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The Relationship Between Voter Perceptions of Frequency of  
Police Use of Excessive Force and Support for the Death Penalty

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Departmental Honors Thesis  
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
Department of Social, Cultural, and Justice Studies

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## **Abstract**

Differing opinions of the death penalty continually conflict with the criminal justice system regarding support or opposition. Previous studies have described how sex and race influence one's perception of the death penalty, whereas this study emphasizes various contributing predictors aside from sex and race. This study utilizes binary logistic regression to examine the relationship between voter perceptions of police use of excessive force and support for the death penalty along with voter demographics. Secondary data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) 2020 Time Series Survey was incorporated into the data set of this study. The current study is composed of a nationwide sample of 6,583 voters based on respondents who participated in the pre-and post-national ANES survey. Findings indicated that respondent support for the death penalty varies depending on the perception of the frequency of police use of excessive force and across age, race, sex, sexual orientation, and education. Further implications of the relationship between voter perceptions of the frequency of police use of excessive force and their support for the death penalty are discussed.

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## **Introduction**

Various studies regarding police use of force and support for the death penalty have been conducted throughout criminal justice research. Police use of force has garnered significant publicity in recent years due to increased incidents of use of force. Literature pertaining to public perception and attitudes toward police use of force has been small but rapidly growing (Kyprianides et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2010). Instances where police use of force is warranted is known as reasonable force, but rare encounters surpass reasonable force and apply excessive force (Gerber & Jackson, 2017). Additionally, extant research has explored the connection between how factors that influence death penalty support. Opinions regarding the death penalty encompass a wide range between strong support and adamant disapproval (Dotson & Carter, 2012). Race, sex, and religion are well-researched variables that contribute significantly in support or disapproval of the death penalty (Sabriseilabi et al., 2022). While extensive research has been conducted on police use of force and public opinions of death penalty support, studies have also sought to understand if there is a relationship between these two factors.

Based on these connections, literature exploring police use of excessive force and support for the death penalty has revealed a relationship does exist between the two variables. To continue to develop the understanding of this existing relationship, demographic factors such as age, sex, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, marital status, social class, education, and party affiliation were controlled for in this study, seeking to identify predictors for death penalty support. Secondary data was utilized from the American National Election Studies (ANES) 2020 Survey to study voter perceptions in the fields of electoral politics, public opinion, and political participation. Therefore, this study sought to further elaborate upon the existing relationship

between the perception of police use of excessive force and support for the death penalty while controlling for a variety of demographic factors.

## **Literature Review**

### **Support for the Death Penalty**

Capital punishment is a form of sentencing where the convicted person is ordered to death by the court system (Dotson & Carter, 2012). Death penalty sentences in the United States have diminished, reaching their lowest levels of the last three decades (Garrett et al., 2017). Even given the rarity of death penalty sentences within the modern criminal justice system, most Americans still advocate for capital punishment. Percentages for support of the death penalty have fluctuated between 67-70 percent of the population since 2000 (Burgason & Pazzani, 2014). Prior studies have utilized this data to understand predictors for supporting or opposing the death penalty.

Race, sex, and political affiliation are strong predictors of support for the death penalty. Studies have found that Whites were more supportive of the death penalty than Blacks (Oliphant, 2018). Whites are 72 percent more likely to support the death penalty than Blacks (Dotson & Carter, 2012). Regarding sex, males have been found to support the death penalty more than females (Applegate et al., 2002). Dotson and Carter (2012), for example, noted that 78.1 percent of men advocated for the death penalty compared to 69.9 percent of women. Lastly, political aspects regarding support for the death penalty have revealed that Republicans support the death penalty more than Democrats (Jones, 2018; Oliphant; 2018). Support for the death penalty since the mid-1990s has remained stagnant among Republicans and fallen among Democrats and Independents (Oliphant, 2018).

