

October 13, 2009

In U.S., Two-Thirds Continue to Support Death Penalty

Little change in recent years despite international opposition

by Frank Newport

PRINCETON, NJ -- Gallup's annual Crime Survey finds that 65% of Americans continue to support the use of the death penalty for persons convicted of murder, while 31% oppose it -- continuing a trend that has shown little change over the last six years.

Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?

2001-2009 trends from Gallup Poll Crime Survey, conducted each October

■ % In favor ■ % Not in favor



GALLUP POLL

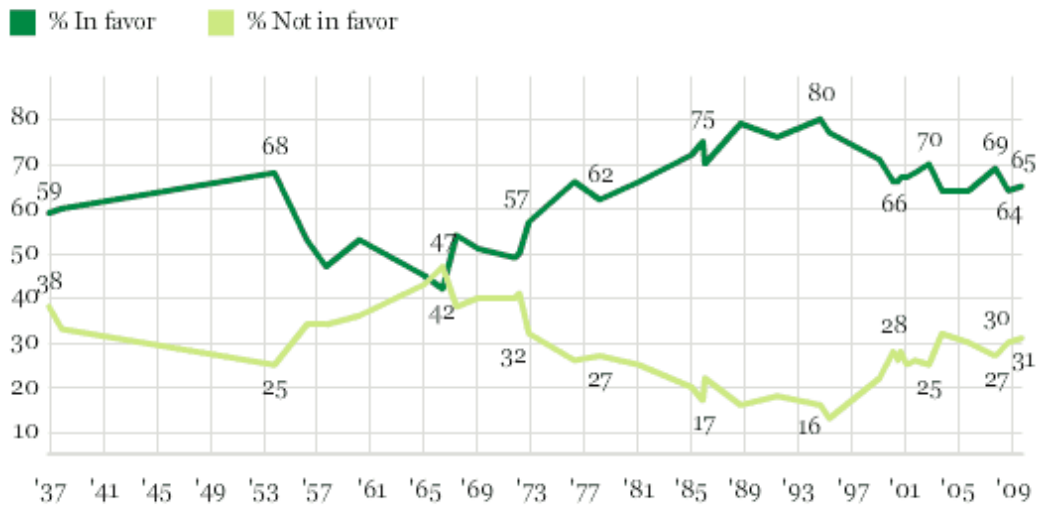
Opponents of the death penalty have pointed out that just five countries -- China, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States -- carry out most of the known executions around the world, and that the number of countries that still allow the death penalty has been dwindling. Despite these worldwide trends, Gallup's annual October update on Americans' attitudes toward the death penalty shows no diminution in support for state-sanctioned executions in cases of murder. The current 65% support level is roughly equal with what has been measured for most of this decade.

"For many Americans, agreement with the assertion that innocent people have been put to death does not preclude simultaneous endorsement of the death penalty."

Gallup's death-penalty data stretch back more than seven decades -- making attitudes toward the death

penalty one of Gallup's oldest trends. Gallup's earliest reading, in 1936, found that 59% of Americans supported the use of the death penalty in cases of murder, compared to 38% who opposed it. The all-time high level of 80% support came in September 1994, just before the midterm elections that swept Democrats out of power and at a time when Americans most often cited crime as the most important problem facing the nation. The low points came in the period of time from the mid-1950s through the early 1970s. During some of this time, the death penalty was illegal, and support dropped as low as 42% in 1966.

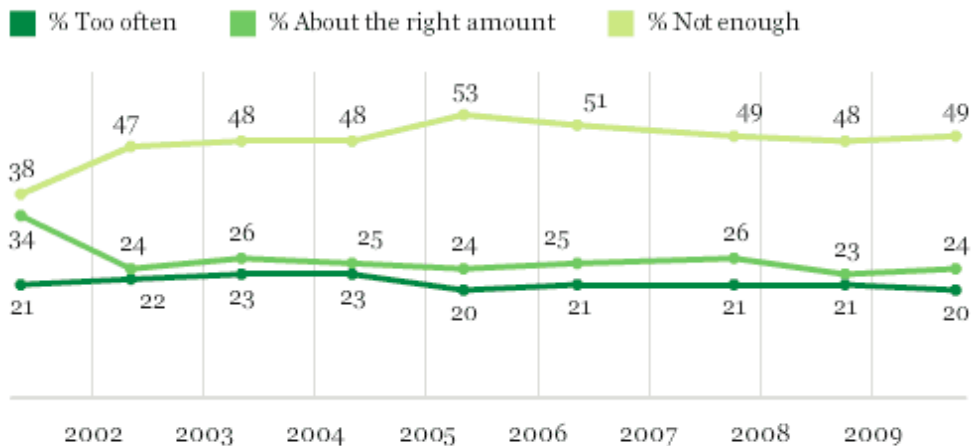
Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?



