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Sydney Young

sydneyyoung@mail.umsl.edu

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Recommended Citation

Young, Sydney, "Public Opinion on Capital Punishment" (2020). *Undergraduate Research Symposium*. 26.
<https://irl.umsl.edu/urs/26>

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University of Missouri-St. Louis

Political Science 3330

12/01/2019

Sydney Young

Public Opinion on Capital Punishment

Abstract

The death penalty in the United States has its set of controversies from the people who support and those who oppose the policy. I want to examine how the death penalty and public opinion has changed over time. I also want to examine if there are statistical differences in regard to gender and political party. I would also like to compare different generations, such as millennials and baby boomers, to see if they vary in support for the death penalty. The last variable I would like to analyze is difference in regard to race and ethnicities.

As a Deputy Juvenile Officer, this topic is important to me because I work daily in the criminal justice field. Advancements in criminal reform have been happening for the juvenile world, but I am not as up to date on issues facing the adult courts.

In the juvenile world, criminal justice is restorative and rehabilitative. In the adult world, the system is punitive based. Since I work on the side of rehabilitation, I am interested in seeing how others view the criminal justice world. This is important to me because public opinion affects the legislation on how I am supposed to fulfill my job duties.

The death penalty argument is also important to me because of the number of individuals on death row, the fact that there have been people on death row who have been exonerated, and there are racial disparities in the implementation. Capital punishment is legal in 29 of the 50 states and according the Criminal Justice Project of the NAACP, currently 2,6734 people are on death row (Death Penalty Fast Facts, 2019). There have been 165 death row exonerations since 1973 with 29 of those exonerations being from Florida (Death Penalty Fast Facts, 2019). According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the death penalty is disproportionate to people of color by 43%. Another discrepancy mentioned by the ACLU is that there have been 12 cases where a white defendant was executed for the murder of a black victim compared to

178 black defendants executed for the murders of white victims (Race and Death Penalty). The sheer number of individuals on death row with a staggering number of exonerations, and racial discrepancies make the topic important and interesting and it will be informative to see if public opinion has changed when new information comes to life.

The statistical analyses in this study examined different demographic groups regarding support for capital punishment. This research compared race, sex, and party affiliation to see if they are in favor of the death penalty, how important is the issue of capital punishment, and how firm they are in their opinions. On a broad analysis, Whites, Republicans, and men tend to be more in favor of the use of capital punishment, but Blacks on the other hand are more likely to oppose it and are more firm in their opinion.

Introduction

Capital punishment is a controversial issue with people arguing that it should be outlawed and others stating it is acceptable. Currently, 106 of 195 countries have abolished the death penalty for any crime, 7 countries have outlawed the use of capital punishment for ordinary crimes, 29 countries are abolitionist in practice which means countries retain the death penalty, but they have not executed anyone in the past 10 years, and then there are 56 countries that allow the use of capital punishment (Abolitionist and Retentionist Countries). The United States of America is one of the 56 countries that allow the death penalty. However, although the United States is considered as allowing capital punishment, many states have outlawed the practice. In the United States, 25 states allow the death penalty, 21 do not use capital punishment and 4 states use governor-imposed moratorium (State by State). Public opinion is diverse on this controversial issue. Research has been implemented to see if there are differences in opinion in

regard to different demographics meaning are there certain races, gender, and political affiliation that can predict if there is opposition or support for capital punishment.

The United States is relatively split on the allowance of the death penalty. Previously mentioned, 25 states allow and 21 do not. Public opinion varies on the issue especially in regard to race. White citizens are more likely to support capital punishment compared to black citizens (Abney, 2009). Abney examines the effect of authoritarianism and racism on the death penalty. Abney states that there is a link between racism and the death penalty that is rooted in authoritarianism as authoritarianism is a strong predictor of support for capital punishment (Abney, 2009). Abney also examines how the death penalty is supported in racism in regard to white citizens and where they live. Studies show that white citizens living in an area with no black citizens increases death penalty support by 34% (Abney, 2009).

