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Reassessing the Racial Divide in Support for Capital Punishment

The Continuing Significance of Race

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This project investigates the racial divide in support for capital punishment. The authors examine whether race has a direct effect on support for capital punishment and test whether the influence of race varies across class, being a native southerner, confidence in government officials, political orientation, and religious affiliation. Using data drawn from the General Social Survey, they find a substantial racial divide, with African Americans much less likely to support the death penalty. Furthermore, the analysis revealed little support for the "spurious/social convergence" hypothesis; shared factors that might be expected to bring African Americans and Whites together—class, confidence in government, conservative politics, regional location, and religious fundamentalism—either did not narrow African American-White punishment attitudes or, at best, had only modest effects. The Results suggest that the racial divide in support for capital punishment is likely to remain a point of symbolic contention in African American-White conceptions of criminal injustice in the United States.

Keywords: *race and capital punishment; death penalty attitudes; racial divide*

It is commonly asserted that a strong majority of Americans endorse the death penalty. This assumption ostensibly supports the conclusion that the legality and exercise of capital punishment reflects the "will of the people"—it is a matter of "democracy at work" (Scheingold 1984). Opinion polls do, in fact, show that upwards of 70 percent of the adult population support executions for offenders convicted of murder (Cullen, Fisher, and Applegate 2000). This global finding, however, masks an equally important, if less

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reported, empirical reality: The extant research indicates that for the past 30 years, African Americans have opposed capital punishment at significantly greater rates than Whites. According to the cumulative General Social Survey (GSS) and a recent Gallup poll, the majority of African Americans oppose whereas the vast majority of Whites support the death penalty (Jones 2003). Consequently, when legislators argue they have represented the consensual sentiments of their constituency by legally condoning capital punishment and when Supreme Court justices have upheld the constitutionality of the death penalty by invoking a "normative standards" argument (Young 1992), they have represented the sentiments of White America and have disregarded African American opposition. It is argued that when government officials ignore the "racial divide" and the overrepresentation of African Americans on death row, they may further intensify the perception that the United States remains, especially within the domain of criminal justice, "two nations—black and white, hostile, separate, unequal" (Hacker 1992: cover page; see also Kinder and Winter 2001).

Although a growing body of research documents the role that race plays in shaping public support for the death penalty, criminological scholarship on this racial divide remains in need of further investigation. Thus, some studies include race as a variable in the analysis and note its significant effect but do not discuss the potential salience of this finding in detail. There is also the tendency for researchers to analyze racial groups separately. In particular, although acknowledging that there are differences between African Americans and Whites, they focus predominantly or exclusively on Whites so as not to obfuscate possibly important predictors (e.g., White racial prejudice; Barkan and Cohn 1994, 2005; Borg 1997; Soss, Langbein, and Metelko 2003). Accordingly, the focus is more on why Whites endorse capital punishment than on why support for executions among African Americans is comparatively low. Another related tendency in the death penalty research is to include race and to show that it has a main effect (i.e., that there is a racial divide) but then to fail to assess whether the influence of race on support for the death penalty is specified by other variables such as political orientation and social class (Applegate et al. 2000; Halim and Stiles 2001; Sandys and McGarrell 1997; Stack 2003). Finally, there have been only limited advances in the extant literature in developing a coherent theoretical argument for why African Americans and Whites should have different opinions on capital punishment.

In this context, the current project attempts to extend the research on the racial divide. Similar to previous research (Bobo and Johnson, 2004; Bohm 1987; Bohm, Clark, and Aveni 1991; Roberts and Stalans 1997), we show

that there is a racial divide in support for the death penalty and that this divide is sustained even when a range of factors are controlled (see also Cochran and Chamlin 2006). Most important, the investigation reveals that factors that should lessen the racial divide, such as African Americans and Whites having the same religious affiliation, do not equally affect their attitudes, and indeed these potential ameliorating factors may result in further polarizing White and Black opinions toward the death penalty. Taken together, these findings suggest not only that a racial divide exists but also that is it unlikely to narrow even if African Americans and Whites converge in social position and social values. Indeed, it appears that African Americans and Whites have widely different collective biographies that uniquely influence their opinions of the death penalty (Hunt 1996; Smith and Seltzer 2000). Specifically, we propose that a key factor in sustaining the cleavage in capital punishment attitudes is the historical legacy of racial oppression that prompts African Americans in diverse social and cultural locations to be wary of the state's use of lethal punishment.

Explaining the Racial Divide in Support for Capital Punishment

Two Theses

This research is informed by, and thus assesses, two competing perspectives on the racial gap in support for capital punishment. One perspective sees race as a "master status" that, in the area of the death penalty, creates an unbridgeable cleavage between African Americans and Whites. For Whites, capital punishment has little racial symbolism and is merely another sanction in efforts to do justice and control crime. For African Americans, however, the state's use of lethal force to punish holds special significance as a sanction that historically has been applied unfairly to and used to control members of their racial group. Accordingly, race trumps other social characteristics and explains why African Americans will be, for the foreseeable future, less supportive of the death penalty. In short, the master status thesis predicts an enduring racial divide over the policy of capital punishment.

The second perspective—what might be called the "spurious/social convergence" thesis—contends that the racial gap in opinions is not enduring but will narrow to the extent that African Americans come to share similar social characteristics with White Americans who tend to support capital punishment. Davis (2005) argues that there is the need to continually monitor racial divisions in public opinion as African Americans socially and economically

assimilate into the mainstream of America. Continual assessments are needed to determine whether there is a "declining significance of race" (Wilson 1980). Davis (2005) contends that some convergence can be expected because the social and economic success of African Americans partly depends on their ability to inculcate the dominant group's beliefs, values, and opinions. Notably, others have argued (e.g.; Hagan and Albonetti 1982) that perceptions of injustice are determined by structural locations other than race, with class being a primary contextual determinant.

Thus, the spurious/social convergence perspective makes two predictions. First, the racial divide in death penalty attitudes is spurious and can be attributed to one or more alternative factors. For example, the racial divide might not be because of race per se but because liberal political attitudes are associated with less support for capital punishment and African Americans are more liberal than Whites.

Second, even if race effects remain, the perspective would predict that some social categories of African American would converge with Whites in their death penalty attitudes. Thus, it is possible that the racial divide would not exist when Whites are compared to African Americans who are affluent, are politically conservative, are religious fundamentalists, trust the government, or live outside the South—the region where state-sanctioned use of lethal force against African Americans has historically flourished. As we will see, however, the results of the analyses reported below lend more credence to the master status thesis than to the spurious/social convergence thesis.

In the sections that follow, we organize the existing literature around the debate over whether the racial divide in support for capital punishment is largely unbridgeable or can be explained by other correlates of death penalty attitudes. In the first section, we explore how racial conflict, especially as it was historically embedded in the violence against African Americans in the South, may contribute to solidifying the racial divide in views toward capital punishment in the United States. We then examine the role of structural location, political orientation, and religion—all factors related to capital punishment sentiments and possibly implicated in the racial divide debate. This assessment provides the basis for presenting the research strategy that informs the empirical analyses subsequently undertaken.

The Legacy of Racial Conflict

In this section, past racial conflicts that we believe are particularly germane for explaining the racial divide in support for the death penalty are reviewed. These past racial conflicts are a potentially salient source of group

distinction that differentially shape African Americans' and Whites' public opinions about capital punishment (Hunt 1996; Smith and Seltzer 2000).