GALLUP POLL

This year's update also shows that nearly half (49%) of Americans say the death penalty is not imposed often enough, roughly in line with the trend on this measure since 2002. Twenty-four percent say it is imposed "about the right amount," while 20% say it is imposed too often -- a percentage that has been only as high as 23% in recent years.

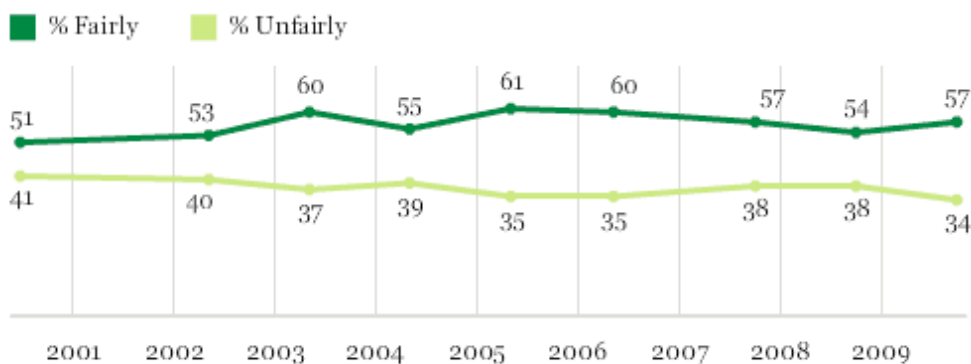
In your opinion, is the death penalty imposed -- [too often, about the right amount, or not often enough]?



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Opponents of the death penalty often argue that it is applied unfairly -- that members of certain minority groups are more likely to receive the death penalty than others convicted of the same crimes, or that the arbitrary differences in trial procedures, judges, and jurisdictions can make a difference in who receives the death penalty and who doesn't. Still, a majority of Americans -- 57% -- say they believe the death penalty is applied fairly in the country today, while 34% say it is applied unfairly. The "fairly" percentage is down slightly from the decade's high point of 61% in 2005.

Generally speaking, do you believe the death penalty is applied fairly or unfairly in this country today?

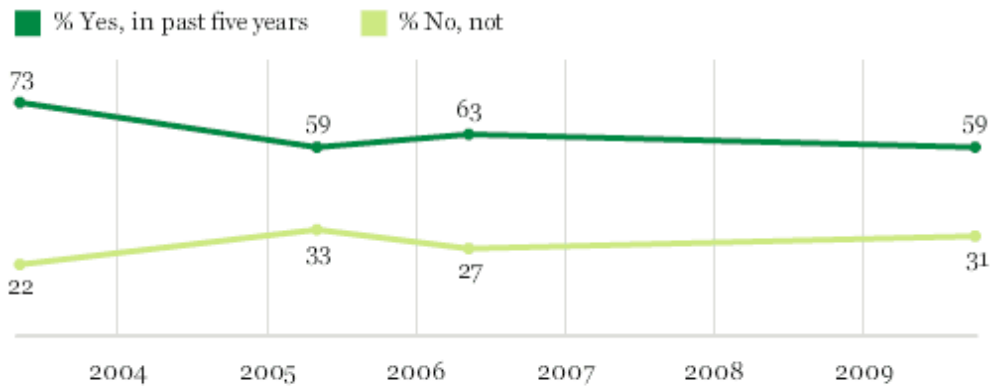


GALLUP POLL

Another argument against the death penalty focuses on cases in which it has been shown that innocent people have been put to death. The finality of execution obviously precludes the possibility of redress if, at some later point, DNA or other evidence finds that the individual in question was wrongly convicted of his or her crime. The American public would appear to be somewhat sympathetic to this argument: this year's poll finds 59% of Americans agreeing that within the last five years, "a person has been

executed under the death penalty who was, in fact, innocent of the crime he or she was charged with." A little less than a third disagree.

