

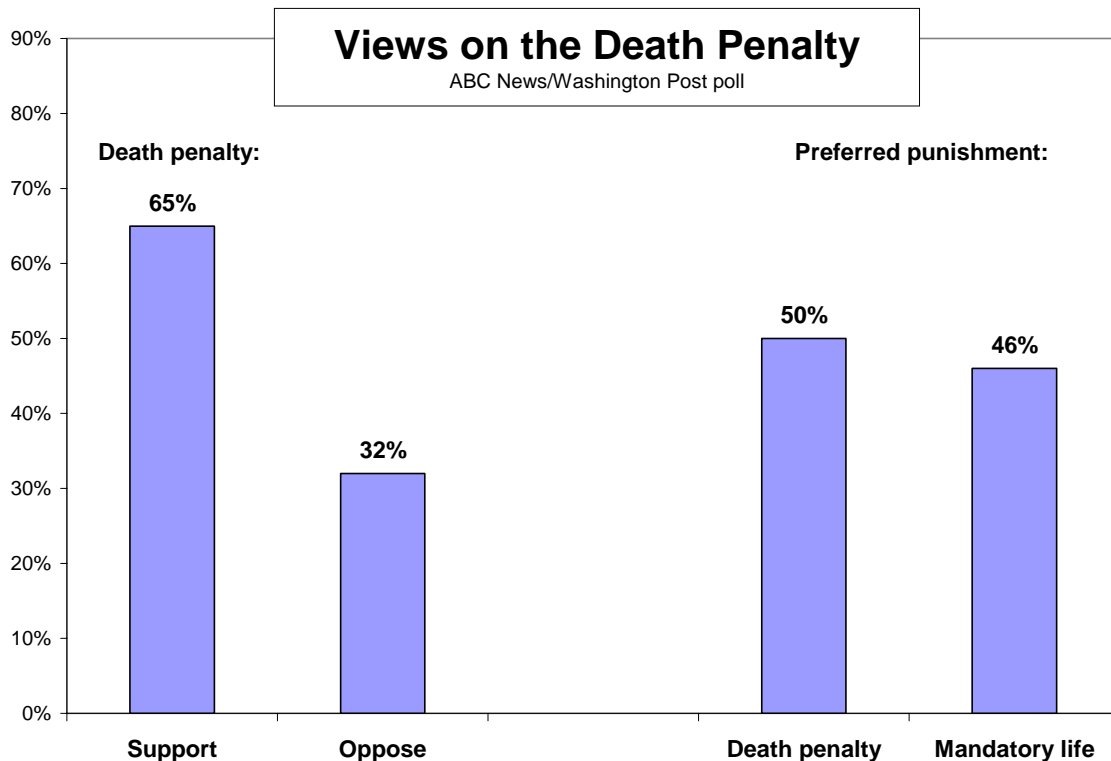
## **Capital Punishment, 30 Years On: Support, but Ambivalence as Well**

Thirty years after the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty, most Americans continue to support capital punishment in principle – but not necessarily in preference, given the alternative of mandatory life.

Sixty-five percent in an ABC News/Washington Post poll support the death penalty for people convicted of murder. But given life in prison without parole as an alternative, preference for the death penalty drops sharply, to 50 percent.

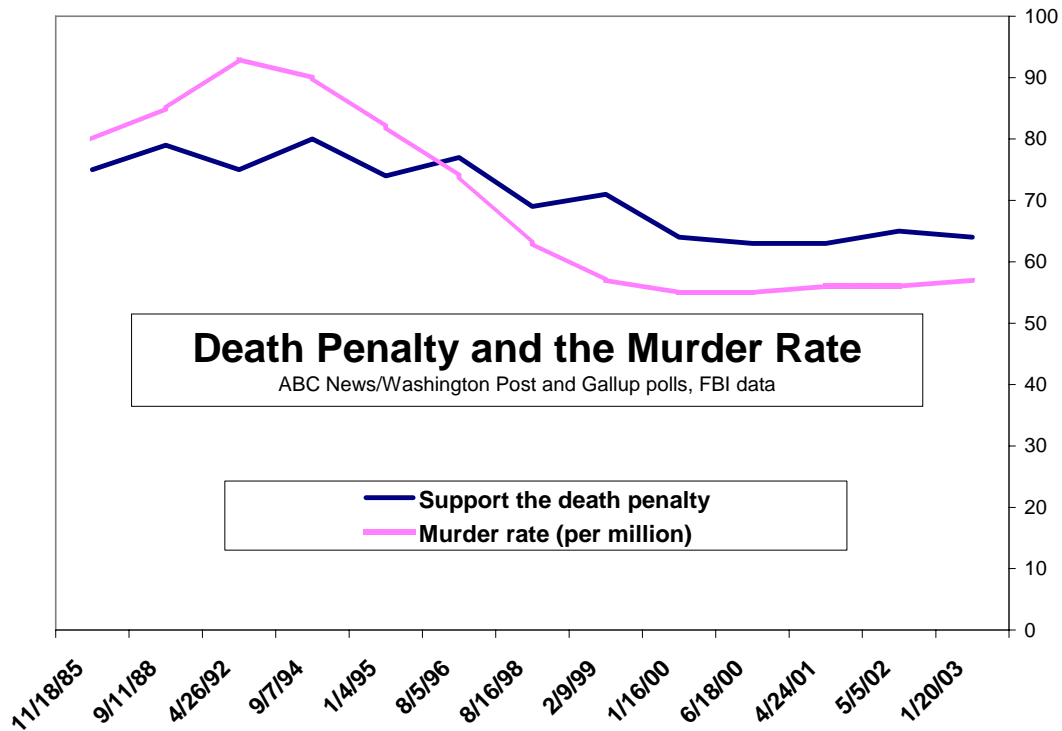
That result, stable for the past six years, reflects the public's longstanding ambivalence about capital punishment. On one hand polling has shown substantial concerns about its administration. On the other, majorities want it available for the most heinous crimes.

