

Public Ambivalence Fuels Support For a Halt in U.S. Executions

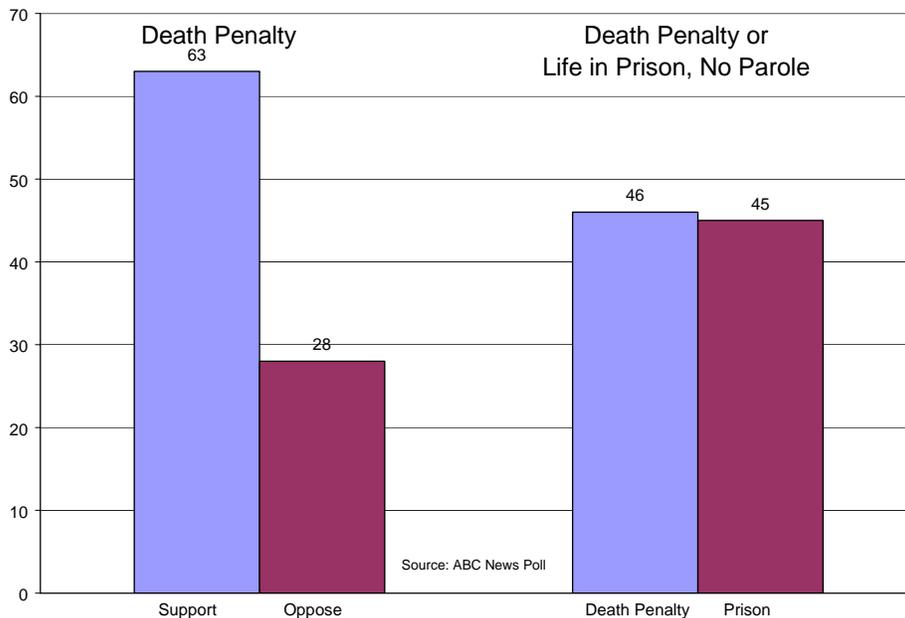
The pending execution of Timothy McVeigh comes at a time of deep and growing ambivalence about the death penalty, to the point that bare majorities of Americans favor a moratorium on executions – or even a law replacing them with mandatory life in prison.

Most people, 63 percent, support the death penalty when no other option is presented. But that's down from a high of 80 percent seven years ago, and it's weakly held: Support for executions drops to 46 percent when life without parole is offered as an alternative.

Which penalty do you prefer for murderers:
Death penalty Life without parole
46% 45

While support for the death penalty is widely known, polls less frequently delve into the public's ambivalence about it, and the support for alternatives. One reason for these views is a growing sense that the death penalty does not act as a deterrent to murder; a majority now holds this view, up 20 points in the last 15 years.

This ABC News/Washington Post poll finds broad agreement with two other arguments against the death penalty: That it's applied unfairly across jurisdictions, and that innocent people are sometimes executed. And the strongest argument in favor – that it prevents killers from killing again – is also achieved by life in prison without parole.



LIFE – Given these views, 51 percent of Americans say they'd support a law replacing the death penalty with mandatory life; 46 percent would oppose such legislation. Equal numbers would support it "strongly" as oppose it strongly – about a quarter on each side.

Fifty-one percent also say they'd support a nationwide moratorium on the death penalty while a commission studies whether it's been administered fairly. And when people are told that such a moratorium currently exists in Illinois, support for a national moratorium advances to 57 percent.

	Support	Oppose
Law replacing death with life/no parole	51%	46
National moratorium on death penalty	51	43
National moratorium (Illinois noted)	57	36



PRO and CON – There are persuasive arguments for the death penalty as well as against it in the public's mind, which fuels the public's ambivalence about it.

Strongest is that it prevents the killer from killing again: Seventy-two percent of Americans agree with this as an argument in favor of executions, and 48 percent agree strongly. As noted, life without parole presumably accomplishes the same goal, which likely is one reason it's an acceptable alternative to many people.

