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More Concern among Opponents about Wrongful Convictions

Continued Majority Support for Death Penalty

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More Concern among Opponents about Wrongful Convictions Continued Majority Support for Death Penalty

Public opinion about the death penalty has changed only modestly in recent years, but there continues to be far less support for the death penalty than there was in the mid-1990s.

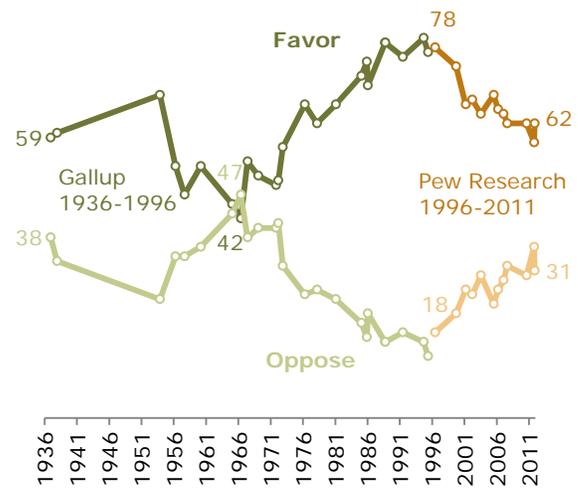
A survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, conducted Nov. 9-14, 2011, among 2,001 adults, finds that 62% favor the death penalty for people convicted of murder while 31% are opposed. That is generally in line with polling on the death penalty over the past several years.

During the mid-1990s, when the Pew Research Center first surveyed on this issue, support for the death penalty was at a historic high point. In 1996, 78% favored capital punishment for people convicted of murder. Support for the death penalty subsequently declined, falling to 66% in 2001 and 62% in late 2005. Since then, support has mostly remained in the low-to-mid-60s, though it dipped slightly (to 58%) in October 2011.

When Gallup first asked about the death penalty in 1936, 59% registered support for the policy. This fell to an all-time low of 42% in 1966, which was the only time over the course of 75 years in which there was more opposition (47%) than support. Gallup's trend showed that support for the death penalty grew again over the course of the 1970s and 1980s and peaked in the mid-1990s.

Most Americans Continue to Favor Death Penalty

% who favor/oppose death penalty for persons convicted of murder



PEW RESEARCH CENTER Nov. 9-14, 2011. Gallup question: "Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?"

More Concern about Wrongful Convictions

When asked why they oppose the death penalty, 27% of opponents say it is wrong or immoral to kill someone, while an identical percentage (27%) cite concerns about flaws in the justice system and the possibility that innocent people could be put to death.

In a Gallup survey 20 years ago, when just 18% opposed the death penalty, a much higher percentage of death penalty opponents (41%) cited moral considerations and there were far fewer mentions of problems with the justice system or wrongful executions (11%).

The majority of Americans who support the death penalty today offer largely the same reasons that supporters gave 20 years ago. Roughly half (53%) say the punishment fits the crime or that it is what murderers deserve. A smaller share raises concerns about the costs of keeping murderers in prison for life (15%). Relatively few death penalty supporters cite

Why People Oppose the Death Penalty

Jun 1991	Nov 2011	Based on those who oppose the death penalty ...
%	%	
41	27	It's wrong/immoral to kill someone/Not our right
11	27	Justice system imperfect/Could execute wrong person
17	16	Religious reasons/Judgment should be left to God
--	10	Person needs to pay/Life sentence more appropriate
--	4	Depends on situation/Not always right punishment
6	4	Possibility of rehabilitation/Deserve second chances
7	3	Not a deterrent
6	2	Death penalty not fairly applied/Concerns about race, ability to pay lawyers
--	1	Don't believe in "an eye for an eye"
16	13	Other
6	2	Don't know

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Nov. 9-14, 2011. Open-ended responses based on 638 people who oppose the death penalty. 1991 data from Gallup. Dashes represent categories that were not coded in the 1991 Gallup survey results. Figures add to more than 100% because multiple responses were allowed.