Mallicoat and Brown highlight that support for capital punishment has been decreasing. Not only is support decreasing, but confidence in the use has also been declining. 58% of respondents believe that the time has come for a moratorium on the use of the death penalty (Mallicoat & Brown, 2008). Researchers have found that there are a few key points that can predict if a person is in favor of capital punishment. Studies have shown that typically whites, upper class citizens, males, Republican partisans, and westerners tend to have higher rates of being in favor of the death penalty compared to other demographics including; women, southerners, and Democrats (Mallicoat & Brown, 2008). Studies also show that black citizens are much more likely to oppose the death penalty than their white counterparts (Mallicoat & Brown, 2008). Mallicoat and Brown also wanted to shine the focus on not only comparing black citizens vs white citizens but increasing literature and science by examining public opinions on capital punishment in the Hispanic/Latino community. The researchers find their data by student

surveys conducted at a California Public University (Mallicoat & Brown, 2008). 432 surveys were administered and 340 were used. Their survey results show that White citizens favor the death penalty by 71.1%, Asians by 62.9% and Hispanic/Latino by 56.6% (Mallicoat & Brown, 2008). Survey results also show that Republicans have higher rates of being in favor of capital punishment compared to Democrats (Mallicoat & Brown, 2008).

Drinan examines how Catholicism views the death penalty. Public opinion polls show differences in opinions with Catholics and non-Catholics. Although there is no difference between Catholics and non-Catholics, it must be noted that the official Catholic position on capital punishment is opposition and Catholic bishops in 1980 condemned the death penalty (Drinan, 1994). Bishops stressed, “lethal punishment, instead of protecting society, may even accelerate the cycle of violence” (Drinan, 1994). Although the Catholic church spoke out against the death penalty, from 1976-1993, 225 men and one woman were executed (Drinan, 1994). 88 men were black and 14 were Latino, which shows a pattern of racial bias in the execution of capital punishment with other evidence showing that 40% of death row inmates were black even though they only represented 12% of the United States’ population (Drinan, 1994).

The Public Religion Research Institute provides information on public opinion in regard to the use of capital punishment as an appropriate punishment for murder. They examine results between race and political party affiliation. The Public Religion Research Institute also found results on comparing Americans that favor life without parole or favor the death penalty. Research shows that 47% of all Americans favor life without parole compared to 46% who favor the death penalty as an appropriate punishment for murder. Life without parole is supported by 57% of Democrats, 64% of African Americans and 56% of Hispanics. The death penalty is

supported by 59% of Republicans, 53% of whites, and 61% of Tea Party members (Life or Death, 2012).

Capital punishment is a divisive issue. Although public opinion in the United States has strong favors for the use of the death penalty, death sentences have declined over the years as well as being concentrated in certain areas (Garrett, Alexander, & Ankur, 2017). In the 1990s, 300 people were sentenced to death in over two hundred counties where-as in 2015 only fifty-one defendants were sentenced to death in thirty-eight counties (Garrett, Alexander, & Ankur, 2017). Studies were conducted to determine if there were causes for the decline in sentences and why capital punishment sentences were concentrated over time. These shifts may show generational differences and or how population densities have changed.

Capital punishment is a widely debated topic, internationally and in the United States. Studies and research have shown that in the United States there are vast differences in opinion in regard to the use of the death penalty. Differences in race, gender, and political affiliation all impact how capital punishment is viewed. Certain demographics and groups have higher rates of approval for capital punishment whereas different groups have higher rates of opposition. These demographics impact public opinion and highlight how controversial the use of capital punishment is. Quick findings show there are public opinion differences in regard to race, gender, and political party affiliation with Whites, Republicans, and males being more likely to be in favor of the use of capital punishment compared to Blacks, Democrats, and women.

Methodology

The death penalty is a highly controversial topic with widespread differing public opinions. Literature has shown that through the years, the death penalty has been debated. The theory is that public opinion has shifted over time to have more opposition towards the death penalty

within all demographics, however when comparing demographic groups against one another, analyses will vary in regard to rates of opposition and being in favor. Public opinion shifts on the death penalty in this study will focus on three different demographic groups; race (black versus white), gender, and political affiliation (Democrat versus Republican).

H1: Those who identify as Democrats will have higher rates of opposition of the death penalty compared to Republicans.

This hypothesis is expected to be true as Democrats tend to be more liberal whereas Republicans tend to be more conservative. Liberals, on average, hold more opposition for the death penalty compared to conservative counterparts. With the differences in ideology, it would make sense for Democrats to have more opposition compared to Republicans.

H2: Women will have higher rates of opposition of the death penalty compared to men.