Sixty percent also think the death penalty is fair because it gives satisfaction and closure to the families of victims; and 56 percent agree with the argument that it's fair because it represents "an eye for an eye – the killer is killed."

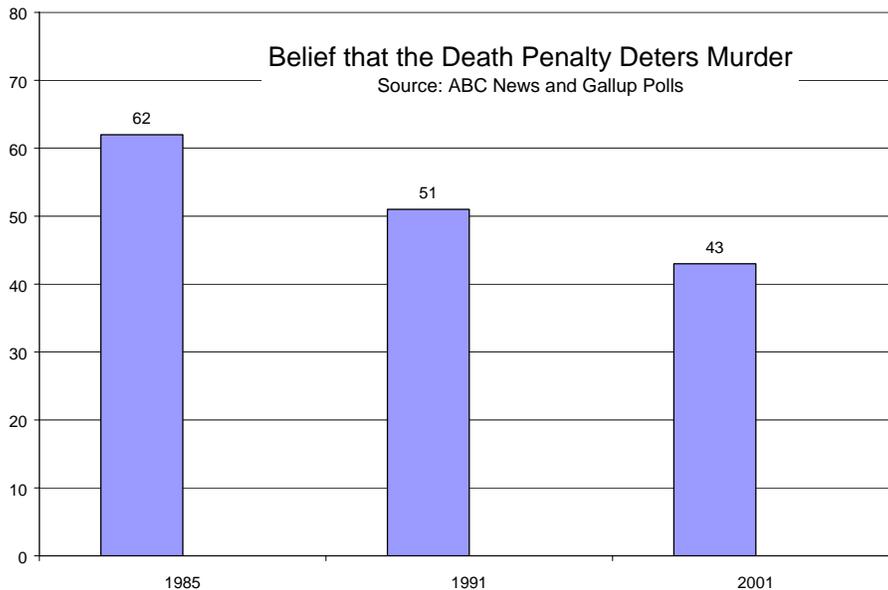
At the same time, 68 percent of Americans say the death penalty is unfair "because sometimes an innocent person is executed," and 63 percent say it's unfair because it's applied differently from county to county and state to state.

Another argument gets less credence: Just 37 percent say the penalty is unfair "because it's applied unequally to blacks compared to whites."

	Agree	Disagree
Death penalty is...		
Fair because killers can't kill again	72%	27
Unfair because of mistaken executions	68	30
Unfair because of jurisdictional differences	63	31
Fair because it provides closure	60	37
Fair because it's an eye for an eye	56	42
Unfair because of racial differences	37	53

DETERRENT – Another argument in support of the death penalty has lost favor: The notion that it acts as a deterrent to murder. In a 1985 Gallup poll, 62 percent agreed with that view. By 1991 it was down to 51 percent. Today just 43 percent agree.

	Is the death penalty a deterrent to murder?	
	Yes	No
4/01	43%	52
6/91	51	41
1/85	62	31



POLITICAL – The death penalty also is less of a political issue than might be assumed: Just 28 percent of Americans say it's "very important" in their vote that a candidate for state or national office agrees with their position on the issue. That includes roughly equal numbers of supporters and opponents of the death penalty.

It's political in another sense, however: The issue is one that sharply divides political groups in this country. Given a choice of the death penalty vs life in prison for convicted

murderers, Republicans favor the death penalty by a 2-1 margin, while more Democrats prefer the life sentence. Independents divide right down the middle.

Similarly, while 61 percent of Democrats said they'd support a law replacing the death penalty with mandatory life, this declines to 49 percent of independents and 36 percent of Republicans. Democrats and independents each account for just under a third of the public, slightly outnumbering Republicans.

MEN and WOMEN – There's also a sharp division on the death penalty between the races, with blacks much more apt to oppose it; and between the sexes. On the basic measure, the death penalty with no alternative offered, it's supported by 70 percent of men, compared to 58 percent of women.

