable. I used “Non-Religious” as the reference category, which I coded as 0. For the rest, “Roman Catholic” was coded as 1, “Other Christian” was coded as 2, “Jewish” was coded as 3, “Other Religion” was coded as 4, and “Protestant” was coded with a value of 5. Each of these five categories was tested against the reference category to check for significance. I expect that Roman Catholics, Protestants, and “Other Christians” will be more likely to support capital punishment, and I expect that Jewish people and those practicing other religions will be less likely to show support.

I measure a respondent’s *Education Level* based on their self-report of education level attained. The five categories of response are coded 1 for “Less than High School”, 2 for “High School”, 3 for “Some Post-High School, No Bachelor’s Degree”, 4 for “Bachelor’s Degree”, or 5 for “Graduate Degree”. Within the model, I plan to leave this variable unfactored, as I am primarily interested in observing the effects of increasing educational attainment on capital punishment support. I believe that individuals demonstrating higher levels of educational attainment will be less likely to show support for the death penalty.

Next, for *Region*, ANES asked the respondent to self-report the region of the US where they believe they reside. The respondent could choose between, “Northeast”, “Midwest”, “South”, or “West”. I condensed this data to conform to my hypothesis, for which I believe that citizens in the southern region of the US will be more likely to support capital punishment than in other regions. I created a dichotomous variable indicating whether a respondent lives in the US South (coded 1) or lives elsewhere (coded 0). I expect to see that living in the south is a significant indicator of capital punishment support in my model.

Living Area is measured through the question, “Do you currently live in a rural area, small town, suburb, or a city?” The respondent could choose to answer, “Rural Area”, “Small Town”, “Suburb”, or “City”. Both “Rural Area” and “Small Town” will be categorized as “Rural”, while “Suburb” and “City” will be grouped as “Urban”. Responses that indicate an individual lives in an urban area will be coded as 1, and responses from rural areas will be coded as 0. I believe that those who live in urban areas will be significantly less likely to support the institution of capital punishment in the United States.

Marital Status is measured using the question, “Are you now married, widowed, divorced, separated or never married?” I have condensed the categories into two to indicate whether the respondent is “Unmarried” (coded 1), or “Married” (coded 0). I believe that unmarried citizens will be less likely to support capital punishment.

My next independent variable is *Income*, which is measured through the ANES by asking the respondent to self-report his/her total family income within a variety of pre-selected ranges. There are 22 ordinal ranges of values, which I decided to also leave as unfactored within the model. I am primarily interested in the general effects of increasing income, rather than isolating the effects of select income ranges on the resulting levels of support. From this variable, I expect that as household income increases, death penalty support will increase.

Finally, *Unemployment* is measured using the question, “Were you out of work or laid off at any time during the last six months?” “Yes” responses are coded 1 to indicate unemployment, and “No” responses are coded 0 to indicate employment. I expect that unemployed members of the population will be less likely to support capital punishment.

Limitations

Notably, there are a few impactful limitations within my research model. The very nature of public opinion about capital punishment dictates that demographic and sociopolitical variables may not sufficiently account for the totality of public opinion. While I intentionally chose twelve variables that I believed would systematically explain individuals' support for capital punishment support, there is likely a wide range of potential factors that affect support at the individual level which are difficult to quantify. For example, certain high-profile public events may affect short-term attitudes of support for capital punishment, which can result in variation among years in the longitudinal model. In response, the qualitative analysis is included to better account for factors outside of my twelve independent variables and for information ANES cannot quantify and/or observe. For any noteworthy variation across years of study, I incorporate relevant literature to explain these differences within their historical context.

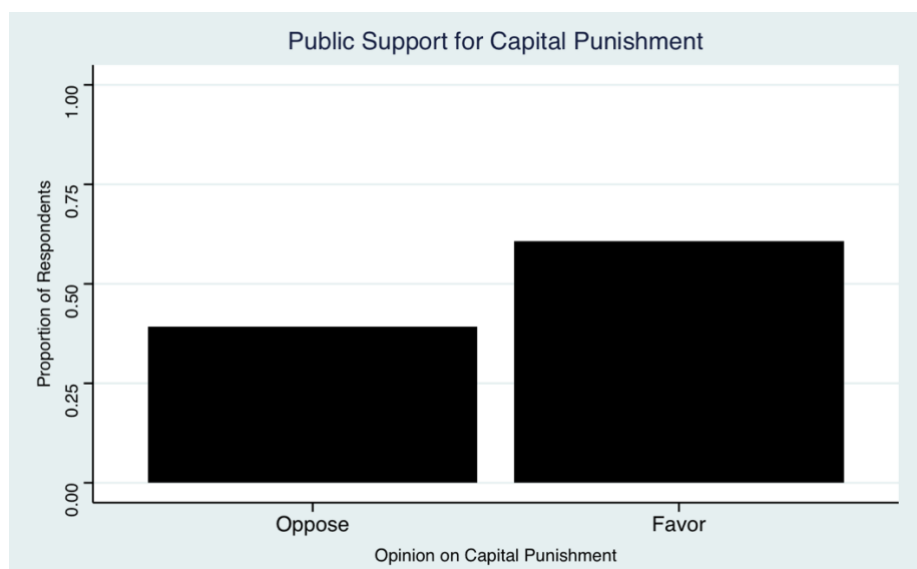
Additionally, the ANES Time Series dataset has a few limitations within the data collection process itself. Over time, the questions asked by ANES change slightly and sometimes get removed altogether. For example, the rural/urban "living area" variable is present within the 2020 questionnaire, but it is notably absent from the time series dataset. Therefore, I had to exclude this variable from the longitudinal model. To a lesser extent, the available survey responses for each question were also slightly different between the cross-sectional and longitudinal models, which I will explain in greater detail in the next chapter. Finally, the number of respondents varies greatly each year within the longitudinal model, with 2020 having a much more expansive respondent pool compared to the other years.