Women having higher rates of opposition of the death penalty compared to men is expected to be true as women are socialized from a young age to be nurturing, compassionate, and empathetic. The differences in how men and women are raised can have an impact on public opinion. It is thought that with women being socialized from childhood to value compassion as an admirable trait, it can explain why they would have higher rates of opposition compared to men.

H3: Whites will have higher rates of being in favor of the death compared to people of color.

This hypothesis is expected to be true as there are racial disparities in the criminal justice system. People of color tend to be overrepresented in capital punishment cases compared to their white counterparts. This disparity can help hypothesize why people of color would have more opposition to the use of the death penalty.

Measurement and Data

To test the hypothesis, data will be analyzed by examining General Social Survey data from the Survey Documentation and Analysis website (Smith et al. 2019). The independent variables that will be examined are gender, race, and political party affiliation. The dependent variable will be the percentages rates of being in favor or opposition of death penalty.

The first question for gender, race, and political party to be examined is “Are you in favor of the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?” This question allows the respondents two choices: to be in favor or to oppose. To examine if there are gender differences, the variable CAPPUN will be placed in the Row and SEX will be placed in column. Summary statistics will be clicked. Keeping CAPPUN in the Row box, RACE will replace SEX in the column box. Lastly, CAPPUN remains in Row box, but PARTY will be written into column to analyze racial differences whereas party response categories are Democrat, Republican, or Independent.

Further analysis between the same three independent variables will be examined by analyzing the survey question, “How important is the death penalty issue to you?” where CAPIMP will replace CAPPUN in the Row box and “How firm are you about your opinion on the death penalty?” where CAPFIRM will then replace CAPIMP in the Row box.

Once analyses are done on three questions between all three independent variables, statistics will be outlined in graphs along with gamma statistics to demonstrate the strength of a relationship between two variables. Further explanation of the graphs will be written in detail to fully note the differences in public opinion between race, gender, generations, and political party affiliation.

Data Results

CAPPUN was the first data set to be analyzed. CAPPUN asks the question, “*Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?*”

Refer to Table 1 below for analysis by sex. When comparing gender, 76.4% of males and 67.6% of females favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. Data was analyzed on opposition percentages as well. 23.6% of males and 32.4% of females oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. The gamma statistics for this analysis is 0.22. There is a moderate relationship between sex and support for the death penalty.

Race was the second independent variable looked at with CAPPUN and data is shown on Table 2. Results show that 75.8% of white citizens, 48.2% of Black citizens, and 62.1% of other races favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. On the other hand, 24.2% of Whites, 51.8% of Blacks, and 37.9% of other races oppose the use of capital punishment. Gamma statistics were analyzed as well and provided a .44. With this variable, there is a stronger relationship between race and support for the death penalty.

Party affiliation was the last variable analyzed with the given question. Table 3 has a data analysis. There is a gamma statistic of .41. Results show 63.9% of Democrats, 82.3% of Republicans, and 67.9% of Independent/other party favor the death penalty. 36.1% of Democrats, 17.7% of Republicans, and 31.1 of Independent/other party oppose the use of capital punishment. There is somewhat of a strong relationship between party affiliation and support for the death penalty.

Secondly, CAPIMP was analyzed with the same variables; gender, race, and political party affiliation. CAPIMP asks "*How important is the death penalty issue to you?*"

Table 4 has data regarding this subset. In studying differences in regard to gender, 15.3% of males and 12.1% of females stated that this issue is one of most important. 5.5% males and 4.4 % females stated the importance of the death penalty issue was not important. Gamma is .07.

Data shows a pretty weak relationship between sex and importance of the death penalty. It does not seem to be a very important issue for many people.

Race was analyzed and Table 5 shows data information. 13.2% of White citizens and 10.5% of Black citizens stated this issue was one of most important. On the other hand, 3.5% of Whites and 13.4% of Blacks saw this issue as not important. .02 is the gamma statistic. These data sets show these demographic variables have no association with the importance of the death penalty.

Political party affiliation was examined in Table 6. 10.9% of Democrats and 14.9% of Republicans stated that the death penalty issue is one of the most important. 5.2% of Democrats and 2.5% of Republicans stated this issue was not important. Gamma is .02. With this gamma, party affiliation is not associated with the importance of the death penalty.

CAPFIRM was the last variable examined and it asks, "*How firm are you about your opinion on the death penalty?*"

When examining results, which can be seen in Table 7, to see if there are statistical differences between genders, it is shown that change is very likely for 2% of males and 3.8% of females. Change is very unlikely for 49.7% of males and 43.2% of females. Gamma is .2. This data shows that women appear to be a bit more likely to change their views on the issue than men, but most people claim that they are not likely to change their position on the death penalty.

