The Effects of Education and Race on Attitudes About Capital Punishment

Antonea Widony
SOC 416
Final Draft
Professor Roger Hammer
Oregon State University
May 28, 2009
Antonea Widony

Abstract

Although support for capital punishment in the case of murder remains high in the United States, there are a number of factors that influence levels of support. Using data from the 2006 General Social Survey of 2,201 respondents, I examine the relationship between race and education on attitudes regarding the death penalty. Reviewed literature suggested that Whites are more likely to be in favor but that a liberal college education tends to result in less support. The literature reviewed regarding the effects of higher education on the attitudes of Blacks was not so straightforward, but generally the literature indicated that higher education does not appear affect attitudes significantly. The results of my analysis are concurrent with these conclusions but with one perplexing finding: there appears to be a spike in support among Black Bachelor’s degree earners. This paper explores this finding as well as the relationships between race, education, and attitudes about capital punishment.
Introduction

Support for capital punishment remains strong in the United States. According to Gallup’s 2008 Crime survey, 64 percent of Americans supported the death penalty for someone convicted of murder and the same survey found that 54 percent of Americans believe that it is applied fairly despite evidence that its application is racially biased (Saad 2008). While support for capital punishment is high, it is lower than other years in this decade as well as in the 1980s and 1990s where support averaged 75 percent (Saad 2008). This high level of support has been attributed to the 1976 Supreme Court case Gregg v. Georgia in which capital punishment was again found to be constitutional and was reinstated after a brief suspension (Jones 2006, Saad 2005). The case brought national attention to the debate and appears to have increased public support. When given a choice between a death sentence or life imprisonment in capital cases, the majority of Gallup respondents over several years in the early 2000s indicated that they favored a death sentence (Saad 2005). It is also interesting to note that capital punishment is generally thought to be an ineffective deterrent, even among those who support it (Saad 2008).

The 2008 Gallup Crime survey also found that the majority of African Americans are not in favor of capital punishment (Saad 2008), and historically support within the Black community has been low. Since 1936, Gallup has been polling Americans about their attitudes toward capital punishment and have found over the years that African Americans have been significantly less likely to support the death penalty than have Whites (Newport 2007). An individual’s level of educational attainment also seems to
have an affect on opinions regarding the death penalty, namely that those with a liberal education are more likely to oppose it (Nesteruk 2004). These observations raise the interesting question of to what degree race and education have on attitudes regarding capital punishment. The sections that follow will attempt to uncover some answers.

Background

The issue of capital punishment in America has been a subject of debate since before its inception. Debates on this topic have been framed in terms of morality, politics, race, and myriad others. In terms of morality it is a question of the right to take a life, however the “eye for an eye” reasoning often enters the debate. A politically framed debate brings up the questions of whether or not the legal system can be trusted to be unbiased and fair as well as whether or not the government should be involved in these types of decisions at all. It is an issue that leads to opinions that for many have been shown to be based on weak reasoning (Unnever, Cullen, and Roberts 2005) in part due to the numerous factors that influence opinion such as social class, race, age, education, and/or geographical location, as well as the exceptions that we’re willing to make based on circumstances surrounding the crime that resulted in a death sentence. These variables can help us understand the factors that influence individual opinions regarding capital punishment, and they can also help us draw informed conclusions at an aggregate level of analysis.

Conventional wisdom suggests that people with higher educational levels tend to oppose the death penalty. It has been argued that a liberal college education encourages critical thinking which allows for the thorough examination of attitudes of all sorts,
including those regarding social policies like the death penalty (Nesteruk 2004). Nesteruk (2004) provides an example of a politically conservative student who supported the death penalty arrive at the conclusion, through critical thinking, that his support conflicted with his personal integrity and by extension reflected a major social inconsistency according to his worldview. Others have argued that having a formal education is the most important factor in determining how a citizen thinks about politics (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996). Higher education tends to foster a sense of tolerance (Moore and Ovadia 2007) and produces a commitment to civil liberties and a more egalitarian approach to race relations (Soss, Langbein, and Metelko 2003). In that capital punishment is absolute, people who are more tolerant tend to be able to see the various consequences of a policy like capital punishment and tend not to support it. It could also be argued that higher education selects for people who have a tendency toward tolerant stances, which then may expand as individuals progress through a liberal education. There is some evidence to support this; in a poll of college freshman regarding their attitudes on various social policies, nearly a third indicated that capital punishment should be abolished (Rarey 2002). In sum, then, we can make the general statement that people with higher levels of education have the increased tendency to oppose capital punishment.