Chapter 5

Research Analysis

The dependent variable in my analysis is support for capital punishment. Respondents could choose to either favor or oppose capital punishment within the survey, resulting in a dichotomous outcome variable. Figure 1 shows the level of support for capital punishment in the 2020 sample. Among the 8,280 respondents, 60% of respondents are in favor of the death penalty, while 40% oppose. These results are consistent with the general findings displayed by Pew Research Center's 2021 American Trends Poll, in which 60% of surveyed Americans were also found to favor capital punishment.

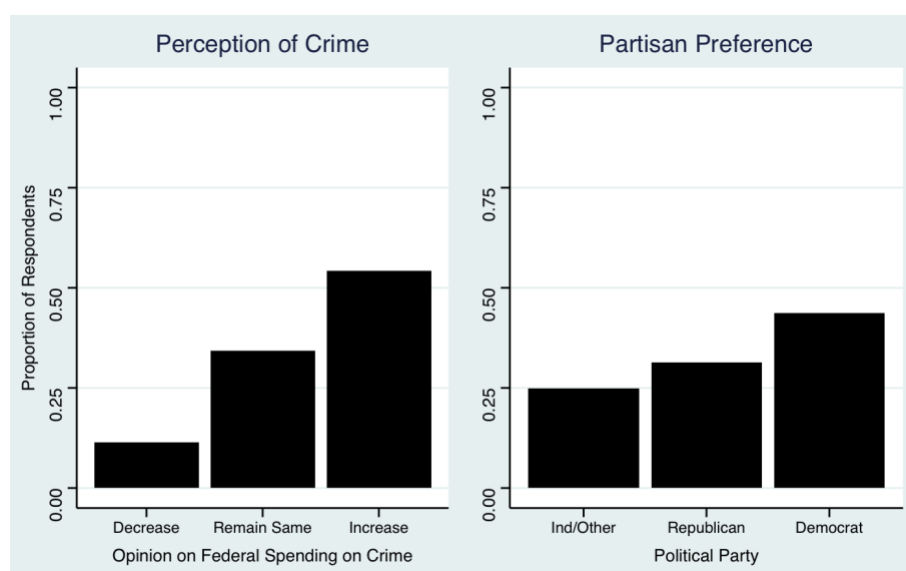
Figure 1: Univariate Distribution of Support for Capital Punishment (2020)



My independent variables similarly show response variation among the surveyed population. While the exact relative frequencies are reported within Appendix A, Figure 2 shows

the distributions for perception of crime and partisan preference, both of which are expected to have a substantial effect on support for the death penalty. When looking at the distribution for crime spending, 54% of respondents believe that spending should increase, as opposed to only 12% who believe it should decrease. The distribution for partisan preference highlights that 44% of respondents identify as Democrats, 31% as Republicans, and 25% as Independents/Other.

Figure 2: Non-Demographic Univariate Distributions (2020)



In addition to the aforementioned independent variables, the survey distributions show that most of the respondents are female, rather than male. In terms of race, 73% of respondents reported as “white”, while only 27% of respondents indicated any racial group besides “white”. The vast majority have also acquired at least some post-high school education or more, and about 75% are employed. In the distribution for religion, Protestants comprise the majority, followed by the non-religious, then Roman Catholics, other Christians, followers of other religions, and finally those of the Jewish faith. Just over half of the respondents indicated that they are

currently married, while only about 25% claim to never have been married at all. Region of residency appears split fairly evenly, with the US South having a comparably larger percentage of respondents than the other three. About two-thirds of respondents indicated that they live in urban areas rather than rural areas. Finally, neither of the age or income distributions seemed to be particularly noteworthy, with income having a uniform distribution and age demonstrating more of a normal-shaped distribution among the respondents.

Multivariate Analysis for 2020 Data

Table 1: Logistic Regression Model for 2020 Data

Independent Variable:	Dependent Variable: Death Penalty Support
Increase Crime Spending	0.892*** (0.132)
Decrease Crime Spending	-1.024*** (0.195)
Republican	0.793*** (0.174)
Democrat	-0.547*** (0.141)
White	0.129 (0.142)
Male	0.299** (0.123)
Age	-0.002 (0.004)
Roman Catholic	0.030 (0.183)

Other Christian	0.177 (0.218)
Jewish	0.044 (0.317)
Other Religion	-0.590** (0.276)
Protestant	0.230 (0.166)
Education Level	-0.320*** (0.063)
Lives in South	-0.239* (0.134)
Lives in Urban Area	-0.587*** (0.139)
Unmarried	-0.158 (0.133)
Income	-0.007 (0.012)
Unemployed	-0.054 (0.156)
Constant	1.693*** (0.367)

Observations	2,607
Log Likelihood	-1,492.625
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3,023.249

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 1 presents results of my analysis of support for capital punishment. The figures shown are coefficient estimates from the logistic regression, and standard errors appear in

parentheses. Additionally, it should be noted that the effect sizes of the coefficient estimates cannot be directly interpreted in a logistic regression model due to the nonlinear transformation of probabilities involved. However, I can use the results of this logistic regression model to determine the direction of the effects of the variables and their statistical significance.