Historically, southern Whites used diverse techniques to control African Americans (Tolnay, Beck, and Massey 1992). Before the Civil War, slaveholders were the primary agents of social control. Although slaveholders arbitrarily and harshly punished slaves, it is notable that lethal violence was rarely used. However, with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ending slavery, the social control of African Americans was transferred officially to local criminal justice systems and unofficially to vigilante mobs (Garland 2005; Tolnay et al. 1992; Zimring 2003).[1] One of the more disquieting aspects of this transfer of social control was the epidemic of lynchings that occurred in the South in the late 1800s and early 1900s. During this period, 73 percent of all lynching victims were African Americans (1,748 African American men, women, and children were lynched by White men), and more than 95 percent of those were tortured and killed in former slave states (Clarke 1998; Tolnay, Deane, and Beck 1996). Tolnay et al. (1996) argue that the function of racially motivated lynchings was to perpetuate White supremacy, especially the economic domination of Whites.

In this context, Clarke (1998) argues that public lynchings had a pernicious consequence on southern Black culture; they created a subculture of fear that "informed the actions of every black man, woman and child throughout the South" (p. 276). Tolnay et al. (1996) add that young African American men learned early in their lives that at any moment they could be the next target of a lynching mob. Clarke further argues that this fear was not abated by the eventual decline of lynchings by the 1920s. Rather, he contends that the number of lynchings declined because they were supplanted by a more palatable form of violence—state executions. Southern White leaders acknowledged that capital punishment could serve the same function as lynchings—the control and intimidation of African Americans. Indeed, court-ordered executions were considered by both White and Black southerners as "legal lynchings."

Tolnay and Beck (1991) argue that another consequence of the lynchings that terrorized African Americans was their decision to leave the South. Their research indicates that southern African Americans were more likely to leave areas where mob violence was greatest. It is likely that African Americans fleeing the fear of being lynched in the South disseminated a deep-seated dislike for capital punishment throughout the United States. Thus, a potential unintended consequence of the "Great Migration" was a cultural transmission of the history of southern lynchings among African Americans. It is therefore reasonable to assume that African Americans throughout the United States

are aware of the history of southern lynchings and are thus more likely than Whites to oppose capital punishment.

For the purposes of this research, we raise the possibility that the legacy of past racial conflicts—particularly those that included racially motivated lynchings, the racist application of the death penalty, and the racist support of government officials—has profoundly affected the attitudes of African Americans toward the death penalty. If so, then we would predict—consistent with the master status thesis—that the racial divide will persist even when controlling for a range of factors (it would not be spurious) and even among African Americans (e.g., conservatives) who tend to share other social attitudes (e.g., about welfare) with Whites. We cannot test this prediction directly because the GSS does not contain items that would measure the respondents' awareness of past racial conflict over the use of lethal force (nor, to our knowledge, does any other national-level data set). Even so, if the racial divide in support for capital punishment persists in the face of controls for other factors, this finding would lend credence to the line of inquiry we have suggested above.

It is possible, however, that past hostile racial conflicts do not equally influence all African Americans. Rather, the historical legacy of violent oppression by southern Whites might exert a stronger impact on the opinions of the death penalty among African Americans born and raised in the South than those born and residing elsewhere. In this article, we thus investigate whether African Americans born and raised in the South are the least supportive of capital punishment.

It is noteworthy that the issue of lynching has recently received considerable attention by the media, politicians, and criminologists (Garland 2005; Messner, Baumer, and Rosenfeld 2006). For example, newly published research shows that the legacy of lynchings is a factor that is affecting the imposition of capital punishment and homicide rates (e.g., Jacobs, Carmichael, and Kent 2005; Messner, Baller, and Zevenbergen 2005). Jacobs et al. (2005) report that the effects of current racial threat and the legacy of vigilantism largely directed against newly freed slaves jointly contribute to imposing the death sentence in contemporary America. Indeed, Zimring (2003) argues that the higher levels of executions carried out in southern states is related to their historical support of vigilante force. It is within this context that we argue that the legacy of lynchings should affect the current racial divide in support for capital punishment—either generally across all African Americans or, in the least, with regard to Blacks with southern roots.

We also explore whether the state's historical use of the death penalty to control African Americans has differentially affected African American and

White support for capital punishment beyond a possible geographical divide. Past studies have shown that public opinion on national policy issues is shaped by distrust and opposition to government power (Hetherington and Globetti 2002; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kinder and Winter 2001). Researchers argue that groups are significantly less likely to support policies enacted by a government that they distrust, particularly if past policies have negatively affected them (Hetherington and Globetti 2002). In addition, Zimring (2003) argues that distrust of government should be a relatively strong predictor of public support for the death penalty, with groups who distrust the government being less likely to support capital punishment.[2]

We suggest that the historical record provides ample reason why African Americans should have serious reservations about trusting the government's use of the death penalty. We assume that contemporary African Americans are aware that at the turn of the twentieth century, local and state governments actively participated in the lynchings of African Americans. We also assume that African Americans are aware that the federal government passively supported lynchings by failing to intervene (Tolnay et al. 1996).[3] In addition, there is a preponderance of current evidence that, if taken at face value, may suggest to African Americans that the government's application of the death penalty manifests itself along racial lines. For example, African Americans are substantially overrepresented among those currently awaiting execution. At the end of 2002, nearly 44 percent of those under a sentence of death were African American (Bonczar and Snell 2003). And nearly half (46 percent) of the individuals who were exonerated since 1973 were African Americans (Dieter 1997). Perhaps even more poignant, the Supreme Court in *McCleskey v. Kemp* assumed the validity of the research that systematically showed that there were racial disparities in capital sentencing (Bowers 1993). Thus, we test whether the influence of race on support for the death penalty varies across levels of confidence in government officials. More specifically, we hypothesize that African Americans who distrust government officials should be more likely to oppose capital punishment than Whites who similarly distrust the government.

Structural Locations

Hagan and Albonetti (1982) suggest that an individual's perceptions of punitive crime control policies, such as the death penalty, are shaped by his or her structural location within the United States. They also state that an individual's structural location is largely determined by his or her class and race.

Indeed, they argue that any model of the perception of crime control policies that does not include measures of class and race will be misspecified.

Arguing from a conflict theory perspective, Hagan and Albonetti (1982) assert that class and race function to determine an individual's level of power. Conflict theory further proposes that because of their power, wealthy Whites are able to have their interests manifested in criminal law (e.g., prevent laws prohibiting "corporate homicide"; Swigert and Farrell 1980) and will be able to violate criminal laws with impunity. Thus, conflict theory predicts that African Americans and the poor should be less likely to support punitive policies because they perceive that they are more likely to be stopped by the police, arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced more severely than their more wealthy White counterparts (Browning and Cao 1992; Cullen et al. 1996; Henderson et al. 1997; Secret and Johnson 1989; Smith and Seltzer 2000). However, Hagan and Albonetti (1982) note that because of historical conflicts between African Americans and Whites (see above), race has greater primacy than class when explaining perceptions of crime control policies.

Conflict theory can also contextualize the argument that the racial divide in support for the death penalty is driven by individual self-interests. Kinder and Winter (2001) have argued that the racial divide on national policy issues may in part result from African Americans and Whites having different self-interests. These different self-interests compel African Americans and Whites to differentially oppose policies that they perceive to be threatening. Researchers add that minority members do not have to directly experience the threat—for example, receive a death penalty sentence—for them to oppose a policy out of their self-interest (Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Hunt 1996). Scholars argue that minorities, even if they have not personally had negative experiences, will tend to identify with the struggles of their fellow group members (Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Hunt 1996). Thus, at the intersection of class and race, relatively powerless African Americans may be more likely to oppose punitive crime control policies, such as capital punishment, because it is in their collective interests to do so: African Americans may collectively perceive that they will be the ones most likely to suffer from the discriminatory application of the death penalty.