In Table 8, race was examined. 3.7% of Whites and 0% of Blacks were very likely to change their opinion. 44.3% of Whites and 51.9% of Blacks were very unlikely to change their opinion. Gamma is .14. Data shows that Blacks seem firmer in their views on the use of capital punishment than whites. This is important to highlight because Blacks are more likely to oppose the death penalty.

In Table 9, political party affiliation is the last variable to be examined. 3.7% of Democrats and 2.3% of Republicans were very likely to change their opinions. 44.8% of Democrats and 45.7% of Republicans were very unlikely to change their opinion. Gamma is .02. Gamma shows no apparent relationship between party and firmness of opinion on the death penalty.

Table 10 examines how public opinion has changed over time. From the 1990s it appears that support has declined from around 80% to 60%. When looking at the demographic groups, support for the death penalty declined by roughly the same amount for blacks and whites and men and women. However, support for the death penalty has not declined much for Republicans while it has substantially declined for Democrats and Independents. The death penalty has become a more partisan issue in American politics.

Graphs

The first three graphs represent analyzes with how different demographics respond to public opinion when CAPPUN is analyzed.

Table 1: Support for the Death Penalty by Sex

Frequency Distribution					
Cells contain: -Column percent -Weighted N		SEX			ROW TOTAL
		1 MALE	2 FEMALE		
CAPPUN	1: FAVOR	76.4 19,013.3	67.6 19,484.6		71.7 38,497.8
	2: OPPOSE	23.6 5,871.6	32.4 9,355.9		28.3 15,227.5
	COL TOTAL	100.0 24,884.9	100.0 28,840.5		100.0 53,725.4
Means		1.24	1.32		1.28
Std Devs		.42	.47		.45
Unweighted N		23,967	29,583		53,550

Table 2: Support for the Death Penalty by Race

Frequency Distribution					
Cells contain: -Column percent -Weighted N		RACE			ROW TOTAL
		1 WHITE	2 BLACK	3 OTHER	
CAPPUN	1: FAVOR	75.8 33,342.2	48.2 3,109.6	62.1 2,046.0	71.7 38,497.8
	2: OPPOSE	24.2 10,633.6	51.8 3,344.2	37.9 1,249.8	28.3 15,227.5
	COL TOTAL	100.0 43,975.8	100.0 6,453.8	100.0 3,295.8	100.0 53,725.4
Means		1.24	1.52	1.38	1.28
Std Devs		.43	.50	.49	.45
Unweighted N		43,289	7,322	2,939	53,550

Table 3: Support of the Death Penalty by Party

Frequency Distribution					
Cells contain: -Column percent -Weighted N		PARTY			
		1 DEM	2 IND	3 REP	ROW TOTAL
CAPPUN	1: FAVOR	63.9 16,280.8	67.9 562.8	82.3 15,815.5	71.7 32,659.1
	2: OPPOSE	36.1 9,205.3	32.1 266.0	17.7 3,403.8	28.3 12,875.2
	COL TOTAL	100.0 25,486.1	100.0 828.8	100.0 19,219.3	100.0 45,534.2
Means		1.36	1.32	1.18	1.28
Std Devs		.48	.47	.38	.45
Unweighted N		26,085	822	18,606	45,513

The next set of graphs represent analyzes when CAPIMP is analyzed.

Table 4: The Importance of the Death Penalty by Sex

Frequency Distribution				
Cells contain: -Column percent -Weighted N		SEX		
		1 MALE	2 FEMALE	ROW TOTAL
CAPIMP	1: ONE OF MOST IMP	15.3 28.6	12.1 35.6	13.4 64.2
	2: IMPORTANT	57.9 108.4	58.1 170.3	58.1 278.7
	3: NOT VERY IMP	21.3 39.8	25.3 74.1	23.7 113.9
	4: NOT IMPORTANT	5.5 10.3	4.4 12.9	4.8 23.2
	COL TOTAL	100.0 187.2	100.0 292.8	100.0 480.0
Means		2.17	2.22	2.20
Std Devs		.75	.71	.72
Unweighted N		178	296	474