In support of my hypothesis, the data show that individual attitudes toward federal spending on crime have a statistically significant effect on support for the death penalty. Specifically, those who favor increased spending are significantly more likely to support the death penalty. Those who favor less spending are significantly less likely to support capital punishment.

Partisanship is also a significant indicator of support for capital punishment. As hypothesized, Republicans are significantly more likely to support capital punishment than the Independent/Other Party group. Likewise, members of the Democratic Party are significantly less likely to support the death penalty compared to the reference category.

Both education level and living area also demonstrate significance in the model. Specifically, individuals with higher educational attainment are significantly less likely to support the death penalty. Upon analysis of living area, those that live in urban areas are significantly less likely to favor capital punishment as compared to citizens in rural areas. Both of these results also correspond to my expectations.

In support of my hypothesis, men are also significantly more likely to favor the death penalty than women. Furthermore, the model shows that citizens in the US South are significantly less likely to support capital punishment. This result surprised me, as capital punishment is more often legalized by states in the South compared to other regions in the United States. Not only did this result not support my hypothesis, but it also contradicts some of

the historical and cultural theories proposed by the existing literature. It is possible that within the scope of the model, there are other variables that might account for the differences between the south and the non-south. Much of the south is predominantly Republican, tends to be more rural than other regions, and generally has lower rates of education. By accounting for these effects separately within the model, it may explain why the US South has this seemingly counter-intuitive influence on support for the death penalty.

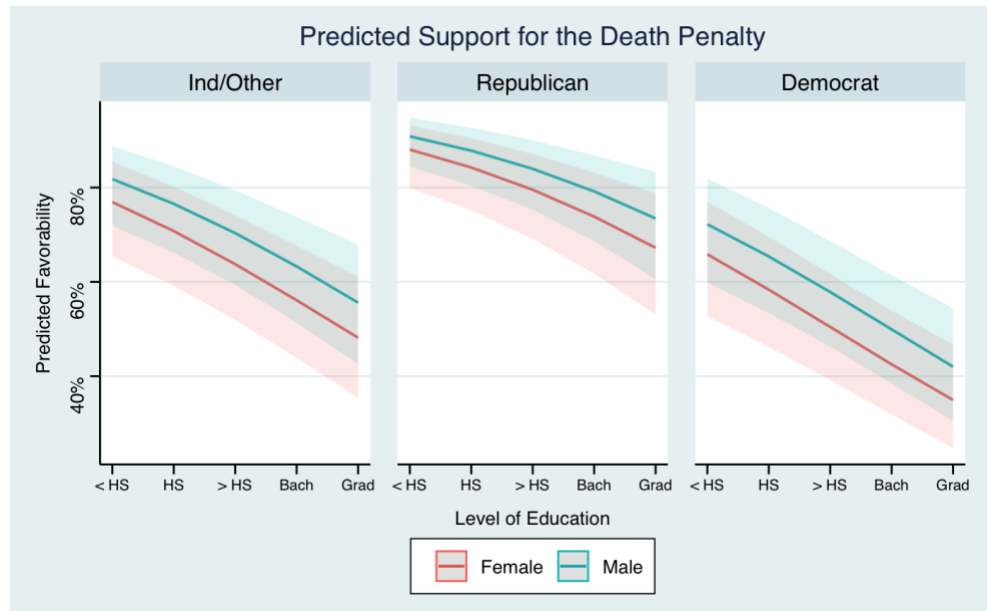
Religion has a limited impact on attitudes towards capital punishment. Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and all “Other Christian” denominations are not significantly more or less likely to support the death penalty compared to those who are non-religious. However, those who practice religions outside of Christianity and Judaism are significantly less likely to support capital punishment. Presumably, this category includes other prominent religions such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. While my expectation for the “Other Religion” category was supported, my model did not adhere to any of my other hypothesized expectations for religion.

Upon observation of race, citizens who identify as white are not significantly more likely to support the death penalty than those considered “non-white”. Again, I was surprised by this result, given historical racial tensions in the United States and the ideas of “Racial Threat Theory” as presented in the existing literature (Jacobs and Carmichael, 2002). Consequently, my hypothesis was not supported by this finding.

Among the other independent variables that showed no significant influence on support for the death penalty, citizens with higher household incomes are not more likely to favor capital punishment than those with lower household incomes. Additionally, both marital status and age do not significantly impact support for capital punishment. Finally, unemployed individuals are

not significantly different from employed citizens in regards to their support for the death penalty. For each of these four variables, my hypotheses are unsupported by the model.