It is noteworthy that Hagan and Albonetti (1982) assume that the influence of race on support for crime control policies is invariant across class. This assumption implies that the racial divide in support for capital punishment is equal across levels of social class. It also hypothetically suggests that the racial divide in support for the death penalty would significantly decrease if class differences between African Americans and Whites were reduced, everything else being equal. We examine whether class position

has less influence on altering African American than White support for the death penalty.

According to conflict theory, power is distributed not only along class and race lines but also depending on whether individuals live in core or periphery areas. Hagan and Albonetti (1982) argue that inner cities within the United States are equivalent to underdeveloped peripheral areas in the world capitalist system. Thus, inner cities are characterized by high unemployment, social disorganization, political corruption, and repressive state policies (Shannon 1996). Researchers also contend that because of this power differential, conflicts regarding the enforcement of punitive crime control policies are more likely to occur in inner cities (Hagan and Albonetti 1982; Sampson and Bartusch 1998). They further argue that relatively powerless inner-city residents are more likely to witness or experience the discriminatory enforcement of punitive crime policies. Thus, Hagan and Albonetti (1982) conclude that negative perceptions of crime control policies should be more explicit among inner-city residents than individuals living elsewhere.

Political Orientation

It could be argued that a significant portion of the racial divide on support for capital punishment results from African Americans and Whites having substantially different political beliefs that are related to their disparate attitudes toward the death penalty. Scholars suggest that there should be a strong positive association between political conservatism and support for capital punishment. Jacobs and Carmichael (2002) argue that politically conservative beliefs are consistent with a dispositional attributional style. Therefore, conservatives are more likely to see offenders as autonomous, rational, unfettered individuals who are responsible for their acts and therefore deserve to be stridently punished for freely choosing to engage in criminal behavior (Grasmick and McGill 1994). Jacobs and Carmichael further suggest that conservatives believe that vicious criminals are beyond redemption. Thus, political conservatives believe that "pernicious and incorrigible offenders must be executed to ensure that they no longer can harm the innocent" (Jacobs and Carmichael 2002:13). On the other hand, liberals share a situational attributional style, believing that crime is caused by inequitable social conditions and that criminals should be afforded the opportunity to reform themselves (Grasmick and McGill 1994). In short, liberals are more inclined to believe that criminals, including murderers, are redeemable (Applegate et al. 2000).

The extant research on support for capital punishment has consistently found that individuals who hold conservative political views are more likely to endorse capital punishment (Applegate et al. 2000; Borg 1997; Stack 2000, 2003; Unnever and Cullen 2005; Unnever, Cullen, and Fisher 2005; Young 1992). Notably, political conservatives are more likely to support the use of the death penalty for both adults and juveniles (Moon et al. 2000; Vogel and Vogel 2003).

We suggest that differences in the political orientation of African Americans and Whites may partially explain the racial divide in their support for the death penalty. Prior studies have indicated that African Americans are more likely than Whites to identify themselves as being liberal and that liberals are more likely to oppose the death penalty (Asumah and Perkins 2000; Calhoun-Brown 1998; Kilson 1993; Seltzer and Smith 1985). Consequently, part of the racial divide could result from the tendency of African Americans to be politically more liberal than Whites. However, when reporting the effect of political orientation on support for capital punishment, researchers have assumed that its effect is invariant across race. Thus, scholars have assumed that the influence of race on support for the death penalty does not vary across political orientation. This may be an erroneous assumption. It is possible that political orientation may exacerbate the racial divide if these beliefs have a greater influence on support for the death penalty among Whites than African Americans.

There are, and have long been, African Americans who identify themselves as being politically conservative (Asumah and Perkins 2000; Kilson 1993). Researchers trace the lineage of African American conservatism back to individuals such as Booker T. Washington and to clique patterns within the racist-caste structuring of African American life in the South during the interwar era (i.e., between WWI and WWII; Asumah and Perkins 2000; Kilson 1993; Watson 1998). Scholars also acknowledge that African American conservatives espouse many of the same values as White conservatives, including equal opportunity, limited government, self-reliance, and individual initiative, and that African American conservatives oppose many of the same government programs as White conservatives (Asumah and Perkins 2000; Calhoun-Brown 1998; Watson 1998; Welch and Combs 1985). For example, Calhoun-Brown (1998) found no statistical differences in the mean scores of African American and White evangelicals on the issues of abortion, women's role in society, and homosexual adoption. Indeed, Asumah and Perkins (2000) claim that the "political agendas for Black conservatives are no different from that of mainstream White conservatives" (P. 58).

However, it remains problematic whether African American and White conservatives are equally likely to support the death penalty. Prior studies show that African American and White conservatives share similar values, yet they significantly differ in their level of support on specific issues (Calhoun-Brown 1998; Seltzer and Smith 1985). For example, Calhoun-Brown (1998) found significant differences among conservative African Americans and White evangelicals on issues dealing with rights that African Americans had previously been denied, including equal employment and inclusion in society (Calhoun-Brown 1998). These findings indicate that African American conservatives may be less likely than White conservatives to support issues that have historically negatively affected their race (Seltzer and Smith 1985). We test whether the influence of race on support for capital punishment significantly varies across political orientation.

Race and Religion

Scholars have argued that religiosity contributes to a strong sense of group identification among African Americans, which in turn shapes their opinions on contemporary political issues (Smith and Seltzer 2000). Researchers have also argued that African Americans interpret and apply their religious beliefs differently than Whites. For example, it has been reasoned that fundamentalist churches with predominantly White members tend to emphasize a doctrine of individual responsibility and blame—a dispositional attributional style positively associated with support for the death penalty (Borg 1998). In contrast, churches with predominantly African American members endorse a situational attributional style, which is negatively associated with support for capital punishment. This situational attributional style is manifested in their church-related political and social activism that has emphasized civil rights and social justice issues (Calhoun-Brown 1998; Young 1992).

Britt (1998) used the 1991 GSS to test whether African American fundamentalists are less likely to support the death penalty than White Christian fundamentalists and African American and White nonfundamentalists. He found that African American fundamentalists had the lowest levels of support for capital punishment, White fundamentalists reported the highest levels, and African American and White nonfundamentalists were indistinguishable, after controlling for a number of covariates including the respondents' political views, salience of religion, and religious ideology. Britt (1998) concluded that the racial divide that separates Whites and African Americans on the issue of the death penalty partly stems from the differences in how African Americans and Whites apply their religious beliefs. Young (1992) adds to

Britt's findings by suggesting that the individualism associated with White Protestantism is tempered by a more collective orientation that is deeply rooted in African American history.

Research Strategy

Based on our review of the relevant literature, we expect race to be a robust predictor of support for capital punishment. More specifically, we expect race to directly affect support for the death penalty while controlling for our independent variables, social class, being a native Southerner, belonging to a fundamentalist denomination, confidence in the government, political orientation, and covariates. We also investigate the degree to which our independent variables mediated the effect of race—that is, the degree to which they reduced the racial divide in support for the death penalty.

There is considerable research that includes race in models of support for the death penalty (e.g., Unnever and Cullen 2005). Most often, the research either includes race in models as a covariate while concentrating on the effect of other variables such as religious beliefs (e.g., Unnever and Cullen 2006; Unnever, Cullen, and Applegate 2005) or examines the effect of race as it interacts with a specific measure such as belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination (e.g., Britt 1998). With few exceptions (Cochran and Chamlin 2006), these investigations have not systematically examined the range of factors that might account for the racial divide. In particular, beyond whether race retains a statistically significant effect, previous studies have not typically assessed the degree to which the racial divide in public support for the death penalty is mediated by other factors (e.g., political orientation). To explore this issue, we first determine the main effect of race on support for capital punishment and then measure the degree to which our covariates mediate the relationship between race and support for the death penalty. As noted, the spurious/social convergence hypothesis suggests that the covariates should substantively decrease the racial divide.