In comparison to race, sex, and political affiliation, the effects of age, marital status, and sexual orientation on support for the death penalty are much more ambiguous within the literature. Oliphant (2018) describes young people as less likely to favor capital punishment than adults because the majority of older age groups tend to support capital punishment. However, these studies are not consistent. Many findings cannot conclude any significant results based on age and support for the death penalty (Sims & Johnston, 2004; Unnever & Cullen, 2006). When considering marital status and sexual orientation, limited research has explored these factors in relation to death penalty support. Individuals who identify as gay/lesbian have been found to be significantly less likely to support the death penalty than heterosexuals (Worthen et al., 2012). Compared to those who have never been married, prior studies concluded that married individuals are significantly more likely to favor the death penalty (Kelso & Green, 2017).

Unlike age, education and income are established factors of death penalty support. Individuals with fewer years of formal education and higher incomes were found to support the death penalty (Halim & Stiles, 2001). Specifically, Thinley (2020) found that high school graduates were more likely to support the death penalty than those who did not graduate high school, while individuals with a college degree were less likely to support the death penalty. Likewise, Burgason and Pazzani (2014) found a negative correlation between the level of education and support for the death penalty; those further along in their education are less likely to support capital punishment (Sethuraju et al., 2016). Regarding income, Sims and Johnston (2004) concluded that lower-income individuals are more likely to support the death penalty than higher-income individuals. However, social class has not been found to be a significant predictor of death penalty support. On the other hand, some studies have found no correlation with social



class and one's perception of the death penalty. Adinkrah and Clemens (2018) found no indications that opinion of the death penalty is influenced by socioeconomic status.

### **Police Use of Excessive Force**

Police use of force is the amount of force applied by a police officer to secure compliance with police orders or commands (Hollis, 2018). As noted by Kyprianides et al. (2021), application of force by the police is relatively rare. However, recent high-profile examples have highlighted incidents of police use of force that have been considered excessive. Ideally, police use of force is intended to prevent or suppress violence, not contribute to violent outbreaks, by using more force than necessary (Chohlas-Wood et al., 2022). Prior studies regarding police use of force examine situational conflicts that exceed reasonable force when applying excessive force.

According to Gerber and Jackson (2017), police use of force becomes excessive when the amount of force needed to control the situation and combat the seriousness of the threat is surpassed. Excessive force is one of the most common forms of police misconduct and, therefore, is intensely regulated (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017). Legal statutes, professional standards, and societal expectations guide appropriate conduct (Geber & Jackson, 2017). Acceptable uses of force derive from procedural justice, the fairness of the process through which police make decisions and exercise authority (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; White et al. 2018). Police officers are authorized within these strict guidelines to use force when it is objectively reasonable.

Officers endure extensive training to assess how to employ de-escalation techniques when faced with threats of imminent danger or levels of resistance offered by the suspect before any force is applied. De-escalation is when officers respond verbally to avoid confrontation

(Walker, 2015). This includes practicing techniques of command presence, verbal direction, and persuasion to maneuver and gain control over a dangerous situation (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2016). Furthermore, situational and environmental factors influence officer discretion (Halim & Stiles, 2001). Considering this, public perception of police use of force plays an important role. Any instances of police use of force can dramatically impact police-community relationships. Overall, feelings of police trust and legitimacy have been described as two critical factors determining the public's perception of police use of force (Kyprianides et al., 2021).

Within police trust and legitimacy, public perception of police use of force is premised upon a wide range of factors such as interactional components, ideological beliefs, and other identity and political antecedents. Controversial police use of force instances significantly impacts public attitudes towards law enforcement and can lead to reduced trust in the police and questioning of police legitimacy (Mullinix et al., 2021; Terrill et al., 2018). Indications for public perception of police use of force have been found in race/ethnicity and political affiliation. Surveys of public perception of police use of force have revealed that Whites were more likely to approve of police use of force than Blacks (Hollis & Jennings, 2018). Additionally, studies have found that conservatives support police use of force more than moderates or liberals (Kyprianides et al., 2021). When assessing public perceptions of police use of force, support for the death penalty was a notable factor within this study.