How often do you think that a person has been executed under the death penalty who was, in fact, innocent of the crime he or she was charged with -- do you think this has happened in the past five years, or not?



GALLUP POLL

However, for many Americans, agreement with the assertion that innocent people have been put to death does not preclude simultaneous endorsement of the death penalty. A third of all Americans, 34%, believe an innocent person has been executed and at the same time support the death penalty. This is higher than the 23% who believe an innocent person has been executed and simultaneously oppose the death penalty.

Relationship Between Support for Death Penalty and Belief That an Innocent Person Has Been Executed in the Last Five Years

Each number of a percentage of the total sample

	Believe that an innocent person has been executed in the last five years	Do not believe that an innocent person has been executed in the last five years
Support the death penalty in cases of murder	34%	23%
Opposed to the death penalty	25%	5%

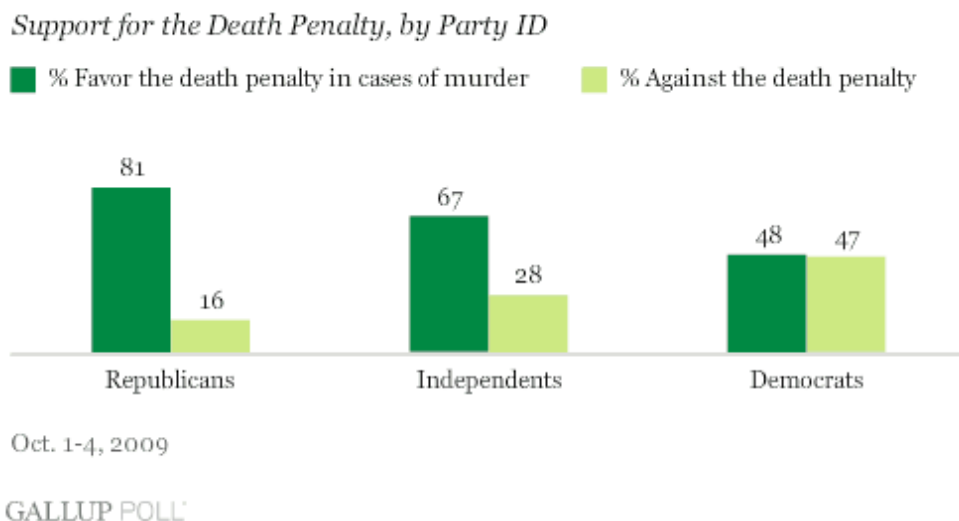
GALLUP POLL

Looked at differently, the data show that 57% of those who believe an innocent person has been executed also support the death penalty. This is significantly higher than the 39% who hold this belief and (perhaps more consistently) oppose the death penalty.

Partisan Differences

The death penalty is favored by most Republicans nationwide, but it also receives the general support of

a solid majority of independents. Support for and opposition to the death penalty are roughly even among Democrats.



An Explicit Alternative to the Death Penalty?

Gallup research has found that support for the death penalty is lower if Americans are offered an explicit alternative -- "life imprisonment, with absolutely no possibility of parole." In May 2006, for example, 65% of Americans supported the death penalty in general (matching the current figure), while, separately, 47% said they preferred the death penalty to life imprisonment as a penalty for murder when given that choice (48% favored life imprisonment).

Bottom Line

Despite a worldwide decline in the use of the death penalty, and the fact that it is outlawed in the majority of countries across the world, about two-thirds of Americans continue to support its use, similar to recent years' updates. Additionally, almost three-quarters of Americans believe that the death penalty is either used with about the right frequency today or not used often enough. Opponents of the death penalty often focus on the fact that individuals put to death have later been found to be innocent. But the data show that a campaign to increase belief that this situation occurs may not by itself increase opposition to the death penalty. A majority of Americans already agree that an innocent person has been executed within the last five years, but a majority of these simultaneously say they still support the use of the death penalty.

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Survey Methods

Results are based on telephone interviews with 1,013 national adults, aged 18 and older, conducted Oct. 1-4, 2009. For results based on the total sample of national adults, one can say with 95% confidence

that the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 4 percentage points.

Interviews are conducted with respondents on land-line telephones (for respondents with a land-line telephone) and cellular phones (for respondents who are cell-phone only).

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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