Beyond controlling for factors that might account for the racial divide, we examine the spurious/social convergence thesis in a second way by exploring whether certain African Americans (e.g., Black conservatives) converge with Whites in their death penalty attitudes. We assess this possibility of selective convergence by testing for statistical interactions of race with several variables. This perspective would predict that African Americans who are conservative, affluent, religiously fundamentalist, from outside the South, or trusted the government would be more likely to converge in their death penalty attitudes with Whites than with African

American and Whites not in these groups (e.g., liberals, poor). But note that the spurious/social convergence thesis argues that any existing cleavages we find should disappear once African Americans share social locations and ideologies found to be more prevalent among Whites. This line of research has not been pursued systematically in previous research, but it is important to do so. For if the racial divide is too robust to be substantively narrowed even selectively, this finding will mean that the significance of race in shaping death penalty attitudes is enduring and not declining. The master status thesis thus will gain added credence.

Method

Data

We analyzed data from the cumulative GSS, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center. The GSS is a replicated cross-sectional survey that is based on a representative sample of adults residing within the Unites States. The GSS sampled approximately 1,500 respondents each year from 1972 to 1993, except for 1979, 1981, and 1992, when no surveys were conducted.

Our intent was to maximize the number of African Americans included in our analyses while including variables relevant to our hypotheses and those that published research have found to predict support for the death penalty. The sample we analyzed comprises the years 1974, 1976, 1977, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1987 to 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2002 and includes 13,823 respondents, of which 1,915 are African American.

Dependent Variables

Respondents were asked whether they favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. The response categories included "favor," "oppose," and "don't know." A dichotomous measure, Death Penalty (1 = favor, 0 = other), was constructed, and 69 percent of the respondents reported that they favor the use of the death penalty for persons convicted of murder.[4]

Research indicates that support for the death penalty for both adults and juveniles is substantially reduced when the respondents are offered the alternative sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole (Moon et al. 2000). Moon et al. (2000) report that 76 percent of surveyed Tennessee residents generally favored the death penalty for adults. Yet when they were offered the alternative of life without the possibility of parole, 45 percent preferred this option to the death penalty. More recently, Vogel and Vogel

(2003) found that 57.6 percent of their respondents in California reported that they either strongly or somewhat favored the use of the death penalty for adults. They also found that of the individuals who favored the use of the death penalty for adults, 42.5 percent favored the use of life without parole when it was offered as an alternative to the death penalty.

Thus, the extant research indicates that how the death penalty question is worded affects estimates of how many people support its use. However, Soss et al. (2003) state that no evidence has been presented, to date, that shows that the wording of the death penalty question affects its relationship with other variables including religious and secular beliefs. Indeed, Unnever and Cullen (2005) created a binary dependent variable that included two choices; respondents were offered the choice of supporting the death penalty or life in prison without the possibility of parole. Their research shows that variables that have been consistently found to influence the binary question of whether or not Americans support the death penalty (yes-no), such as political ideology, also significantly influence the choice between supporting capital punishment or life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. That is, regardless of the wording of the question, politically conservative Americans are found to be more likely to support the death penalty.

This research analyzes a dichotomous measure of support for the death penalty with caution acknowledging that it may overestimate overall support. It is noteworthy that other studies have used a binary measure of support for the death penalty, including Applegate et al. (2000), Borg (1997), Grasmick et al. (1993), Halim and Stiles (2001), Stack (2000, 2003), Young (1992), and Young and Thompson (1995).

Independent Variables

Race. We included a measure of the respondent's race, African American (1 = African American, 0 = Whites). Respondents coded "other" were deleted.

Class location. We used a single item to measure the respondent's class location, Income. Total family income was a summary scale ranging from 1 to 12, where the minimum category denotes an income of "under $1K" and the maximum category denotes "$25,000 or over." Some researchers have argued that family income should be negatively related to support for the death penalty because low-income people have greater direct and indirect contact with the costs of punitive sentences (Soss et al. 2003), whereas others argue that low income should positively predict support for capital punishment (Stack 2003).'[5]

Native Southerner. We created a variable, Southerner (1 = southerner, 0 = others), that assessed whether the respondents resided in the South when they were 16 years old and were living in the South when the interview was conducted. Past research has found that the influence of being a White native Southerner on support for the death penalty varied across political conservatism, religious fundamentalism, and racial intolerance. More specifically, Whites raised in the South who were politically conservative, fundamentalists, and racially intolerant were significantly more likely to support capital punishment than were non-southern Whites (Borg 1997).

Fundamentalists. We used the classification scheme developed by Smith (1990) denoting whether respondents belonged to a fundamentalist denomination to construct our measure, Fundamentalists (1 = fundamentalist denomination, 0 = other).[6] Research investigating whether fundamentalists are more likely to support the death penalty has generated inconsistent results. Some studies report that Christian fundamentalists are more likely to support capital punishment (Grasmick and McGill 1994; Young 1992), whereas other researchers report a null relationship (Applegate et al. 2000; Baumer, Messner, and Rosenfeld 2003; Sandys and McGarrell 1997; Soss et al. 2003; Unnever and Cullen 2006; Unnever, Cullen, and Roberts, 2005; Young and Thompson 1995).

Political orientation. We use a single self-report item that has been extensively used in prior death penalty research, to measure political ideology, Political Conservative (scale of 1-7, with the maximum category denoting *extremely conservative* respondents). The question measuring political orientation included in the 2002 GSS was:

> We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal—point 1—to extremely conservative—point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?"

Confidence in government officials. We used a single item to measure the respondent's level of confidence in government officials. Our measure, Confidence in Government, was based on the response to a question regarding the executive branch of the federal government.

> I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

The responses ranged from 1 (*hardly any*) to 3 (*a great deal*). Prior research has found that Whites who distrust the government were less likely to support capital punishment (Soss et al. 2003).[7]

Controls

As controls, we included variables researchers have found to be related to support for punitive crime control policies that, therefore, could influence our results. Researchers have argued that residents in urban areas, particularly those living in inner cites, should be less likely to support punitive crime control policies such as the death penalty (Hagan and Albonetti 1982; Sampson and Bartusch 1998). Ideally, we would have included a measure of whether the respondent lived in an impoverished socially disorganized inner city (Sampson and Bartusch 1998). The cumulative GSS file contains no such measure. However, it does include a measure of whether the respondent lived in the central city of one of the 12 largest standard metropolitan statistical areas, Central City, (central city = 1, other = 0). We control for gender (1 = male, 0 = female) because the prior research has indicated that males are more likely to support punitive crime control policies (Applegate et al. 2000; Soss et al. 2003; Stack 2000). It is noteworthy that Stack (2000) tested for gender interactions and found no evidence that men and women significantly differed in their reasons for supporting the death penalty. Stack's research thus indicates that males and females should be included in the same analysis when examining predictors of public opinion about the death penalty.

We control for age (measured in years) because it has been hypothesized to positively predict support for capital punishment (Stack 2000). In addition, we controlled for the respondent's level of education. Education (years completed) is included because it has been shown to negatively predict support for capital punishment (Britt 1998; Grasmick and McGill 1994; Halim and Stiles 2001; Sandys and McGarrell 1997; Young 1992). A consistent predictor of support for the death penalty is church attendance, with support decreasing as attendance increases (Applegate et al. 2000; Britt 1998; Grasmick et al. 1993; Grasmick and McGill 1994; Sandys and McGarrell 1997; Unnever and Cullen 2006). Our measure of church attendance was based on the following question. "How often do you attend religious services?" The response categories ranged from 0 (*never*) to 8 (*several times a week*).