Figure 3: Predictive Model of Support (2020)



To present the relative impacts of statistically significant variables in my regression model, I decided to construct the predictive plot above. Predicted favorability is the probability that an individual will support the death penalty for all values of each variable included in the plot. Figure 3 shows the combined effects of three significant variables: partisan preference, gender, and education level. Education level is represented by five categories: “Less than High School Degree”, “High School Degree”, “Some Post-High School, No Bachelor’s Degree”, “Bachelor’s Degree”, and “Graduate Degree”. Each category for education is abbreviated in the plot above. Next, partisan preference is represented by three categories: “Independent/Other”, “Republican”, and “Democrat”. Gender is represented using its two categories: “Male” and

“Female”. Finally, all other variables are set to their reference categories (if categorical) or their mean value (if interval) for purposes of calculating the predictions. The plot above measures the effects of each category of these three variables for an individual that does not believe federal spending on crime should be changed, is non-white, is approximately 50 years-old, is non-religious, lives in the non-south, lives in a rural area, is married, has a yearly household income of approximately \$65,000, and is employed.

Several interesting observations can be made from this plot. At any level of education, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to support the death penalty. This implies that Democrats with no high school degree are still less likely than Republicans with a Master’s Degree to support capital punishment. Additionally, Republican men are more likely than Democrat men to support the death penalty for any given level of education, with the same trend applying to women. This finding highlights the sizable influence partisanship has over capital punishment support, essentially negating the effects of two other significant variables.

Furthermore, and perhaps most interesting, the slopes of each plot vary greatly on the basis of partisanship and gender. While Democrats have straight, negative slopes, Republicans have these comparably less-steep, downward curves. This implies that Republicans in 2020 are less susceptible to changing their beliefs on capital punishment on the basis of educational attainment alone than are Democrats. In addition, the slopes for Republican men and Republican women are also quite different, with women demonstrating a greater predicted drop in capital punishment support than men as they both increase in education level. These findings show that educational attainment affects support for capital punishment in a varied manner, with Republican men especially resistant to the effect of increased education on death penalty support.

Comparison of Multivariate Models Over Time

As noted in the previous chapter, there are a few differences between the cross-sectional 2020 model in Table 1 and the longitudinal model below in Table 2. Perhaps the most impactful of these differences is the fact that the rural/urban “living area” variable has been omitted. Unfortunately, there is no variable that ANES has collected over the entire period of study that accounts for urbanism. As this variable has been omitted, there is now a greater number of observations present for the year 2020 within the longitudinal model than in the cross-sectional model, also accounting for some of the variation among results.

In addition, the 2020 ANES Survey and the ANES Time Series Survey asked slightly different questions over time regarding religiosity. Consequently, the available time-series survey responses are limited to “Catholic”, “Jewish”, “Protestant”, and “Other/None”. By combining the “Other Christian”, “Non-Religious”, and “Other Religion” categories from the 2020 model into one category, the effects of religion are different in the longitudinal model. As I chose “Other/None” to be my reference category, only Catholics, Protestants and Jewish people will be present in the table below.

Table 2: Logistic Regression Models Over Time (1992 – 2020)

		Dependent Variable:				

		Death Penalty Support				
		1992	2000	2008	2016	2020
Independent Variable:		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

Increase Crime Spending	0.269 (0.175)	0.205 (0.185)	0.456** (0.187)	0.243** (0.115)	0.788*** (0.093)
Decrease Crime Spending	-0.583 (0.406)	-0.872** (0.364)	-0.860** (0.384)	-0.579*** (0.221)	-0.751*** (0.142)
Republican	0.545** (0.234)	0.509** (0.234)	0.578** (0.261)	0.586*** (0.166)	0.961*** (0.119)
Democrat	-0.448** (0.177)	-0.445** (0.196)	-0.430** (0.188)	-0.637*** (0.129)	-0.569*** (0.098)
White	0.968*** (0.176)	0.628*** (0.196)	0.774*** (0.178)	0.297** (0.136)	0.252** (0.098)
Male	0.622*** (0.164)	0.422** (0.172)	0.613*** (0.168)	0.126 (0.118)	0.172** (0.087)
Age	-0.003 (0.007)	-0.010 (0.007)	0.001 (0.007)	0.005 (0.004)	0.002 (0.003)
Catholic	-0.024 (0.235)	0.240 (0.255)	0.308 (0.245)	0.136 (0.152)	0.072 (0.122)
Jewish	0.484 (0.558)	-0.042 (0.521)	-0.867 (0.532)	-0.661* (0.375)	-0.029 (0.237)
Protestant	0.394* (0.208)	0.031 (0.223)	0.695*** (0.199)	0.102 (0.139)	0.190* (0.101)
Education Level	-0.457*** (0.100)	-0.259** (0.108)	-0.260** (0.113)	-0.345*** (0.081)	-0.324*** (0.058)
Lives in South Region	-0.242 (0.167)	-0.087 (0.176)	0.308* (0.174)	0.105 (0.119)	-0.077 (0.091)
Unmarried	-0.033 (0.178)	-0.099 (0.182)	0.044 (0.185)	-0.050 (0.125)	-0.179* (0.091)
Income	0.148 (0.092)	-0.004 (0.095)	0.248** (0.101)	0.124* (0.065)	-0.031 (0.047)
Unemployed	-0.165 (0.260)	0.144 (0.312)	0.333 (0.256)	-0.102 (0.192)	0.039 (0.104)