Opposition to capital punishment is also likely to increase among those who identify with a racial or ethnic minority. There are a number of racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States, however I will limit my analysis to the attitudes of African Americans regarding the death penalty. Because African Americans have historically been treated unfairly in the American justice system there is a sense of distrust in the
government and the legal process (Johnson 2008). This distrust stems from the historically unfair application of the death penalty to African Americans involved in capital crimes as well as it being used as a means to control their members (Unnever and Cullen 2007). General attitudes among African Americans regarding capital punishment are compounded by the racial profiling and stereotyping apparent in law enforcement and sentencing biases in the administration of justice in the United States (Johnson 2008). These perceptions can help to explain why African Americans are generally less likely to support punitive policies than their White counterparts.

There is evidence that African Americans receive harsher sentences than Whites for similar crimes, and so are disproportionately affected by death sentences for capital crimes (Johnson 2008). There is considerable research on capital sentencing that indicates that race considerations, whether conscious or not, have an effect on whether or not a defendant will be sentenced to die (Ross 1994). Interestingly, social psychological profiles of jurors in capital cases show that they are punitively oriented and more prone to convict, and when the jury is composed of White males they are more likely to impose the death penalty on African American defendants whose victim(s) were White (Fleury-Steiner 2002). Ross (1994) also found that prosecutors demonstrate racial bias when seeking charges. When the victim of a capital crime is African American, the crime’s level of aggravation had to be significantly higher for the death penalty to be sought than for a White victim (Ross 1994).

Historically, access to higher education by African Americans and other ethnic minorities has been severely limited or not possible at all. There are a number of factors
that have contributed to the problem of access. The outright barring of African Americans from admission is perhaps the most egregious, but others such as socioeconomic status and subtle discriminations during the admissions process are more insidious. Affirmative action policies have improved access, but one study found that between 1986 and 2003 there was a significant drop in considering race for admission to college, from 60 percent to 35 percent at public four-year institutions (Jaschik 2005). Jaschik (2005) observed that the drop was most marked beginning in 1995 and largely attributed this to the campaign that began that same year against affirmative action, and that between 1995 and 2003 colleges voluntarily abandoned affirmative action policies in admissions in response to both the threat of and actual litigation regarding the constitutionality of affirmative action.

In the examination of discrimination against African American males in elementary and secondary educational institutions, Green (2008) explains that both structural and unconscious racism have prevented African American males from realizing the promise of equal access to education made by Brown v. Board of Education (1954). They are disproportionately more likely to be tracked in “special needs” programs that may have the effect of limiting their educational achievement (Green 2008), and one could argue that their lack of success in elementary and secondary school would hinder their chances of being accepted to post-secondary educational institutions.

There is little evidence that education affects African American’s attitudes toward capital punishment, and so the relationship between the two is rather unclear. Regardless of the level of educational attainment they are much more likely to be opposed to the
death penalty, attributable at least in part to the factors discussed above. There is, however, a possibility that education may have a moderating effect on attitudes regarding the death penalty regardless of race. Examining more current data than that used in previous research may yield the result that better-educated African Americans are even more likely to oppose the death penalty in capital cases than less-educated African Americans.

It is perhaps more plausible that there is a case of competing effects at play here. Individuals that haven’t received a higher education are generally more likely to support the death penalty, yet African Americans, who face a number of obstacles in obtaining a higher education and are thus less likely to earn college degrees, tend to oppose capital punishment regardless of highest level of degree earned. So, while we may be inclined to generalize that people who are less-educated would be more likely to support the death penalty, the literature reviewed above indicates a marked effect to the contrary when considering race.

Data and Methods

The data for this study come from the 2006 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a nationally representative sample of approximately 4,000 adult respondents who are asked a variety of questions about their demographic characteristics and about their opinions on a variety of social issues. It is one of the most frequently used sources of data in the social sciences (National Opinion Research Center 2006). Because this study focuses on the effects of education and race on attitudes about capital punishment, the sample is confined to adults who responded as either in favor of or in opposition to the
death penalty, have had at least some education, and at first mention identified themselves as Black/African American or White. The resulting sub-sample includes 2,201 adults.