Table 5: The Importance of the Death Penalty by Race

Frequency Distribution					
Cells contain: -Column percent -Weighted N		RACE			
		1 WHITE	2 BLACK	3 OTHER	ROW TOTAL
CAPIMP	1: ONE OF MOST IMP	13.2 53.2	10.5 5.7	22.3 5.3	13.4 64.2
	2: IMPORTANT	58.2 234.4	59.5 32.1	51.6 12.2	58.1 278.7
	3: NOT VERY IMP	25.1 100.9	16.5 8.9	17.4 4.1	23.7 113.9
	4: NOT IMPORTANT	3.5 13.9	13.4 7.2	8.7 2.1	4.8 23.2
	COL TOTAL	100.0 402.5	100.0 53.8	100.0 23.7	100.0 480.0
Means		2.19	2.33	2.13	2.20
Std Devs		.70	.84	.87	.72
Unweighted N		399	55	20	474

Table 6: The Importance of the Death Penalty by Party Affiliation

Frequency Distribution					
Cells contain: -Column percent -Weighted N		PARTY			
		1 DEM	2 IND	3 REP	ROW TOTAL
CAPIMP	1: ONE OF MOST IMP	10.9 26.0	17.8 2.1	14.9 27.3	12.8 55.4
	2: IMPORTANT	58.6 140.0	64.4 7.5	62.0 113.6	60.2 261.0
	3: NOT VERY IMP	25.3 60.5	8.9 1.0	20.5 37.5	22.9 99.1
	4: NOT IMPORTANT	5.2 12.4	8.9 1.0	2.5 4.6	4.2 18.1
	COL TOTAL	100.0 238.9	100.0 11.6	100.0 183.1	100.0 433.6
Means		2.25	2.09	2.11	2.18
Std Devs		.71	.82	.67	.70
Unweighted N		250	8	169	427

The last three sets of graphs are data analyses with CAPFIRM.

Table 7: Firmness in Death Penalty Opinions by Sex

Frequency Distribution					
Cells contain: -Column percent -Weighted N		SEX			ROW TOTAL
		1 MALE	2 FEMALE		
CAPFIRM	1: CHANGE VERY LIKELY	2.0 3.7	3.8 10.8	3.1 14.6	
	2: SOMEWHAT LIKELY	11.1 20.6	23.8 67.6	18.7 88.2	
	3: SOMEWHAT UNLIKELY	37.3 69.4	29.2 83.1	32.4 152.5	
	4: CHANGE VERY UNLIKELY	49.7 92.5	43.2 123.0	45.8 215.5	
	COL TOTAL	100.0 186.1	100.0 284.6	100.0 470.7	
Means		3.35	3.12	3.21	
Std Devs		.76	.90	.85	
Unweighted N		177	288	465	

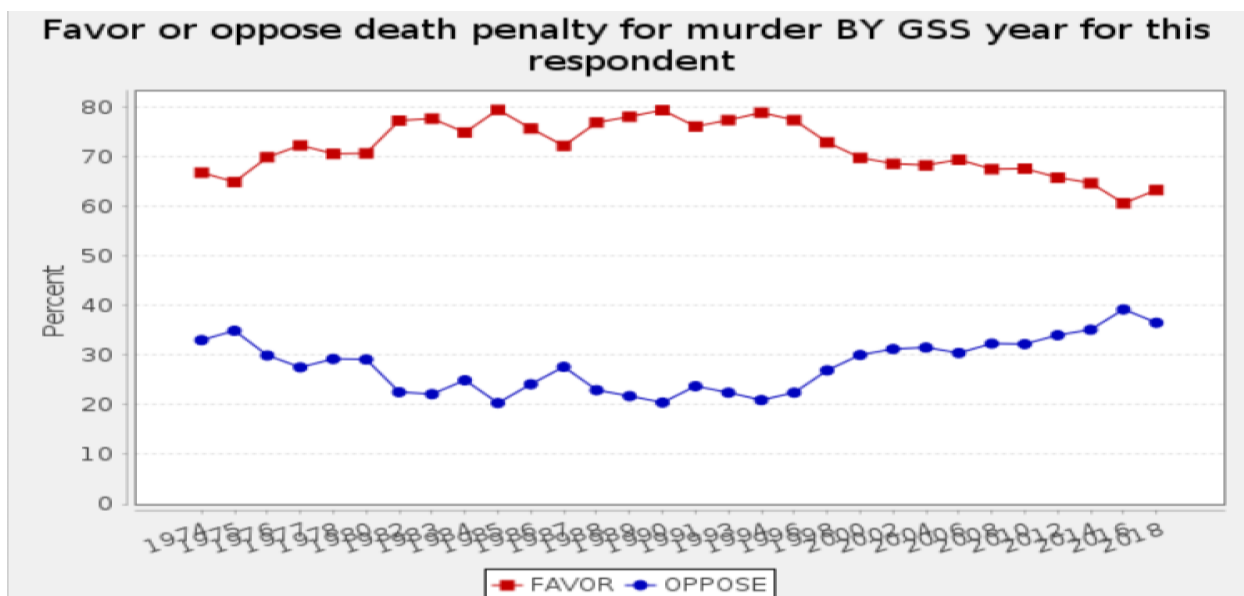
Table 8: Firmness in Death Penalty Opinions by Race