Constant	1.214** (0.541)	1.468*** (0.550)	-0.681 (0.578)	0.983** (0.395)	0.927*** (0.270)
Observations	1,203	985	1,251	2,501	5,259
Log Likelihood	-523.094	-516.145	-680.007	-1,450.047	-3,092.628
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,078.188	1,064.290	1,392.014	2,932.093	6,217.257

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2 identifies a few variables that are consistently significant over time. Again, the figures shown are coefficient estimates from the logistic regression, and standard errors appear in parentheses. Based on the results, Republicans are significantly more likely to favor capital punishment in each of the five years included in the model. In contrast, Democrats are significantly less likely to support capital punishment in each yearly model. As well as supporting my hypotheses, this finding implies that partisan preference has remained a consistent influence on support for capital punishment over the past 32 years.

In addition to partisan preference, race and education level are the only two other variables to demonstrate significance in each yearly model. Consistently over time, citizens who identify as white are significantly more likely to support the death penalty than those considered “non-white”. In addition, individuals with higher educational attainment are less likely to favor the death penalty in each year. Both of these findings also provide empirical support for my hypotheses.

Next, Table 2 indicates that certain variables fluctuate in significance over the period of study. Perception of crime, for example, is not significantly related to attitudes toward capital punishment in 1992. In 2000, individuals who favor a decrease in federal crime spending are significantly less likely to favor the death penalty, while citizens favoring an increase in federal

crime spending are not significantly more or less likely to support capital punishment than those who believe spending should stay the same. In each year analyzed from 2008 on, those favoring a decrease in spending are significantly less likely to favor the death penalty, and those favoring an increase in spending are significantly more likely to support the death penalty.

Among the other variables that vary in significance over time, men are significantly more likely than women to favor capital punishment in every year besides 2016. When analyzing the effects of religion over time, only Judaism and Protestantism demonstrate any significance in the model. Individuals of the Jewish faith are significantly less likely to favor capital punishment than the “Other/None” category, but only in 2016. Likewise, Protestants are significantly more likely to support capital punishment only in the years 1992, 2008, and 2020. In contrast, Catholics do not exhibit significantly different preferences toward the death penalty than those in the base category in any models during the period of study.

Additionally, citizens who live in the US South are significantly more likely to support the death penalty than those who live outside the South in 2008, but in no other yearly model. Unmarried individuals are less likely to favor the death penalty than married individuals, but only in 2020. Individuals with higher household incomes are more likely to support the death penalty than (those in the omitted category) in 2008 and 2016, but the effect of income is does not significantly affect attitudes toward capital punishment in every other included year.

Finally, Table 2 includes two variables that remain insignificant across all years within the timeframe of analysis. My analysis suggests that unemployment and age do not significantly influence support for capital punishment for any of the years analyzed in the model. Neither of these findings are able to lend any support to my hypotheses.

From these results, one can determine which variables are constant influences on support for capital punishment, which variables consistently lack any effect, and which variables demonstrate variation over time. Both Republican and white individuals have been consistently more likely to favor the death penalty, while Democratic citizens and those with higher educational attainment have been consistently less likely to demonstrate support. Furthermore, age, unemployment, and Catholicism have consistently been wholly unimpactful towards attitudes on capital punishment over time. But what about variables that exhibit longitudinal variation? While the model is able to identify both consistency and variation over time to understand which variables systematically affect attitudes towards capital punishment, it is much less capable of explaining any such variation.

I observe three particularly interesting occurrences for which I believe can be better explained within a historical context. First, I was struck by the variation in federal spending on crime in 2000, as favoring a decrease in spending was a significant indicator of death penalty support, while favoring an increase was completely insignificant. As neither category had a significant influence on death penalty attitudes in 1992, I became curious about potential causes for this peculiar variation both in 2000 and over time.

Secondly, individuals with higher household incomes are significantly more likely to support the death penalty in only 2008 and 2016. Among these two years, income has a greater degree of significance in 2008. While income is significant at the $p < 0.05$ -level in 2008, it only shows significance at the $p < 0.10$ -level in 2016. Additionally, the coefficient estimate in 2008 has double the size of effect as compared to 2016, implying greater influence within the model.

Lastly, the influence of partisan preference becomes more potent beginning in 2016. For both Republicans and Democrats, the effect of partisan preference is significant at the $p < 0.01$ -

level in both 2016 and 2020, while it demonstrates comparably less significance at the $p < 0.05$ -level each year prior. Furthermore, the coefficient estimates for partisan preference are comparably larger in 2016 and 2020, with Republicans in 2020 having one of the largest positive coefficient estimates in the entire model. The following qualitative analysis strives to better explain these three intriguing instances of variation as products of sporadic influential events across recent history.