Given the alternative of life without parole, 55 percent of men prefer the death penalty, compared to 39 percent of women. And a law replacing the death penalty with mandatory life is favored by 44 percent of men, compared to 57 percent of women.

METHODOLOGY - This ABC News poll was conducted by telephone April 20-24, 2001, among a random national sample of 1,003 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Data collection and tabulation by ICR- International Communications Research of Media, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:
<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/PollVault/PollVault.html>

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Here are the full results (*=less than 0.5 percent):

1. Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
4/24/01	63	28	9
6/18/00	63	27	10
1/16/00	64	27	9
2/9/99*	71	22	7
8/16/98	69	27	4
8/5/96	77	19	4
1/4/95	74	19	7
9/7/94*	80	16	4
4/26/92**	75	19	6
9/11/88*	79	16	5
1/13/86	70	22	8
11/18/85*	75	17	8
12/18/82	76	19	6
1/30/82	69	19	12
5/20/81	73	20	8
2/2/81*	66	25	9

*Gallup: "Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?"

**oppose added

2. Which punishment do you prefer for people convicted of murder, the death penalty or life in prison with no chance of parole?

	Death Penalty	Life	No opinion
4/24/01	46	45	9
1/16/00	48	43	10
2/9/99*	56	38	6

*Gallup

3. In deciding how to vote in a state or national election, how important is it to you that a political candidate agrees with your position on the death penalty - very important, somewhat important, not too important or not important at all?

	-----Important-----			-----Not important-----			No op.
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not too	Not at all	
4/24/01	72	28	44	27	19	8	2

4. How would you feel about a law replacing the death penalty with life in prison with no chance of parole - is that something you'd support strongly, support somewhat, oppose somewhat or oppose strongly?

	-----Support-----			-----Oppose-----			No op.
	NET	Strngly	Smewht	NET	Strngly	Smewht	
4/24/01	51	24	27	46	26	20	4

5. Regardless of your overall opinion on the death penalty, for each statement I read please tell me if you agree with it strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat or disagree strongly:

	-----Agree-----			-----Disagree-----			No op.
	NET	Strngly	Smewht	NET	Strngly	Smewht	
a. The death penalty is unfair because it's applied differently from county to county and state to state.	63	32	31	31	13	17	6
b. The death penalty is unfair because it's applied unequally to blacks compared to whites.	37	22	15	53	33	20	10
c. The death penalty is unfair because sometimes an innocent person is executed.	68	35	33	30	11	18	2
d. The death penalty is fair because it's an eye for an eye - the killer is killed.	56	28	28	42	26	15	3
e. The death penalty is fair because it prevents killers from killing again.	72	48	24	27	16	10	1
f. The death penalty is fair because it gives satisfaction and closure to the families of murder victims.	60	30	30	37	22	15	4

6. Do you feel that the death penalty acts as a deterrent to murder - that it lowers the murder rate - or not?

	Yes, acts as a deterrent	No, does not	No opinion
4/24/01	43	52	6
6/16/91*	51	41	8
1/13/86	61	32	7
1/14/85	62	31	7

*1991 and previous - Gallup: "Do you feel that the death penalty acts as a deterrent to the commitment of murder, that it lowers the murder rate, or not?"

7. Some people say there should be a halt in all executions in this country while a commission studies whether the death penalty has or has not been administered fairly. Others say there already are enough safeguards to prevent

unfair or mistaken executions. What do you think - would you support or oppose a halt in executions while this issue is studied?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
4/24/01	51	43	6

8. (ASKED IF OPPOSE) In Illinois the governor has halted executions while a commission studies whether the death penalty has been administered fairly. Knowing that, would you support or oppose a halt in executions nationally while this issue is studied?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
4/24/01	13	85	2

7/8 NET

	Given Illinois Example		
	Support	Oppose	No opin.
4/24/01	57	36	7

END