### **Police Use of Force and the Death Penalty**

While the use of force and the death penalty are frequently studied separately, some researchers have considered the relationship between these issues. Preceding research has shown that a relationship does exist between perception of police use of force and support for the death

penalty, but in a variety of fashions. Halim and Stiles (2021) sought to understand how police use of force impacts death penalty support; Exum (2015) argued that the Fourth Amendment and officer methods of lethal force is the connection between police use of force and the death penalty; finally, Silver and Pickett (2015) look at how can individuals who identify as conservatives provide implications into perceptions of police use of force and support for the death penalty.

For example, Halim and Stiles (2001) examined the connection between support for police use of force and the death penalty. Their findings suggested that African Americans, who were less likely to support the death penalty, were also less likely to believe that police use of force is warranted (Halim & Stiles, 2001). However, men generally were more likely to support the death penalty and police use of force (Halim & Stiles, 20021). Overall, this study suggests a relationship exists between police use of force and the death penalty.

Other studies approach the relationship between police use of force and the death penalty from a legal viewpoint. When police use of excessive force arises, rights protected under the Fourth Amendment are questioned. Under the Fourth Amendment, deadly force may be used if there is probably cause to believe that a suspect has committed a crime or threatened the infliction of serious harm (Hogue, 2020). Even though most instances of lethal force are justified under the legal statues, Exum (2015) argues that police use of excessive force, when reaching levels of lethal force, is an alternative method of capital punishment. The death penalty that court-sanctioned procedures would govern is manifested in officers who employ deadly police force when non-fatal force would be a safe alternative (Exum, 2015). Implications of their study suggest that use of force and the death penalty can be used to improve fatal force protocols; police officers should be more thoroughly trained in non-lethal force techniques to gain control

in threatening situations. However, techniques of non-lethal alternatives have been implemented. Officers are trained to avoid the use of higher levels of force unless necessary (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2016). In addition to de-escalation techniques, officers can employ non-lethal types of force such as oleoresin capsicum spray and tasers. While further in-service officer trainings have been instilled, discussion from this study still demonstrates another viewpoint in how the relationship between police use of force and the death penalty have been employed.

Lastly, Silver and Pickett (2015) studied the connection between police use of force and support for the death penalty through a politicized policing outlook. They concluded that there are predictors between attitudes of police use of force and likelihood to support the death penalty. Accordingly, this study found that racial prejudice was a significant predictor of support for police use of excessive force across political groups, suggesting a relationship exists between the two variables (Silver & Pickett, 2015). Within individuals who identify as conservative, this group can be further specified between consistent or conflicted conservatives. Consistent conservatives are those who repeatedly vote in an ideological manner (Stimson, 2004). On the other hand, conflicted conservatives typically have shifting public opinions. Based on this distinction, the results of the study concluded that consistent conservatives, compared to conflicted conservatives, were significantly more likely to support the death penalty (Silver & Pickett, 2015). Furthermore, consistent conservatives demonstrated attitudes that are shaped by utilitarian concerns regarding police use of force (Silver & Pickett, 2015). Given the components of previous studies exploring how police use of force and support for the death penalty are intertwined, this study seeks to bridge the literature gap further.

## **Current Study**

The use of capital punishment has been debated throughout history. While much research has been conducted to identify personal factors that influence an individual's support for the death penalty, less attention has been paid to the relationship between support for the death penalty and voter perceptions of other criminal justice issues. This study seeks to contribute to death penalty knowledge by examining the relationship between voter perception of the frequency of police use of force and support for the death penalty.

## **Methodology**

### **Data and Sample**

This study utilizes publicly available data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) survey. This survey was administered to U.S. citizens 18 years or older. Pre-election surveys were administered between August 18 and November 3, 2020 (ANES, 2021). Then, between November 8, 2020, and January 4, 2021, pre-election respondents were re-interviewed following the election for a post-election survey. Based on provided residential addresses, 2020 respondents received invitations via mail. All 2020 sampling respondents were randomly chosen from the USPS computerized delivery sequence file (C-DSF) with an equal probability of being selected. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three groups: web-only, mixed-web, and mixed video. The web-only group received a survey that could be entirely completed online. Mixed-web participants completed the survey online, and the non-responding individuals had the option of a telephone interview. Finally, mixed video respondents had several options. These included the initial online survey, telephone interview, and online interview through zoom. A \$200 incentive was applied to those who were still non-responsive in the mixed-web and mixed-video groups.