Qualitative Analysis

2000: Innocence Movement

The late 1990s and early 2000s were pivotal in the formation of a widespread “innocence movement” within American culture. This effort was focused on exonerating wrongfully convicted individuals by definitively proving their innocence in a court of law, as well as implementing policy and legislative reform to prevent future miscarriages of justice (Roberts, 2018). The combined effects of small-scale innocence efforts, improved DNA technologies, popular backlash against police corruption, landmark Supreme Court decisions, and a newfound cultural fascination all culminated in a much larger shift in the social awareness of innocence (Baumgartner et al., 2008). Around the same time, the *New York Times* began mass-producing stories on issues of innocence and defects present within the criminal justice system, captivating much of the general population (Baumgartner et al., 2008). By the year 2000, everyday Americans were well-versed in concepts related to the fallibility of the criminal justice system, such as “prosecutorial misconduct”, “evidence suppression”, and “‘jailhouse snitch’ testimony”, among many others (Baumgartner et al., 2008).

Additionally, the popularization of the innocence movement led to questions about the safety, ethical nature, and overall usefulness of the death penalty. According to Norris (2017), “death penalty convictions created more public attention for wrongful convictions than any others”. In subscribing to the interests of the public, the notion of innocence became the main platform for death penalty abolitionists, and it helped spawn anti-death penalty movements across the country. In 1998, Northwestern University held the first ever National Conference on Wrongful Convictions and the Death Penalty, furthering the attention garnered by the issue of capital punishment among academics (DPIC, 2023). In 2000, the Republican governor of Illinois, a previously staunch supporter of capital punishment, publicly imposed a statewide moratorium on executions and commuted all death sentences to life in prison (Baumgartner et al., 2008). According to Gallup (2006), opposition towards the death penalty jumped nearly 10% in polls of the American public from 1991 to 2000. Clearly the ideas of the innocence movement had a sizable impact on public support for capital punishment.

In explaining my own model of support for capital punishment, I find that the effect of attitudes toward federal spending on crime on support for capital punishment took an interesting turn in 2000. Specifically, 2000 marks the first year that attitudes about spending on crime shape individuals’ views about the death penalty. However, unlike the years that follow, in 2000, individuals favoring a decrease in federal spending on crime were significantly less likely to support the death penalty, while favoring an increase in spending had no statistically significant effect. So how can this be explained? Based on the relevant literature, I believe that the prominence of the innocence movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s strengthened societal opposition towards the death penalty. Individual perception of crime, as well as opinions towards federal spending on crime, are likely to be tied to the ideas of the innocence movement. Those

favoring lower federal spending on crime, for example, are especially likely to resonate with the calls for criminal justice reform and abolition of capital punishment of the late 1990s. Bolstered by these ideas, I argue that individuals favoring a decrease in spending on crime prevention would theoretically be even less likely to support the death penalty in 2000 as compared to 1992, contributing to its significance within the model.

In contrast, there was no analogous movement in favor of capital punishment in the 1990s. The existing literature does not identify a similarly influential counter-movement to the “discovery of innocence”, and there is no discernable reason why individuals who favor increased federal spending on crime would be more likely to support the death penalty in 2000 than 1992. Fittingly, the results of the model demonstrate no change in significance across these eight years. As the innocence movement was likely much more potent and influential for individuals who prefer to decrease federal spending on crime, it makes sense that they would be significantly less likely to support the death penalty in 2000, while increasing spending would remain an inconsequential factor in explaining support. Accordingly, I argue that the innocence movement accounts for some of the variation in statistical significance between those who have opposing opinions about federal spending on crime in 2000.

2008: Financial Crisis

In the years prior to 2008, the United States housing market relied heavily on selling “subprime mortgages”, which were mortgages made to homebuyers with low incomes and/or poor credit histories (Comiskey and Madhogarhia, 2009). Banks, savings and loans companies, and mortgage companies all profited mightily from the fees and prepaid interest of these risky mortgages, and aggressive Wall Street investment banks would spend tens of billions of dollars

per year purchasing as many as possible (Comiskey and Madhogarhia, 2009). As investment banks were willing to buy mortgages despite high levels of risk, these banks and companies assumed zero risk from selling these mortgages to untrustworthy or uncredible homebuyers (Comiskey and Madhogarhia, 2009). When the homeowners inevitably couldn't pay these predatory mortgages, they defaulted on their payments en masse, culminating in the 2008 housing bubble that collapsed the United States economy (Comiskey and Madhogarhia, 2009).

Known today as "The Great Recession", the impact of 2008 affected far more than just banks and recent homebuyers. Data from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) suggests that median household income suffered the greatest one-year drop in recorded American history (Shierholz, 2009). Furthermore, EPI data finds that the median individual became significantly poorer from the events of 2008, regardless of class, race, and ethnicity (Shierholz, 2009).

So, how does this affect attitudes on capital punishment? Notably, 2008 is the earliest year in my own model in which income is a significant indicator of support for the death penalty. Specifically, in both 2008 and 2016, individuals with higher household incomes are more likely to favor the death penalty. In contrast, income is insignificant in 1992, 2000, and 2020, while 2016 demonstrates a comparably lower level of significance than 2008. Additionally, the coefficient estimate for 2008 is about double the size of the estimate in 2016, which implies that income has a much greater influence on support for capital punishment in the 2008 model. Therefore, the recession and its widespread impact on the American population may be relevant in explaining the effects of income on support for the death penalty in 2008.