For instance, while Americans divide about evenly, 50-46 percent, on whether they prefer the death penalty or mandatory life for murderers in general, majorities in past polls have preferred execution over life terms in several notorious cases – for example, for Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden and Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.



The Supreme Court suspended the death penalty in 1972, then reinstated it in a ruling, *Gregg v. Georgia*, issued on July 2, 1976. The first execution in a decade followed six months later when Gary Gilmore, convicted of killing a motel clerk, was executed by firing squad at Utah State Prison in Salt Lake City. Another 1,028 executions have taken place since, with 3,370 inmates currently on death row.

**TREND** – Support for the death penalty in the support/oppose formulation has been stable, between 63 and 66 percent, since 2000. It declined – along with crime rates – after peaking at 80 percent in 1994. Indeed there’s been a close correlation between the murder rate and support for the death penalty since the mid-1980s. (Any significant correlation indicates a relationship, but not necessarily a causal one.)



That correlation exists even though fewer than half of Americans think the death penalty acts as a deterrent to murder – 42 percent said so in an ABC/Post poll last year, down from 62 percent in a Gallup poll in 1985. Many instead simply see it as punishment.

Compared with an ABC/Post poll 10 years ago, support for the death penalty is 12 points lower – 77 percent then, 65 percent now. That change has occurred dramatically among young adults, age 18 to 30 – a 32-point drop in their support for the death penalty over the last decade, from 80 percent then to 48 percent now. The change among older adults has been much smaller, six points.

**GROUPS** – Views on capital punishment vary widely among other groups – including among men and women and among political, ideological and racial groups.

In this poll, 71 percent of men support the death penalty in general; that declines to 59 percent among women. And men prefer the death penalty over life in prison by 57-39 percent, while women prefer mandatory life, by 52-43 percent.

Among adults over age 30, 70 percent support the death penalty and 55 percent prefer it to life in prison; among those 30 and under, just 48 percent support the death penalty, and mandatory life is preferred by a 2-1 margin.

There's also a vast gap among blacks vs. whites and Hispanics, with blacks – who long have been more skeptical of the criminal justice system overall – far less likely to support capital punishment.

Support for the death penalty peaks among Republicans and conservatives (at 84 and 75 percent, respectively), with far less support from Democrats and liberals. As on many issues, independents and moderates are perched between the two.

	Death penalty		Preference:	
	Support	Oppose	Death	Life in Prison
All	65%	32	50%	46
Men	71	28	57	39
Women	59	37	43	52
Age 18-30	48	50	32	64
Age 31+	70	27	55	40
Whites	68	30	53	42
Blacks*	38	55	23	71
Hispanics*	64	33	42	58
Republicans	84	16	63	32
Independents	65	33	51	43
Democrats	52	44	39	58
Conservatives	75	23	59	36
Moderates	62	34	47	48
Liberals	53	44	40	59

\*Merged 2005 and 2006 data

**METHODOLOGY** – This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone June 22-25, 2006, among a random national sample of 1,000 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com at <http://abcnews.com/pollvault.html>.

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Full results follow (\*= less than 0.5 percent).

1-21, 23-27 Previously released.

22, 28-32 Held for release.

33. On another subject, do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
6/25/06	65	32	3
6/26/05	66	32	2
4/24/05	65	29	6
1/20/03	64	31	5
5/5/02	65	26	9
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

34. 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
6/25/06	50	46	5
6/26/05	51	46	3
1/20/03	49	45	6
5/5/02	46	43	11
4/24/01	46	45	9
1/16/00	48	43	10
2/9/99*	56	38	6

\*Gallup

\*\*\*END\*\*\*