The final ANES 2020 study sample consisted of 8,280 pre-election respondents and 7,449 post-election responses (ANES, 2021). For the purposes of this study, only those who participated in the pre-and post-election ANES surveys were eligible for inclusion ( $n=7,449$ ). Any cases without data for the variables of interest were removed from the sample. The final sample was composed of 6,583 cases.

## **Variables**

### **Dependent Variable**

The dependent variable was support for the death penalty. In the pre-election survey, respondents were asked, “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?” The dichotomous variable was coded “0” for oppose and “1” for favor. This is a nominal variable due to the categorical nature and distinct classifications between support or opposition to the death penalty. There is no value or order to the dichotomous variables.

### **Independent Variable**

The study’s independent variable was the perceived frequency of police use of excessive force. In the post-election survey, respondents were asked, “How often do you think police officers use more force than is necessary?” Five response categories were provided: Never, Rarely, About half the time, Most of the time, All of the time. However, due to low responses in the extreme categories, they were collapsed into three categories: Never/Rarely, About half the time, and Most/All the time. (See Table 1 for a breakdown of original and combined categories). Never/Rarely was the reference category. This variable is a ratio level of measurement because of the continuous manner, range of options, and presence of the value of absolute zero. It is being used to calculate voter perception of the tendency of police to use of excessive force.

## **Control Variables**

### ***Age***

The pre-election survey asked respondents about their birth date, month, and year. The publicly available dataset provided a continuous age variable; however, those 80 or older were placed into a single category. Therefore, respondent age was converted to a categorical variable by generation. Generation Z represents voters born between 1997-2002, ages 18 to 23. Millennial represents voters born between 1981-1996, ages 24-39; Generation X represents voters born between 1965-1980, ages 40-55; Baby Boomers represents voters born between 1944-1979, ages 56-74, and the Silent Generation represents voters born 1928-1945, ages 75 and higher.

### ***Sex***

In the pre-election survey, respondents were asked, "What is your sex?". Male and female response categories were provided. Male was coded "0," and Female was coded "1."

### ***Sexual Orientation***

In the pre-election survey, respondents were asked, "Do you consider yourself to be heterosexual or straight, homosexual or gay [or lesbian], or bisexual?". Four response categories were listed, Heterosexual or Straight, Homosexual or Gay (or Lesbian), Bisexual, or Something Else. Due to few responses in some response groups, the categories were condensed into two categories: Heterosexual or Straight (coded 0) and Not Heterosexual (coded 1).

### ***Race/Ethnicity***

The pre-election survey asked respondents about their self-identified race/ethnicity. Responses included White/Non-Hispanic, Black/Non-Hispanic, Hispanic, Asian or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander/Non-Hispanic alone, Native American/Alaska Native or Other

race/Non-Hispanic alone, and Multiple Races/Non-Hispanic. Due to low responses in some categories, they were collapsed into four categories: White/Non-Hispanic, Black/Non-Hispanic, Hispanic, or Other. White/Non-Hispanic was the referent category.

### ***Marital Status***

In the pre-election survey, respondents were asked, “Are you now married, widowed, divorced, separated, or never married?”. Six categories were provided: Married: spouse present, Married: spouse absent, Widowed, Divorced, Separated, and Never Married. Due to low responses in some categories, responses were collapsed into a dichotomous variable: Are/Have been Married or Never Married. Never Married was the referent category.

### ***Social Class***

In the post-election survey, respondents were asked, “How would you describe your social class? Are you in the lower class, the working class, the middle class, or the upper class?”. Four categories were provided: Lower class, Working class, Middle class, and Upper class. As Middle Class was the largest category, it was used as the referent.

### ***Education***

In the pre-election survey, respondents were asked about their level of education. Response categories included: less than high school credentials, high school credentials, some post-high school/no bachelor’s degree, bachelor’s degree, or graduate degree. To slightly condense education level responses, categories were modified to HS/GED or less, some college, a bachelor’s degree, or master's/professional degree. Some college was the largest category and was therefore used as the referent category.