Among the various impacts of the recession, a greater number of individuals suffered from expected economic insecurity in 2008, as opinions on future economic stability were adversely affected by widespread losses in income, occupational stability, and savings (Lehmann

and Pickett, 2017). Importantly, Lehmann and Pickett (2017) found that lower-income individuals were more likely than other income groups to experience expected economic insecurity in 2008, and that those with greater expected insecurity were less supportive of the death penalty. Moreover, compared to the other years in my model, EPI data indicates that the United States population in 2008 was generally poorer and thus more likely to experience expected economic insecurity (Shierholz, 2009). With a greater concentration of lower-income individuals in the population, and with lower-income individuals being significantly less likely to support the death penalty, it is possible that a greater discrepancy exists between lower and higher-income individuals in attitudes towards capital punishment in 2008. Thus, the attitudes of higher-income individuals towards the death penalty may appear more “different” than those of lower-income individuals. I argue that this resulting discrepancy across income levels among attitudes towards the death penalty may explain the comparably higher coefficient estimates and variable significance in 2008.

2016: Presidential Election

Few American citizens believed Donald Trump to be a serious political competitor when he announced his bid for the presidency in 2015. Over the course of the 2016 election, his blunt rhetoric and lack of political correctness won him extensive appeal among Republican voters across the population (Fisher, 2016). Demographically, Trump’s base of support varied even from other Republican candidates at the time, as he activated a segment of the Republican electorate that had long felt ignored in the political process (Fisher, 2016). Among the many factors for his success in the 2016 election, Trump enthusiastically embraced a few key issues, mobilizing and exploiting the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Obama, and anti-globalization

sentiments popular among his base of support (Jacobson, 2017). To many of his supporters, it didn't matter if the claims Trump made were untrue, misinformed, or even self-contradictory (Jacobson, 2017). Criticism by the media and other "establishment politicians" only strengthened the appeal of Trump in the eyes of his supporters (Jacobson, 2017).

One major consequence of the 2016 presidential election was the corresponding increase in partisan polarization. As argued by Nacos et al. (2020), Trump demonstrated the characteristics of a populist, an autocrat, and a demagogue. As a demagogue, he effectively established his Republican supporters as his loyal ingroup, while isolating Democrats and political opponents as his disloyal outgroup (Nacos et al., 2020). He then used this outgroup as a scapegoat for all important political, social, and cultural problems associated with his supporters (Nacos et al., 2020). His rhetoric vilified Democrats in the eyes of his Republican support base, effectively dividing the American population on partisan lines (Nacos et al., 2020). As summarized by Carothers (2019), "The election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in November 2016 vividly demonstrated and increased the severity of polarization."

Prior to the 2016 election, Democrats adopted a new party platform, in which they called for an end to the death penalty in the United States (Jones, 2018). Moreover, 2016 public opinion polls demonstrate that a clear majority of Democrats opposed capital punishment (Jones, 2018). In direct contrast, the Republican Party's 2016 platform vehemently affirms the death penalty's constitutionality and its importance in fighting crime (Jones, 2018). Accordingly, a majority of Republican citizens also indicated support for capital punishment in 2016 (Brenan, 2024). In addition to the amplified polarization between Democrats and Republicans, it is apparent that attitudes on capital punishment were similarly polarized on account of party platform and public

opinion. As more individuals began to identify and vote on party lines, partisan influences became a more significant indicator of ideological preference (Dancey and Sheagley, 2018).

Based on the existing research, I believe that the 2016 presidential election contributed to a much more polarized political climate than was present in any of the preceding years included in my model. Therefore, I argue that the increased polarization between Republicans and Democrats during the 2016 election contributed to a heightened influence of partisanship on the already-divisive issue of capital punishment. According to the data in Table 2, the coefficient estimates for both parties in 2016 and 2020 are comparably larger than in previous years, indicating a greater impact on death penalty support. Within a historical context, these findings suggest that the polarized political climate of 2016 may have exacerbated the influence of partisanship on individual-level support for capital punishment in both 2016 and 2020.

Implications

Among the three analyses conducted in this chapter, each is able to provide valuable insight into the explanation of individual-level support for capital punishment. Taken together, my cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses show that partisan preference, attitudes toward federal spending on crime, race, gender, and education level are critical to explaining attitudes toward the death penalty. Specifically, support for the death penalty is most pronounced among those who are white, male, Republican, and supportive of increasing federal spending on crime. Far less support is apparent among those who are Democrats, highly-educated, and supportive of decreasing federal spending on crime. The short qualitative analysis I present illustrates how historical context can also influence support for the death penalty among individuals. I was able to identify and detail three distinct historical occurrences that may have impacted the

significance levels of variables in my model. While I was able to identify a few interesting connections between historical events and their potential impacts on public support for the death penalty, these relationships are purely speculative. In future studies conducted on this topic, I believe that it would be interesting to explore case study research in greater depth. While much existing research has focused on large-scale, systematic influences on capital punishment support, I believe that there is still much to be learned about history's smaller-scale impacts on attitudes towards the death penalty.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

As Kenneth Eugene Smith's execution serves as a recent reminder of the tense public discourse surrounding capital punishment, it is clear that public opinion is split amongst the American public. While contentious arguments over social media and various news outlets may publicize this issue, state legislatures represent the primary mechanism for policy reform. Throughout 2024, Missouri, Kentucky and Ohio all plan to vote on bills that seek to abolish the death penalty in their respective states (DPIC, 2024). Furthermore, legislators in West Virginia and North Carolina plan to introduce bills that would expand the use of the death penalty statewide (DPIC, 2024). As citizens have the power to directly elect state legislators to represent their interests, they are able to collectively impact policy on capital punishment. In this context, the study of how attitudes towards capital punishment are influenced by demographic and sociopolitical factors is highly important in understanding the future of death penalty policy.