Researchers have investigated the hypothesis that individuals who fear being criminally victimized or who have been victimized are more likely to support the death penalty. These studies have generated mixed results, with

research finding that fear of victimization predicts support for capital punishment (Young and Thompson 1995), whereas other studies report a null relationship (Applegate et al. 2000; Stack 2000, 2003). Notably, racial differences have been reported. For example, Borg (1998) found that the experience of losing a personal acquaintance, friend, or family member to homicide does not invariably lead to greater support for capital punishment. However, Borg further reports that White support for the death penalty increases if they knew someone who was murdered but decreases among African Americans. In addition, Cohn, Barkan, and Halteman (1991) found that Whites are more likely to be punitive if they are racially prejudiced, but the most salient predictor of punitiveness among African Americans was their fear of victimization.

We control for fear of victimization.[8] The following question was used to construct our measure of fear of victimization, Fear. "Is there any area right around here—that is, within a mile—where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?" We recoded its responses so that 1 equaled yes and 0 equaled no.

We used binary logistic regression to analyze our dichotomous dependent variable, death penalty, and we report standardized logistic regression coefficients and log odds ratios. Two-tailed tests of significance are reported. Listwise deletion of missing data was used.

Results

Direct Effects

We first assess whether African Americans were significantly more likely to oppose the death penalty than Whites. Table 1 presents two models. The first model includes race and our controls. The second model presents a full binary logistic regression equation that regressed support for capital punishment on race while controlling for our independent variables and our control measures. Entering our independent variables into the second equation allows for an assessment of the degree to which they mediated the effect of race—that is, the degree to which our independent variables reduced the racial divide in support for the death penalty.

The results presented in model 1 of Table 1 indicate that African Americans were significantly more likely to oppose the death penalty than Whites. The predicted odds of African Americans supporting capital punishment were nearly one fourth the odds of Whites. The results also show that respondents with more years of education, who resided in the central city, and often attended church were significantly less likely to support the

Table 1
Binary Logistic Regression Analysis of Support for the Death Penalty

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
Age	.000	1.000	–.009	.999
Male	.130***	1.609	.116***	1.528
Education	–.043***	.974	–.078***	.954
Central city	–.026**	.846	–.012	.926
Attend	–.022*	.985	–.059***	.960
Fear	.026**	1.102	.033**	1.133
African Americans	–.230***	.299	–.208***	.334
Income	—		.115***	1.074
Southerner	—		.004	1.019
Fundamentalists	—		.015	1.061
Confidence in government	—		–.005	.984
Conservative	—		.177***	1.274
Model χ^2	758.59***		1151.75***	
Max rescaled R^2	.075		.112	

Note: Standardized logistic regression coefficients and odds ratios are presented.
*$p < .05$, two-tailed. **$p < .01$, two-tailed. ***$p < .001$, two-tailed.

death penalty, and males and Americans who feared being victimized were significantly more likely to support the death penalty.

The results from model 2 of Table 1 indicate that African Americans were significantly more likely to oppose capital punishment after controlling for the effects of our independent variables and control measures. The predicted odds of African Americans supporting capital punishment were one third the odds of Whites. The models presented in Table 1 also show that the influence of race on support for the death penalty decreased after including the independent variables. The decrease in the size of the race coefficient from model 1 to model 2 indicates that 10 percent of the effect of race on support for the death penalty was mediated by the independent variables. In the next section, we test whether the effect of race on support for capital punishment significantly varied across our independent variables.

The results from model 2 of Table 1 also show that the respondent's social class, as measured by his or her income, was related to support for the death penalty.[9] Respondents with higher incomes were more likely to support capital punishment. As expected, the standardized logistic regression coefficients presented in Table 1 indicate that race had a greater influence on support for the death penalty than our measure of class. Indeed, race was the most robust predictor of support for capital punishment.

Model 2 of Table 1 also indicates that political conservatives and people who fear being victimized were significantly more likely to support the death penalty, and respondents with more years of education and those who attended church often were significantly less likely to support the death penalty. Notably, living in the central city, being a native Southerner, belonging to a fundamentalist church, lacking confidence in government officials, and age were unrelated to support for capital punishment.[10]

Interaction Effects

Race × *Income*. Our review of the literature suggested that the influence of race on support for the death penalty may vary across levels of income. We explore whether income has a greater effect on White support for capital punishment than on African American support. We test this hypothesis by including a Race × Income interaction term in the full regression equation. The regression equation with the Race × Income interaction term is presented in model 1 of Table 2. The results presented in model 1 of Table 2 indicate that the interaction term was statistically significant.

To investigate how the effect of race on support for the death penalty varied across income levels, we generated predicted probabilities of support for capital punishment for African Americans and Whites. To generate predicted probabilities, we deleted variables that were insignificant in the full regression equation presented in model 1 of Table 2 (Age, Central City, Native Southerner, Fundamentalist, and Confidence in Government) and reestimated the regression equation with the interaction term included.[11] We assigned mean values to the ordinal and interval variables and values of one were assigned to Male and Fear.[12] Predicted probabilities for African Americans and Whites were generated for two income levels, 1 and 12—the lowest and highest income levels. The predicted probability of Whites with the highest income level supporting capital punishment was .814, and the predicted probability for Whites with the least amount of income was .638, a difference of 17.6 percent. In comparison, the predicted probability of African Americans with the highest income level supporting capital punishment was .552, and the predicted probability for African Americans with the lowest income level was .474, a difference of 7.8 percent. These results show that class position, as measured by income, had less influence on altering African American support than White support for the death penalty. Notably, poor African Americans were less likely to support capital punishment than wealthier Blacks.

Table 2
Binary Logistic Regression Analyses of Support for the Death Penalty

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
Age	–.009	.999	–.009	.999	–.010	.999	–.013	.999	–.009	.999
Male	.117***	1.532	.115***	1.523	.115***	1.525	.115***	1.521	.116***	1.527
Education	–.078***	.954	–.078***	.954	–.077***	.955	–.078	.954	–.077***	.955
Income	.134***	1.086	.114***	1.073	.115***	1.073	.113***	1.072	.115***	1.073
Central city	–.008	.959	–.009	.954	–.009	.953	–.008	.957	–.008	.957
Southerner	.006	1.025	.029	1.127	.006	1.027	.009	1.039	.003	1.015
Fundamentalists	.016	1.066	.011	1.045	.016	1.065	.011	1.047	.038**	1.162
Attend	–.059***	.960	–.058***	.960	–.058***	.961	–.063***	.957	–.059***	.960
Confidence in government	–.005	.984	–.007	.981	.003	1.009	–.005	.985	–.005	.984
Conservative	.177***	1.273	.178***	1.276	.178***	1.275	.222***	1.355	.176***	1.273
Fear	.033**	1.133	.031**	1.121	.033**	1.129	.033**	1.131	.033**	1.129
African Americans	–.123***	.524	–.178***	.393	–.146***	.463	.000	.999	–.161***	.430
African Americans × Income	–.092***	.948	—		—		—		—	
African Americans × Southerner			–.057**	.667	—		—		—	
African Americans × Confidence					–.067***	.858	—	—		
African Americans × Conservative							–.223***	.748	—	
African Americans × Fundamentalist									–.070***	.642
Model χ^2	1163.2***		1165.2***		1155.1***		1214.2***		1167.0***	
Max rescaled R^2	.113		.114		.113		.118		.114	

Note: Standardized logistic regression coefficients and odds ratios are presented.
*$p < .05$, two-tailed. **$p < .01$, two-tailed. ***$p < .001$, two-tailed.