Frequency Distribution					
Cells contain: -Column percent -Weighted N		RACE			ROW TOTAL
		1 WHITE	2 BLACK	3 OTHER	
CAPFIRM	1: CHANGE VERY LIKELY	3.7 14.6	.0 .0	.0 .0	3.1 14.6
	2: SOMEWHAT LIKELY	18.5 73.1	23.5 12.4	11.9 2.7	18.7 88.2
	3: SOMEWHAT UNLIKELY	33.5 132.4	24.6 13.0	31.1 7.1	32.4 152.5
	4: CHANGE VERY UNLIKELY	44.3 175.2	51.9 27.4	57.0 12.9	45.8 215.5
	COL TOTAL	100.0 395.2	100.0 52.8	100.0 22.6	100.0 470.7
Means		3.18	3.28	3.45	3.21
Std Devs		.86	.83	.71	.85
Unweighted N		392	54	19	465

Table 9: Firmness in Opinion on Death Penalty by Party Affiliation

Frequency Distribution					
Cells contain: -Column percent -Weighted N		PARTY			
		1 DEM	2 IND	3 REP	ROW TOTAL
CAPFIRM	1: CHANGE VERY LIKELY	3.7 8.9	.0 .0	2.3 4.1	3.0 13.0
	2: SOMEWHAT LIKELY	21.1 50.0	31.2 3.6	16.4 29.7	19.4 83.3
	3: SOMEWHAT UNLIKELY	30.4 72.2	51.0 5.9	35.6 64.5	33.2 142.6
	4: CHANGE VERY UNLIKELY	44.8 106.3	17.8 2.1	45.7 82.7	44.4 191.1
	COL TOTAL	100.0 237.4	100.0 11.6	100.0 181.0	100.0 430.0
Means		3.16	2.87	3.25	3.19
Std Devs		.89	.72	.81	.85
Unweighted N		248	8	167	423

Table 10: Changes Over Time in Public Opinion



Conclusion

This research shows that there are vast differences in public opinion in regard to the death penalty and confirms the hypotheses with respect to race, gender, and political party affiliation. These findings were concluded through public opinion surveys so there is much reliance and validity with the results. Specifically, the analysis on the opinion of the death penalty features a large sample size. Larger sample sizes make results more reliable. These results can also be generalized to other public opinion topics. Looking at other issues such as marijuana legalization and increased government social programs, the hypotheses go hand in hand with the opinions on the death penalty meaning that Blacks, Democrats, and women would be more likely to support marijuana legalization and governmental social programs compared to Republicans, men, and Whites. With any research there are limitations. This research shows support or opposition of the death penalty. It would be interesting to see if there were public opinion differences in the method of execution and seeing if the method would have an impact of a person being in favor or opposing the use of capital punishment. Important research would also include seeing how these relationships change over time.

This study complicates the United States democracy. When looking at public opinion, there are a bunch of different opinions and values around the subject. There are demographics with drastic different views. These disparities in public opinion can affect how democracy works. In the United States with voting for or against a policy, a person will either win or lose. When public opinion is vastly different, it makes a democracy harder to run efficiently because there is no give or take in the situation. With the vast difference in opinions, it is important to ask, if certain groups are more opposed to the death penalty and many states still have capital

punishment, do these groups have less trust in the criminal justice system? Public opinion shapes legislation so those legislative pieces that are opposed by certain groups can cause a distrust not only in criminal justice, but in the government as a whole. Public opinion shapes a democracy and a country and in the topic of the death penalty, public opinion is a hot topic issue.

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