Pennsylvanians’ Perspectives on Capital Punishment

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PENN STATE HARRISBURG - On February 13, 2015, Governor Wolf placed a moratorium on all executions in Pennsylvania (Pennlive, 2015). In December that year, the State Supreme Court upheld this decision by a unanimous vote (Triblive, 2015). This decision can be due, in part, to wrongful convictions in Pennsylvania (Washington Post, 2015). By August 2017, Pennsylvania had 180 inmates sitting on death row awaiting execution. However, those on death row will likely be there for a while. In the last 30 years, three inmates have been executed while another six had their convictions overturned. The three inmates who were executed waived their rights to appeals and due process, which takes an average of 15 years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010).

More than two years later, the moratorium has continued to stand. During this time, government officials have discussed ideas on how to eliminate wrongful convictions in the case of capital punishment. Some call for abolishing the death penalty altogether. What do Pennsylvanians think about the death penalty?

Penn State Poll Omnibus Survey

To answer this question, the Penn State Harrisburg Center for Survey Research interviewed by telephone a random sample of Pennsylvanians as part of the Penn State Poll in the spring of 2016. Of the 600 survey participants, 517 adult residents of Pennsylvania answered two questions:

1. “Do you favor of oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?”, and
2. “What is the main reason or reasons for your position on the death penalty?”

The majority of this sample favored the death penalty (58%), just under a third opposed the death penalty (31%), and only a small percentage neither favored or opposed the death penalty or had no opinion (11%).

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Figure 1. Percent of each response to the question, “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted on murder?”

Reasons for opinion
The majority (57%) of those who favored the death penalty cited crime severity, deterrence, and/or revenge as reasons for support. The majority (54%) of those who opposed the death penalty did so due to their religion and/or what they considered to be moral (see Figure 2). The category that was very close for both groups was justice and cost, with those who favored (25%) just under those who opposed (29%) for these reasons.

Figure 2. Reasons for position on the death penalty
Differences Among Social Groups

While there were no differences in opinion among racial and ethnic groups, there were differences among other social groups. Women are more likely than men to cite crime severity, deterrence, or revenge as reasons for their position compared with justice or cost and other reasons. In this survey, political affiliations held different viewpoints. Republicans, rather than other political parties, also refer to crime severity, deterrence, or revenge to support the death penalty more than religion and morality. Further, one’s education level affected views on the death penalty. Those with some college (but not a degree) are more likely to choose crime severity, deterrence, revenge than religion and morality and justice and crime to support their position.

The death penalty is an important topic, as it impacts the lives of many people. In order for the citizenry to take an informed stance on the death penalty, more public education is needed on what the death penalty entails, including the possibility of wrongful conviction. For example, research consistently indicates that the death penalty does not work to deter crime (Donohue & Wolfers, 2006; Fagan, 2006; Siennick, 2012).5 Would those who cited deterrence as a reason for support continue to hold that position if they were aware of this? With that said it is also important for our leaders to know what their constituents think about the death penalty and to know why certain social groups feel so strongly in favoring the death penalty. Perhaps this information can better coordinate public education campaigns as Pennsylvania’s leaders move forward on this important topic.

Study Information
For additional information, contact Jennifer Gibbs, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, School of Public Affairs, Penn State Harrisburg, at 717-948-4319 or jengibbs@psu.edu.

Penn State Poll Methodology
The Penn State Poll is designed to allow organizations and researchers with statewide interests to contribute one or more customized questions to an omnibus telephone survey while sharing the costs. Survey data includes responses from 606 randomly selected adult Pennsylvanian residents. The Center for Survey Research at Penn State Harrisburg conducted the Penn State Poll between March 12 and May 19, 2016 and utilized a dual-frame design consisting of both landline and cell phone samples. Data are weighted as a function of each respondent’s age and sex. The margin of error for this survey is plus or minus 4.0 percentage points with the conventional 95% degree of desired confidence. For additional information, contact Stephanie L. Wehnau, M.S., Director of the Center for Survey Research, at 717-948-6429 or csr@psu.edu.