Race × Native Southerner. Our review of the extant research indicated that the effect of race on support for the death penalty may vary across whether the respondent was a native southerner. More specifically, we examine whether southern African Americans are less supportive of the death penalty than nonsouthern Blacks and whether southern Whites are more supportive of capital punishment than Whites residing outside the South. We test this hypothesis by including a Race × Southerner interaction term in the full regression. The regression equation with the Race × Southerner interaction term is presented in model 2 of Table 2. The results presented in model 2 of Table 2 indicate that the interaction term was statistically significant.

Predicted probabilities for African Americans and Whites were generated for those who were native Southerners and those who were residents of other regions, using the procedures outlined above.[13] The predicted probability of native southern Whites supporting capital punishment was .801, and the predicted probability for nonnative southerners was .779, a difference of 2.2 percent. In comparison, the predicted probability of native southern African Americans supporting the death penalty was .515, and the predicted probability for nonnative southern Blacks was .585, a difference of negative 7 percent. These results show that being a native southerner had a greater influence on altering African American support than White support for capital punishment. In addition, the results indicate that being a native Southerner decreased African American support and increased White support for the death penalty. Notably, native southern African Americans were less likely to support capital punishment than were nonnative southern Blacks.

Race × Confidence in Government. Our review of prior studies suggested that the influence of race on support for the death penalty may vary across levels of reported confidence in government officials. It is possible that African Americans who distrust government officials may be more likely to oppose capital punishment than Whites who lack confidence in government officials. We test this possibility by including a Race × Confidence in Government interaction term in the full regression equation. The regression equation with the Race × Confidence in Government interaction term is presented in model 3 of Table 2. The results presented in model 3 of Table 2 indicate that the interaction term was statistically significant.

Predicted probabilities for African Americans and Whites were generated for those who had a great deal of confidence (a value of 1) and those who had hardly any confidence in government officials (a value of 3), using the procedures outlined above.[14] The predicted probability of supporting the death penalty for Whites with a great deal of confidence in government officials

was .784, and the predicted probability for Whites with hardly any confidence was .787, a difference of .003 percent. In comparison, the predicted probability of African Americans supporting capital punishment with a great deal of confidence in government officials was .596, and the predicted probability for Blacks with hardly any confidence was .525, a difference of 7.1 percent. These results show that lacking confidence in government officials had a greater influence on altering African American support for the death penalty than it did for Whites. Notably, the results show that African Americans who trusted government officials were more likely to support capital punishment than those who distrusted government officials.

Race × Political Orientation. Our review of prior research indicated that the influence of race on support for the death penalty should vary across levels of political orientation. We examined whether political orientation had less influence on altering African American than White support for capital punishment. We tested this hypothesis by including a Race × Conservative interaction term in the full regression. The regression equation with the Race × Conservative interaction term is presented in model 4 of Table 2. The results presented in model 4 of Table 2 indicate that the interaction term was statistically significant.

Predicted probabilities for African Americans and Whites were generated for extreme liberals (a value of 1) and extreme conservatives (a value of 7) using the procedures outlined above.[15] The predicted probability of extremely conservative Whites supporting capital punishment was .928, and the predicted probability for extremely liberal Whites was .674, a difference of 25.4 percent. In comparison, the predicted probability of extremely conservative African Americans supporting capital punishment was .634, and the predicted probability for extremely liberal Blacks was .613, a difference of 2.1 percent. These results show that political orientation had a greater influence on altering White than African American support for the death penalty. Notably, extremely conservative African Americans were only slightly more likely to support capital punishment than were extremely liberal Blacks.

Race × Fundamentalism. Finally, we examined whether the influence of race on support for the death penalty varied across whether African Americans and Whites belonged to a fundamentalist denomination. We investigated whether belonging to a fundamentalist church positively influenced White support and negatively influenced African American support for capital punishment. We tested this hypothesis by including a Race × Fundamentalists interaction term in the full regression equation. The regression equation with

the Race × Fundamentalists interaction term is presented in model 5 of Table 2. These results show that the Race × Fundamentalists interaction term was statistically significant.

Predicted probabilities for African Americans and Whites who did or did not belong to a Christian fundamentalist church were generated using the procedures outlined above.[16] The predicted probability of White fundamentalists supporting capital punishment was .805, and the predicted probability for White nonfundamentalists was .779, a difference of 2.6 percent. In comparison, the predicted probability of African American fundamentalists supporting capital punishment was .531, and the predicted probability of Black nonfundamentalists was .603, a difference of negative 7.2 percent. These results show that belonging to a fundamentalist church had a greater influence on altering African American than White support for the death penalty. In addition, these results indicate that belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination decreased African American support for the death penalty and increased White support. Notably, African American Christian fundamentalists were less likely to support capital punishment than were Blacks who belonged to other denominations.

Discussion

Hacker (1992) has suggested that even in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, the United States remains "two nations—black and white, hostile, separate, unequal." This chasm is largely rooted in enduring material disparities that manifest themselves in the concentration of disadvantage primarily in inner-city areas (Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1987). But African Americans and Whites are also potentially divided by their views on social issues, including the contentious issue of crime and its punishment.

Crime and punishment assume special salience because of both the ostensible differential involvement of African Americans in street crime and, in particular, the disproportionate number of young Black males arrested and subsequently incarcerated (Kennedy 1997; Mauer 1999; Miller 1996; Tonry 1995). Research indicates that African Americans and Whites do not conceptualize "American justice" in the same terms. Where White citizens tend to see the scales of justice as reasonably balanced, their African American counterparts believe that unfairness, based on race, is integral to the operation of the criminal justice system (Hagan, Shedd, and Payne 2005; Henderson et al. 1997; Sampson and Bartusch 1998). At issue is the very legitimacy of the justice system. In this context, the death

penalty—as the ultimate exercise of state power—potentially takes on special significance.

It might be possible that those convicted of capital crimes are a group that would elicit little sympathy—that all Americans, regardless of race, would be inclined to endorse their receiving their "just deserts." As we have seen, this is not the case. Although White support for capital punishment is high, the comparable level of support for African Americans is tenuous. The GSS data show that the vast majority of Whites support the death penalty, whereas the majority of African Americans oppose the capital punishment—a racial divide of 24 percentage points. Equally relevant, this divide persists in multivariate models even when a range of correlates identified by previous research are controlled. Our research found that the predicted odds of African Americans supporting the death penalty were one third the odds of Whites.

Perhaps most important, the analysis showed that factors that might be expected to bring African Americans and Whites together—class, confidence in government, conservative politics, and religious fundamentalism—either do not narrow Black-White punishment attitudes or, at best, have only modest effects. That is, it would seem plausible to anticipate that once the racial divide was probed further, we would discover that African Americans who were religious fundamentalists, affluent, conservative, and trusted the state would have views similar to their White counterparts. The data suggested, however, that race remains a master status that defines views on capital punishment.

Thus, for Whites, support for capital punishment—though high virtually across the social board—escalates for those who have high incomes, embrace conservative politics, express confidence in the government, and are religious fundamentalists. For African Americans, income and confidence in the government do increase death penalty support. Even so, the effects are limited, with the level of support for capital punishment for African Americans who are affluent and who trust the government remaining far below that of Whites with similar views (a gap of more than 20 percentage points). Most instructive, the influence of being a conservative has little impact on African American death penalty attitudes (in contrast to its substantive impact on White sentiments), and embracing fundamentalist religious beliefs actually increased the racial divide in support for capital punishment.[17]

Taken together, these results provide little support for the spurious/social convergence thesis—the idea that the racial gap can be substantially reduced either by controlling for known predictors of death penalty attitudes or by focusing on African Americans who are socially similar to Whites who tend to endorse the death penalty. Blacks' ambivalence about, if not opposition to,

the death penalty is not confined to a subgroup of African Americans living in impoverished areas or embracing far-Left political views. Rather, it appears that doubts about capital punishment cut across socioeconomic, political, and religious lines within the African American community. Accordingly, capital punishment likely will remain a social issue in which race will function as a master status and on which there is likely to be an enduring racial divide. Thus, in this sociopolitical domain, the significance of race is not declining but of continuing salience.[18] One potential social cost of the continuing use of capital punishment is that it contributes—admittedly to an extent that is difficult to finely calibrate—to the more general racial divide in the nation identified by scholars such as Hacker (1992).