Why People Support the Death Penalty

Jun 1991	Nov 2011	Based on those who support the death penalty ...
%	%	
53	53	Deserved/Appropriate punishment
13	15	Cost of life in prison/Prison overcrowding
--	8	Depends on nature/severity of the crime
13	6	Serves as a deterrent/example for others
--	5	Support death penalty, if no doubt about guilt
19	5	Prevents person from committing more crimes
--	5	Biblical/religious reasons
--	3	Know a victim/sympathize with victims' families
--	2	Support death penalty, generally
--	1	Person could get out/should never get out
--	1	Don't believe person can ever be rehabilitated
11	8	Other
2	3	Don't know

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Nov. 9-14, 2011. Open-ended responses based on 1,222 people who favor the death penalty. 1991 data from Gallup. Dashes represent categories that were not coded in the 1991 Gallup survey results. Figures add to more than 100% because multiple responses were allowed.

deterrence (6%) or keeping murderers from committing more crimes (5%) in explaining their position.

Racial and Partisan Differences over the Death Penalty

The death penalty continues to draw much more support from whites (68%) than from African Americans (40%). Among Hispanics, 52% favor the death penalty for people convicted of murder while 42% are opposed.

Large majorities of conservative Republicans (84%) and moderate and liberal Republicans (73%) support the death penalty, as do 64% of independents. Among Democrats, conservatives and moderates favor the death penalty by 55% to 37% while liberals oppose it by about the same margin (54% to 40%).

Majorities of major religious groups, except for black Protestants, favor the death penalty for people convicted of murder. Roughly three-quarters of white evangelical Protestants (77%) and white mainline Protestants (73%) support the death penalty. Somewhat fewer white Catholics (61%), Hispanic Catholics (57%) and the religiously unaffiliated (57%) favor capital punishment for convicted murderers.

Wide Ideological Divide Over Death Penalty

<i>Death penalty for persons convicted of murder</i>	Favor	Oppose	DK	N
	%	%	%	
Total	62	31	7=100	2001
White	68	26	6=100	1470
Black	40	49	11=100	192
Hispanic	52	42	6=100	180
18-29	59	36	5=100	321
30-49	64	31	5=100	511
50-64	65	27	8=100	620
65+	56	33	11=100	513
College grad+	53	42	5=100	754
Some coll or less	65	27	7=100	1235
Cons Rep	84	11	6=100	363
Mod/Lib Rep	73	22	6=100	180
Ind	64	31	5=100	723
Cons/Mod Dem	55	37	8=100	375
Liberal Dem	40	54	6=100	250
Protestant	67	26	7=100	997
White evang	77	16	7=100	412
White mainline	73	21	6=100	348
Black	40	47	13=100	132
Catholic	59	36	6=100	449
White Cath	61	33	6=100	310
Hispanic Cath	57	37	6=100	101
Unaffiliated	57	36	7=100	346

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Nov. 9-14, 2011. Whites and blacks are non-Hispanic only; Hispanics are of any race. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

About the Survey

The analysis in this report is based on telephone interviews conducted Nov. 9-14, 2011, among a national sample of 2,001 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia (1,200 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone, and 801 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 397 who had no landline telephone). The survey was conducted by interviewers at Princeton Data Source under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International. A combination of landline and cell phone random digit dial samples were used; both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Respondents in the landline sample were selected by randomly asking for the youngest adult male or female who is now at home. Interviews in the cell sample were conducted with the person who answered the phone, if that person was an adult 18 years of age or older. For detailed information about our survey methodology, see <http://people-press.org/methodology/>.

The combined landline and cell phone sample are weighted using an iterative technique that matches gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and nativity, region, and population density to parameters from the March 2010 Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. The sample also is weighted to match current patterns of telephone status and relative usage of landline and cell phones (for those with both), based on extrapolations from the 2010 National Health Interview Survey. The weighting procedure also accounts for the fact that respondents with both landline and cell phones have a greater probability of being included in the combined sample and adjusts for household size within the landline sample. Sampling errors and statistical tests of significance take into account the effect of weighting. The following table shows the sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

Group	Sample Size	Plus or minus ...
Total sample	2,001	3.0 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

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