

MARCH 28, 2014

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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%).

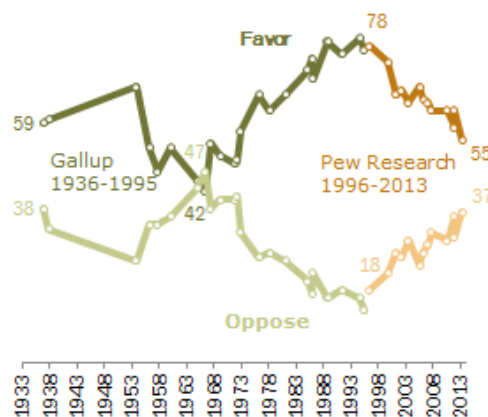
Even among white adults, support for capital punishment has decreased markedly over the past two decades, from 81% in 1996 to 63% in 2013. Over the same time period, the share of blacks favoring the death penalty also has declined, from 55% to 36%.

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

### Most Americans Continue to Favor Death Penalty, But By Smaller Margins

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



Pew Research Center survey conducted March 21-April 8, 2013, based on a national sample of 4,006 adults. RQ10. Gallup question: "Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?"

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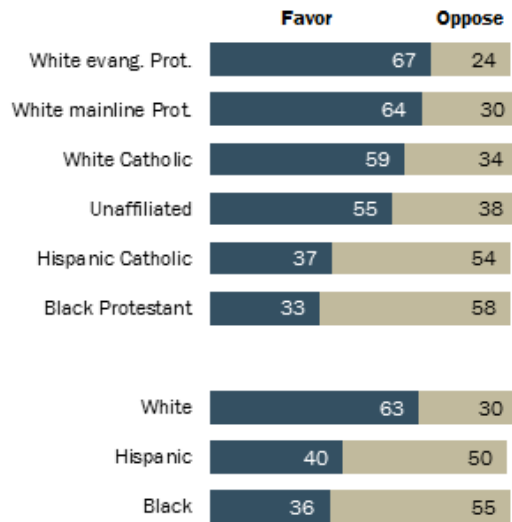
and older are more likely than those under 50 to support capital punishment, by a similar margin (58% vs. 53%).

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/>).*

## Support for Death Penalty Across Religious and Racial/Ethnic Groups

*% of U.S. adults who favor/oppose the death penalty for those convicted of murder*



Pew Research Center survey conducted March 21-April 8, 2013. RQ10. Whites and blacks are non-Hispanic only; Hispanics are of any race. Those saying "don't know" are not shown.

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## Support for Death Penalty Across Demographic Groups

*% who support the death penalty for persons convicted of murder*

	Favor	Oppose	DK	N
Total	55	37	8=100	4,006
Men	58	35	6=100	1,930
Women	52	38	9=100	2,076
Age 18-49	53	40	7=100	1,815
18-29	51	43	7=100	646
30-49	55	38	7=100	1,169
Age 50+	58	33	9=100	2,128
50-64	60	32	8=100	1,115
65+	54	35	11=100	1,013
College grad+	54	39	7=100	1,566
Some college or less	56	36	8=100	2,418
Republican	71	23	6=100	981
Democrat	45	47	8=100	1,423
Independent	57	37	6=100	1,309

Pew Research Center survey conducted March 21-April 8, 2013. RQ10. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

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1. [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](#). ↪