This firmness of the racial divide in death penalty attitudes again leads us to suggest that it may be rooted in African Americans' shared history of racial oppression—epitomized by the use of lynchings as a mechanism of racial control in the South—that causes Blacks generally to be wary of the use of lethal action by the state. This historical legacy, however, might be even more salient in the context of the South. Today, nowhere in the United States are more African Americans facing execution than in the South (though this is also true for Whites). Of the 1,554 African American prisoners awaiting execution at the end of 2002, 846, or 54.4 percent, were in southern states (Bonczar and Snell 2003). Notably, our data shows that being a native Southerner spread the racial divide, with African American support decreasing and White support increasing the advocacy for capital punishment. In any event, the role of racially inspired lynchings in shaping contemporary African American views on the death penalty and criminal justice more generally is an area that future research should investigate more fully

Further elaborations and tests of the current research also may wish to probe the discourse that is used by African Americans and Whites as they describe their reasons for either supporting or opposing the death penalty (Fleury-Steiner 2002; Radelet and Borg 2000). A more nuanced approach, perhaps involving focus groups of African Americans, may reveal the way in which the "cognitive landscapes" that frame contemporary perceptions of injustice are laden with the legacy of criminal justice practices that have targeted minorities and especially African Americans (Hagan et al. 2005). These elaborations might want to explore how this historical lens shapes the interpretations of African Americans as they witness contemporary instances of criminal injustice such as the beating of Rodney King and African American inmates being exonerated from death row (Unnever and Cullen 2005). This research can also shed light on the reasons why the

potential ameliorating effects of political, social, and economic gains have had a negligible impact on the racial divide in public support for the death penalty but have narrowed it in relation to other policies such as social welfare expenditures (Davis 2005). Lastly, such research may address why potential social convergence effects, such as political orientation, differentially influence African Americans and Whites.

Research on "hegemonic legal narratives" may stimulate needed public discussions on how crime provides Whites an opportunity to assert their racial superiority over African Americans and how African Americans seek less punitive forms of punishment as a more global resistance to White racism (Feagin 2001; Feagin and O'Brien 2003; Fleury-Steiner 2002; Unnever and Cullen 2005). Further tests of our findings may find that the racial divide in support for other public policies such as affirmative action also emerges from the legacy of lynchings coupled with the belief that the United States is a society deeply polarized by race and class inequalities. Further elaborations of the current research thus should shed considerable light on how the criminal justice system and political institutions can shape contemporary policies to reduce the racial divide within the United States and reduce the racial tensions that permeate American urban centers. The results presented here clearly indicate that social, political, and economic gains will not substantively bridge the gap between African Americans and White public opinion. Rather, our data suggest that the social convergence of African Americans may require a public atonement for the historical oppression of African Americans by the criminal justice system.

Until such policies incorporate these initiatives, it is likely that the death penalty—the specter of putting another African American citizen to death—will remain symbolic of the limits of social justice in the United States. Within the African American community, executions are more likely to raise questions about whether justice has been served—whether the accused is truly guilty or, if guilty, whether a White offender would have received the same penalty. Or, in the least, there is perhaps an understanding that though the commission of a capital crime was, in some sense, chosen, it was also a decision bounded by life circumstances rooted in large social inequities (Hacker 1992; Young 1992).

For most Whites, race is often a peripheral or episodic consideration—something that may influence their views but not something that preoccupies their thinking and interactions on a daily basis.[19] For African Americans, however, race remains integral to understanding how everyday life, including life within the criminal justice system, functions in the United States (Henderson et al. 1997; Sniderman and Piazza 1993). As a

result, for African Americans, the state's use of lethal force—whether in the death chamber or elsewhere (e.g., police on the street)—is likely to be an occasion for sorrow and doubt rather than for celebration and confidence.

Notes

1. In his latest work, *The Cultural Contradictions of American Capital Punishment*, Zimring (2003) notes that a disproportionate number of the executions in the United States have taken place in southern states. He theorizes that southern states have a "culture of punitiveness" that fuels their inordinate use of the death penalty. Zimring argues that this present day "culture of punitiveness" emerged from a history of nongovernmental violence—a vigilante tradition—that was rampant in the American South. Notably, Zimring argues that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, these vigilante values do not include White racism. His theory also does not discuss how past racial conflicts may be shaping the perceptions that African Americans have about the death penalty. In this article, we focus on whether race is a relevant predictor of American support for capital punishment. Indeed, it is our position that the vigilante tradition that Zimring labels as a "culture of punitiveness" has shaped and is shaping the racial divide in public opinion about the death penalty. Future research may explore whether individuals who endorse vigilante values and who live in the South harbor racial prejudices. Researchers also may wish to explore whether support for state executions is most likely to be found among individuals raised in the southern vigilante tradition and who harbor racial prejudices.

2. Zimring (2003) argues that the southern vigilante tradition—the root cause of the high per capita rate of executions in the South—has embedded within it a deep-seated distrust of government. He also argues that the death penalty is a definitive exercise of state power. Therefore, Zimring suggests that it is contradictory for vigilantes to support the death penalty if they have a deep distrust of government officials. He argues that vigilantes resolve this contradiction by perceiving that the death penalty is a community process rather than the exercise of a distant and self-interested government.

3. The issue of the federal government's failure to intervene to prevent lynchings is an issue that continues to be etched in the national conscience. On June 13, 2005, more than 100 descendants of Anthony Crawford—an African American landowner who was beaten by a mob, tied to a truck and dragged through town, hung from a tree in the Abbeville, South Carolina, fairgrounds, and shot about 200 times—came to Washington, D.C., to hear the Senate apologize for doing nothing to stop his murder and the lynchings of thousands of others over decades. A resolution was passed by the Senate that, in part, stated:

> Whereas lynching prompted African-Americans to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and prompted members of B'nai B'rith to found the Anti-Defamation League; Whereas nearly 200 anti-lynching bills were introduced in Congress during the first half of the twentieth century; Whereas between 1890 and 1952, 7 Presidents petitioned Congress to end lynching; Whereas between 1920 and 1940, the House of Representatives passed 3 strong anti-lynching measures Whereas protection against lynching was the minimum and most basic of Federal responsibilities, yet the Senate failed to enact anti-lynching legislation despite repeated requests by civil rights groups, Presidents, and the House of Representatives. (Senate Resolution 442, 2005)

The Senate failed to enact antilynching legislation, mostly because powerful southern lawmakers derailed the efforts through use of the filibuster, or extended debate. The resolution concludes with the following:

> Resolved, That the Senate– (1) apologizes to the victims and survivors of lynching for its failure to enact anti-lynching legislation; (2) expresses its deepest sympathies and most solemn regrets to the descendants of victims of lynching whose ancestors were deprived of life, human dignity, and the constitutional protections accorded all other citizens of the United States; and (3) remembers the history of lynching, to ensure that these personal tragedies will be neither forgotten nor repeated. (Senate Resolution 442, 2005)

It is also noteworthy that contemporary African American authors—including poets Langston Hughes and Maya Angelo—have written about lynchings and that Billie Holiday's best-selling record, *Strange Fruit*, was about lynching.