The GSS provides a question that asks respondents, “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?” This measure includes a variety of responses, but for the purposes of this paper the Don’t Know and No Answer responses will be omitted. This paper is concerned with the investigation of attitudes for or against capital punishment, and to keep the data congruent with the hypothesis I omit the responses of those who don’t indicate support or opposition. Framing the question dichotomously for this analysis may provide insight into voting tendencies on this issue; we may be able to ascertain a general level of support for or opposition to the death penalty which may then inform us on how people might be likely to vote on the issue. However, the dichotomous nature of the GSS question inhibits the respondent’s ability to express any variation by limiting their choice of responses. This may indicate a problem of validity as the question and responses do not allow for the myriad contingencies that may surround a respondent’s attitude regarding the death penalty, such as whether or not the respondent would maintain their position if there were a choice between a sentence of life in prison with no possibility of parole and the death penalty.

The GSS provides data regarding the respondents’ highest level of education achieved. The data will be collapsed into three categories: less than high school/high school, bachelor’s degree, and graduate degree. The associate/junior college response will be omitted because it isn’t well-defined; it may include technical training or other
vocational certificates and it doesn’t require core curriculum as it does at four-year institutions. Central to my hypothesis is that a liberal education increases tolerance, and the inclusion of those responses of associate/junior college may obscure the results of this analysis. The existing research reviewed above regarding the influence of education on attitudes toward capital punishment only pertains to those who have earned a bachelor’s or graduate degree, so in order to maintain the validity of the data analysis it is best to omit the associate/junior college response altogether.

The GSS data set that specifies race is divided into numerous categories. This analysis will use only two categories: those respondents who identify as White and those who identify as Black/African American. The exclusion of respondents whose first mention of racial identity as not White or Black/African American may act to simplify multi-racial identities; the first mention response is likely the dominant identity and thus will be used. Additionally, the research reviewed above focused on the Black/White dichotomy, so in the interest of accordance with existing research and this paper’s hypothesis it is favorable to confine the analysis to the two categories. Inclusion of other racial or ethnic minority categories, while interesting, is not relevant to this analysis. There may be some issues regarding validity in relation to the way in which the GSS question is framed. The respondent’s self-identification with prescribed categories may not effectively capture the complexities of their racial identities, thus skewing the validity of the responses.
Results

The results of the data analysis in Table 1 show attitudes by race regarding capital punishment in the case of murder. Not surprisingly, Whites are significantly more likely to support the death penalty than Blacks. Of White respondents, 73.5 percent indicated support compared to 42.4 percent of Black respondents, with a significant difference of 31.1 percent. The difference in attitudes regarding capital punishment between Whites and Blacks results in a chi-squared value of 129.764 (1 degree of freedom (df)), which indicates significance at the 99.9 percent level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race (First Mention)</th>
<th>Attitude Regarding Capital Punishment</th>
<th>Total (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Favor</td>
<td>Oppose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N)</td>
<td>1,512</td>
<td>689</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the results of how attitudes regarding capital punishment may be affected by educational attainment. Among respondents who completed high school or less, 78.1 percent are in favor of the death penalty. For those who earned a Bachelor’s degree 64.4 percent are in favor, and among those who earned a graduate degree 56.3 percent support capital punishment. The difference between high school or less and a Bachelor’s degree is 13.7 percent, and between a Bachelor’s and graduate degree is 8.1 percent. The difference in attitudes regarding the death penalty between respondents who completed high school or less, earned a Bachelor’s degree, and who earned a graduate
degree results in a chi-squared value of 27.16 (2 df), which indicates significance at the 99.9 percent level.

Table 2: Attitudes Regarding Capital Punishment by Education (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
<th>Attitude Regarding Capital Punishment</th>
<th>Total (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Favor</td>
<td>Oppose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School or Less</td>
<td>78.1%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N)</td>
<td>1,512</td>
<td>689</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the data analysis for respondents’ attitudes about the death penalty by highest degree earned and controlling for race are shown in Table 3. Among White respondents, 78.8 percent of those who completed high school or less support the death penalty, while 65.5 percent of those who earned a Bachelor’s degree and 57.9 percent of those who earned a graduate degree are in favor. The differences in percentages between the educational groups mirrors those found between Whites and Blacks (Table 1). There is a 13.3 percent difference between those who completed high school or less and those who earned a Bachelor’s degree, and a 7.6 percent difference between those who earned a Bachelor’s degree and a graduate degree. The difference in attitudes regarding capital punishment between Whites who completed high school or less, earned a Bachelor’s degree, and who earned a graduate degree results in a chi-squared value of 57.831 (2 df), which indicates significance at the 99.9 percent level.