My analyses of individuals' support for capital punishment demonstrate that political party affiliation, education level, and attitudes towards federal spending on crime are among the most powerful indicators of where individuals stand on this issue. Those in favor of increasing spending, as well as members of the Republican Party, are significantly more likely to favor capital punishment. In direct contrast, individuals with greater educational attainment, favoring a decrease in federal spending on crime, and supporting the Democratic Party are significantly more likely to oppose the death penalty. These three variables are the most indicative of whether an individual chooses to support the death penalty, both within the cross-sectional 2020 model and over the majority of years included within the longitudinal analysis.

Other highly significant factors over time include gender, income, and race, although each was subject to variation in respective levels of significance over time. Additionally, urbanism was found to be highly significant in the 2020 model, although data restrictions did not allow for its inclusion in the longitudinal analysis. Finally, it is likely that variation in significant predictors of attitudes can be attributed to social, political, and economic events during the time period. These events may include, but are not limited to, the development and popularity of innocence movements in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the 2008 economic downturn, and the increase in political polarization during the 2016 presidential election.

Public support for capital punishment remains important for its impact on the American political landscape. Accordingly, the results of my analyses indicate just how significant partisanship has been in determining public opinion on capital punishment. Partisan conflict appears especially influential on attitudes about capital punishment throughout the past decade, and growing polarization may make support for the death penalty increasingly predictable across party lines. Both Democrats and Republicans exhibited larger coefficient estimates in 2016 and 2020 than in other years, indicating partisanship's increased size of effect in explaining attitudes towards the death penalty. Furthermore, relevant literature argues that the 2016 presidential election contributed to a heightened climate of political polarization, possibly explaining the magnified effects of partisanship on public support for the death penalty in the modern era.

Using the 2020 cross-sectional model, I am also able to predict the likelihood of individuals supporting the death penalty. In doing so, I constructed a predictive plot assessing the relative influences of partisanship, education, and gender on resulting attitudes towards capital punishment. Interestingly, I find that increased educational attainment is less influential on Republicans, when compared to Democrats, on shaping attitudes towards the death penalty. As

capital punishment represents only one of many sociopolitical issues divided by core party ideology, I speculate that education may have a similar effect on other divisive matters. In the context of the current American political climate, these findings have fascinating implications not only for capital punishment, but potentially other core partisan issues as well.

My analysis, while insightful, is not without its limitations. Firstly, my individual-level results cannot truly be generalized to the state-level, meaning that I cannot draw implications about impacts on state-level policy. Had I been able to access each respondent's state within the dataset, I would have had greater ability to make predictions about state support for capital punishment, which is a more direct determinant of state policy implications than individual-level attributes. In any attempts at future research, state-level data on capital punishment support would be a priority. Secondly, I would have preferred for the longitudinal analysis to begin sometime prior to the 1990s in order to better measure the impact of partisanship on resulting support. Historically, the age of increased partisanship began in the 1990s, and it would have been interesting to compare the effects of a less partisan political climate on capital punishment support. The ANES Time Series dataset only included data dating back to 1990 for several of my variables, making 1992 the earliest usable presidential election year. Finally, the qualitative explanations for variation in variable significance are not causal mechanisms, merely hypothesized historical factors that correlate with observed variation over time. Future research on this topic may examine the impact of specific events, such as the 2008 financial crisis, in greater depth through the use of a case-study format.

Appendix A
2020 Descriptive Statistics

Independent Variable	Frequency	Relative Frequency
Crime Spending		
Remain Same	2825	34.3%
Increase	4457	54.2%
Decrease	945	11.5%
Political Party		
None / Independent	1029	24.2%
Democrat	1861	43.7%
Republican	1336	31.4%
Other	33	0.8%
Race		
White	5963	72.9%
Black	726	8.9%
Hispanic	762	9.3%
Asian	284	3.5%
Native American	172	2.1%
Other Race	271	3.3%
Gender		
Male	3763	45.7%
Female	4450	54.2%
Religion		
Not Religious	1794	22.0%
Jewish	188	2.3%

Roman Catholic	1046	20.1%
Protestant	321	38.9%
Other Christian	3180	12.8%
Other Religion	1643	3.9%
Education Level		
No High School Degree	376	4.6%
High School Graduate	1336	16.4%
Some Post-High School	2790	34.2%
Bachelor's Degree	2055	25.2%
Graduate Degree	1592	19.5%
Region		
Northeast	1396	16.9%
Midwest	1997	24.1%
South	3081	37.2%
West	1806	21.8%
Living Area (Urbanism)		
Rural	2957	35.7%
Urban	5323	64.3%
Marital Status		
Currently Married	4322	52.2%
Never Married	2007	24.2%
Other Marital Status	1951	23.6%
Unemployment Status		

Unemployed	1482	25.9%
Employed	4233	74.1%

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