Shrinking Majority of Americans Support Death Penalty

According to a 2013 Pew Research Center survey, 55% of U.S. adults say they favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. A significant minority (37%) oppose the practice.

While a majority of U.S. adults still support the death penalty, public opinion in favor of capital punishment has seen a modest decline since November 2011, the last time Pew Research asked the question. In 2011, fully six-in-ten U.S. adults (62%) favored the death penalty for murder convictions, and 31% opposed it.

Public support for capital punishment has ebbed and flowed over time, as indicated by polls going all the way back to the 1930s. But it has been gradually ticking downward for the past two decades, since Pew Research began collecting survey data on this issue. Since 1996, the margin between those who favor the death penalty and those who oppose it has narrowed from a 60-point gap (78% favor vs. 18% oppose) to an 18-point difference in 2013 (55% favor vs. 37% oppose).

Among most large U.S. religious groups, majorities support capital punishment. Roughly six-in-ten or more white evangelical Protestants (67%), white mainline Protestants (64%) and white Catholics (59%) express support for the death penalty.

By contrast, black Protestants are more likely to say they oppose the death penalty than support it (58% vs. 33%), as are Hispanic Catholics (54% vs. 37%).

The differences among religious groups reflect the overall racial and ethnic picture on support for capital punishment. Twice as many white Americans favor the death penalty as oppose it (63% vs. 30%). Among black adults, the balance of opinion is reversed: 55% oppose capital punishment, while 36% support it. The margin is narrower among Hispanics, but more oppose the death penalty (50%) than support it (40%).

Even among white adults, support for capital punishment has decreased markedly over the past two decades, from 81% in 1996 to 63% in 2013. Over the same time period, the share of blacks favoring the death penalty also has declined, from 55% to 36%.

About half or more of most demographic groups support capital punishment, with only modest differences among them.

Men are slightly more likely than women to say they favor the death penalty (58% vs. 52%). And Americans ages 50
and older are more likely than those under 50 to support capital punishment, by a similar margin (58% vs. 53%).

Politically, the differences are somewhat greater. Fully seven-in-ten Republicans (71%) express support for the death penalty, while roughly a quarter (23%) oppose it. Among Democrats, public opinion is more evenly divided: 45% are in favor of the death penalty for convicted murderers, and 47% are opposed. Political independents fall in between the two parties, with 57% supporting capital punishment and 37% opposing it.

Note: The question about support for the death penalty was part of a longer survey that produced separate reports on views about radical life extension (http://www.pewforum.org/2013/08/06/living-to-120-and-beyond-americans-views-on-aging-medical-advances-and-radical-life-extension/), end-of-life medical treatments (http://www.pewforum.org/2013/11/21/views-on-end-of-life-medical-treatments/) and evolution (http://www.pewforum.org/2013/12/30/publics-views-on-human-evolution/). The overall data on public support for the death penalty previously were released in a survey topline (http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/11/end-of-life-survey-report-app-b.pdf) and in a Fact Tank post (http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/02/12/support-for-death-penalty-drops-among-americans/).
Some scholars suggest this decline in support coincides with greater attention paid to possible wrongful convictions, a movement referred to as the innocence frame or “innocence projects.” The overall pattern, with the peak in the 1990s and a steady decline since, is consistent with long-term trend data from Gallup. 1