The results of the analysis of Black respondents, shown in Table 3, yielded a perplexing finding. Of those that completed high school or less, 41.1 percent are in favor
Antonea Widony

of the death penalty. Interestingly, support for capital punishment increases to 53.5 percent among those who earned a Bachelor’s degree and then drops to 33.3 percent among those who earned a graduate degree. This may be due to the very small sub-sample of Blacks who earned a Bachelor’s degree (N = 43), and the sub-sample of Blacks who earned a graduate degree is even smaller (N = 15). The difference in attitudes regarding the death penalty between Blacks who completed high school or less, earned a Bachelor’s degree, and who earned a graduate degree results in a chi-squared value of 2.855 (2 df) which indicates significance only at the 76 percent level.

Table 3: Attitudes Regarding Capital Punishment by Highest Degree Earned, Controlling for Race (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race (First Mention)</th>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
<th>Attitude Regarding Capital Punishment</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Favor</td>
<td>Oppose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>High School or Less</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>65.5%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,368</td>
<td>493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>High School or Less</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
<td>58.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>46.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total (N)</td>
<td>1,512</td>
<td>689</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion and Conclusion

The results described above show that education and race have an effect on attitudes about capital punishment in the case of murder. Some of the conclusions that
can be drawn from this data set reveal some interesting findings. When examining the effect of education on attitudes, it is clear that respondents with college degrees are significantly less likely to support the death penalty (Table 2). However, when controlling for race education appears to have the opposite effect than expected and as is supported by current literature for Black respondents who have earned a Bachelor’s degree. There is a 12.4 percent spike in support for capital punishment for Black undergraduate degree earners from those who completed high school or less, and then support falls again among Black respondents who earned graduate degrees (Table 3). As mentioned in the results section, the small sub-sample of Black degree earners may not accurately reflect attitudes among this group. It is unlikely that competing effects are at play here; it is more likely that random error is responsible for the unusual finding as is indicated by the statistical significance of 76 percent, which is rather weak. Higher educational attainment does have a significant effect among White respondents, and this finding is well supported by existing literature and is reflected in national opinion polls such as Gallup as was discussed above.

As expected, when simply considering the effect of race on attitudes regarding capital punishment we find that White respondents are significantly more likely to indicate support than Black respondents. This is concurrent with both conventional knowledge and existing research.

The nature of this topic and the associated constraints did not allow for any major discoveries to be revealed. Access to a larger sub-sample, especially with regard to Black college degree earners, and examining a wider range of variables may have provided
results that are more consistent with existing literature or perhaps even shown with significance the mediating effect of a liberal college education on attitudes regarding the death penalty among Blacks. With this one exception, higher educational attainment does appear to decrease support for capital punishment across race. Future research in this area should perhaps explore the inconsistencies found in this analysis to determine if reliability issues are responsible for the unusual findings.
References


Output Syntax: Tables 1, 2, and 3

GET
FILE='C:\Users\widonya\Documents\paperdataset4.sav'.
RECODE racecen1 (1=1) (2=2) (ELSE=99) INTO Rrace.
VARIABLE LABELS  Rrace 'Race (First Mention)'.
EXECUTE.
RECODE cappun (1=1) (2=2) (ELSE=99) INTO Rcappun.
VARIABLE LABELS  Rcappun 'Attitude Regarding Capital Punishment'.
EXECUTE.
USE ALL.
COMPUTE filter_$=(Rdegree + Rrace + Rcappun = 8).
VARIABLE LABEL filter_$ 'Rdegree + Rrace + Rcappun = 8 (FILTER)'.
VALUE LABELS filter_$ 0 'Not Selected' 1 'Selected'.
FORMAT filter_$ (f1.0).
FILTER BY filter_$.
EXECUTE.

CROSSTABS
/TABLES=Rrace BY Rcappun
/FORMAT=AVVALUE TABLES
/STATISTICS=CHISQ
/CELLS=COUNT ROW
/COUNT ROUND CELL.

CROSSTABS
/TABLES=Rdegree BY Rcappun BY Rrace
/FORMAT=AVVALUE TABLES
/STATISTICS=CHISQ
/CELLS=COUNT ROW
/COUNT ROUND CELL.

CROSSTABS
/TABLES=Rdegree BY Rcappun
/FORMAT=AVVALUE TABLES
/STATISTICS=CHISQ
/CELLS=COUNT ROW
/COUNT ROUND CELL.