4. Researchers who use the General Social Survey (GSS) to analyze public opinion on the death penalty generally juxtapose those who stated that they support capital punishment against those who are either oppose or responded that they "don't know" (e.g., Baumer, Messner, and Rosenfeld 2003). In these data, less than 6 percent of the respondents stated that they did not know whether they supported the death penalty. We replicated our analysis excluding those who did not know, and the results were substantively the same as those reported. For an analysis of the factors that predict those who hold weak attitudes toward capital punishment, see Unnever, Roberts, and Cullen (2005).

5. We examined multiple measures of social class including self-reported social class, whether at any time during the past 10 years the respondent was unemployed and looking for work for as long as a month and whether the respondent was self-employed or worked for someone else. Income had the largest zero-order correlation with support for the death penalty and the largest standardized logisitic regression coefficient when included in the full regression equation presented in model 1 of Table 1.

6. Smith (1990) used five different techniques to categorize denominations as fundamentalist: "1) utilization of prior classification schemes, 2) membership in theologically oriented ecumenical associations, 3) surveys of denomination members, 4) surveys of denominational clergy, and 5) theological beliefs of denominations" (P. 226).

7. Unfortunately, for all the years analyzed here, the GSS did not include questions that specifically measured the degree to which Americans distrusted local criminal justice professionals such as the police, prosecutors, and judges. Future researchers may wish to replicate our analysis with a more refined focus on whether support for the death penalty varies depending on the degree to which African Americans and Whites distrust local government officials—especially those directly involved in procuring death sentences.

8. The cumulative GSS includes a measure of whether the respondent was a vicarious victim (CIDEKNEW) of homicide (Borg 1998). However, this question was only asked from 1988 to 1991. The cumulative GSS also includes two measures of whether the respondent was a victim of a burglary or a robbery. We would lose 3,012 respondents if we included these measures in our regression analyses, and an analysis showed that including them would not substantively alter the results presented in model 1 of Table 1.

9. It could be argued that our use of family income is not a valid measure of the respondent's social class because it is skewed toward the highest income category. Our selection of this measure was based on it being asked across all of the years included in our analysis. It would have been more preferable to use an income measure with more categories such as the

GSS measure used in 1998 (INCOME98), which has 23 rather than 12 response categories. However, including INCOME98 as our measure of class would result in eliminating all the years prior to 1998. To further explore the relationship between income and support for the death penalty, we examined another measure of social class/income (FINRELA): "Compared with American families in general, would you say your family income is far below average, below average, average, above average, or far above average?" The results presented in model 2 of Table 1 were substantively the same regardless of which measure of income we included in the regression equation.

10. We also examined whether a measure of urbanity had a direct effect on support for the death penalty by substituting it in the full regression equation presented in model 1 of Table 1, and its relationship with support for capital punishment was statistically insignificant.

11. We used the following equation to generate the probabilities:

Predicted probability of supporting capital punishment = –.261 + African American (–.616) + Male (.423) + Education (–.047) + Income (.082) + Attend (–.039) + Conservative (.243) + Fear (.117) + Black × Income (–.054)

12. The mean level of education was 13 years, the mean income category was 10, the mean level of church attendance was 4, the mean level for Confidence in Government was 2, and the mean level of political orientation was 4.

13. We used the following equation to generate the probabilities:

Predicted probability of supporting capital punishment = –.183 + African American (–.920) + Male (.417) + Education (–.046) + Income (.070) + South (.134) + Attend (–.040) + Conservative (.244) + Fear (.106) + Black × Southerner (–.415)

14. We used the following equation to generate the probabilities:

Predicted probability of supporting capital punishment = –.180 + African American (–.746) + Male (.418) + Education (–.046) + Income (.071) + Confidence in Government (.009) + Attend (–.039) + Conservative (.245) + Fear (.113) + Black × Confidence in Government (–.152)

15. We used the following equation to generate the probabilities:

Predicted probability of supporting capital punishment = –.367 + African American (.020) + Male (.416) + Education (–.046) + Income (.069) + Conservative (.305) + Attend (–.043) + Fear (.114) + Black × Conservative (.290)

16. We used the following equation to generate the probabilities:

Predicted probability of supporting capital punishment = –.194 + African American (–.844) + Male (.421) + Education (–.045) + Income (.071) + Conservative (.240) + Attend (–.041) + Fear (.114) + Black × Fundamentalist (–.448)

17. Our finding that African American conservatives and Black liberals share similar sentiments toward the death penalty does not preclude individual African American conservatives

from supporting capital punishment (Asumah and Perkins 2000). For example, Supreme Court Justice Thomas invoked the "race card" as he equated his nomination process to a "high tech lynching," yet as a Supreme Court Justice his rulings show that he is one of most unwavering supporters of the death penalty (Watson 1998). To further explore within-African American differences in their support for the death penalty, we reproduced the analysis presented in model 2 of Table 1 including only African Americans. This analysis examined the factors that predict support for capital punishment among African Americans. The results from this analysis, based on 1,915 African Americans, indicated that three factors predicted support, fear of victimization, belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination, and confidence in the executive branch. African Americans who feared being victimized (standardized regression coefficient = .058, p = .03) were more likely to support the death penalty, and African Americans who were Christian fundamentalists (–.05, p = .03) and those who lacked confidence in the government (–.06, p = .01) were less likely to support the death penalty. Three other findings were notable. First, the results indicated that the political worldview among African Americans did not determine support for capital punishment; liberal and conservative African Americans expressed similar public opinions toward the death penalty. Second, the full logistic regression equation explained relatively little of the variance in support for the death penalty, Max-rescaled R^2 equaled .02. The latter finding suggests a need for additional research on why most African Americans oppose executing convicted murderers. We elaborate on this need in the discussion section. Third, the results indicate that age does not predict support for capital punishment among African Americans. These data tentatively indicate that the impact of lynchings on African American is not an age-graded effect with older African Americans expressing less support than their more youthful counterparts for the death penalty.

18. We explored whether the racial divide in support for the death penalty was a result of when the surveys were conducted. The surveys included in our analysis span four decades, from the 1970s to 2002. We created three dummy variables, one for each decade: 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The contrast category was the years 2000 and 2002. We included the three dummy variables for the decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in the full logistic regression equation presented in model 2 of Table 1. The standardized logistic regression coefficient for race without controlling for the decade when the surveys were conducted was –.208 (see model 2 of Table 1), and the standardized regression coefficient for race after controlling for when the surveys were conducted was –.217 (p = .000). To further investigate whether the racial divide in support for the death penalty has persisted into the twenty-first century, we reproduced the analysis reported in model 2 of Table 1 for the years 2000 and 2002 (n = 1,039). The standardized logistic regression for race limiting the sample to only those respondents surveyed in 2000 and 2002 was –.235 (p = .000). At the turn of the twenty-first century, the predicted odds of an African American supporting the death penalty were one fifth the odds of Whites. Clearly, these analyses indicate that the racial divide in support for the death penalty is of continuing salience.

19. Previous research has found that White racism is related to support for capital punishment. We did not include measures of White racism because we include both African Americans and Whites, not just Whites (for studies that included only Whites, see Barkan and Cohn 1994, 2005; Borg 1997; Soss et al. 2003). The GSS does contain one item that might be used as a proxy for racial antagonism that was asked on the same ballots as the measures presented in Table 1 and that spanned the years included in our analysis: "Do you think there should be laws against marriages between (Negroes/Blacks/African-Americans) and Whites?" The responses were yes or no. We included this item in the full logistic regression model presented in model 2 of Table 1, and the results were substantively the same—there was a racial

divide in support for the death penalty after controlling for racial animosities. The standardized logistic regression coefficient for race without a measure of racial antagonism included was –.208, and with the measure of racial antagonism included, the race regression coefficient was –.174. Future research may further explore the degree to which White racism affects African Americans' opinions of the death penalty and its impact on the racial divide (e.g., see Unnever and Cullen, in press).

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