### ***Party Identification***



In the pre-election survey, respondents were asked, “What political party are you registered with, if any?”. Response categories included Democratic, Republican, None or Independent, and Other. Response groups were kept as Democratic, Republican, or Independent. Democrat was the reference category. Due to the low representation of responses in the Other category, it was not incorporated as a response category in this study.

## Results

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for the sample. The majority (54.2%) of the respondents were female ( $n=3569$ ), and 45.8% were male ( $n=3014$ ). Of the five generational categories, the largest group was the Baby Boomers generation ( $n=2354$ ) which consisted of 35.8% of respondents followed by Generation X (24.9%,  $n=1641$ ), Millennials (25.7%,  $n=1689$ ), the Silent Generation (9.9%,  $n=650$ ), and Generation Z (3.8%,  $n=249$ ). These distributions are comparable to the overall voter population. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2022), 66.8% (154 million) of eligible voters (citizens 18 years and older) reported that they voted in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Of these, 53.1% were female, and 46.9% were male. Additionally, the generational national distribution was as follows: Generation Z was the smallest age group reporting voting (7.5%), 24.8% were Millennials, 25.2% were Generation X, Baby Boomers were the largest age group reporting voting (32.3%), and the Silent Generation were 10.1% of reported voters (U.S. Census Bureau).

Most respondents were heterosexual or straight (93.6%,  $n=6163$ ), with non-heterosexual individuals representing 6.4% ( $n=420$ ) of the sample. The data provided indicators of whether respondents were homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or of another sexual orientation; however, due to low representation, they were combined into one category, non-heterosexual. The majority (73.9%) of the participants were White/non-Hispanic ( $n=4867$ ), followed by Black/non-

Hispanic (8.8%,  $n=581$ ), Hispanic (8.7%,  $n=576$ ), and Other (8.5%,  $n=559$ ). The Other race category consists of Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander, Native American, Alaska Native, multiple races, or another race, combined into one category for analytic reasons. See Table 1 for distribution for the Other category. These distributions are also similar to the overall voter population. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2022), of those who reported voting, the majority were White (71.0%), 12.2% were Black, and 10.6% were Hispanic. In our sample, the majority of respondents were heterosexual or straight (94.1%,  $n=5059$ ), with non-heterosexual 5.9% ( $n=318$ ) of the sample.

The majority of respondents reported that they were or had been married (76.9%,  $n=5065$ ), with 23.1% stating they had never been married ( $n=1518$ ). Of the participants, 7.1% classified themselves as lower class ( $n=468$ ), with the middle-class respondents occupying the majority (53.9%,  $n=3549$ ), followed by the working class (33.9%,  $n=2234$ ) and upper class (5.0%,  $n=332$ ). Most surveyed voters (80.1%) had more than a HS education ( $n=5268$ ), and 20% had a High School or GED education or less ( $n=1315$ ). Of the Party ID classifications, the largest group identified as Democrat ( $n=2410$ ), which consisted of 36.6% of the respondents, followed by Republican (32.1%,  $n=2116$ ) and then Independent (31.2%,  $n=2057$ ).

Looking at the independent and dependent variables, the majority (61.1%) of the surveyed voters favored the death penalty in cases of murder ( $n=4020$ ). Respondents were asked, “How often do the police use excessive force?” Primarily, the respondents stated that the police never/rarely use more force than necessary (44.6%,  $n=2936$ ), followed by 33.1% ( $n=2179$ ) responding that police use excessive force about half the time, and 22.3% stated that the police use more force than necessary most or all of the time ( $n=1468$ ).

**Table 1***Univariate Statistics N=6583*

Variable	n	%
<i>Support for Death Penalty</i>		
Favor	4020	61.1
Oppose	2563	38.9
<i>How often do police use excessive force</i>		
Never/Rarely	2936	44.6
Never	140	2.1
Rarely	2796	42.5
About Half of the Time	2179	33.1
Most/All of the Time	1468	22.3
Most of the Time	1053	16.0
All of the Time	415	6.3
<i>Age by 5 Generations</i>		
Generation Z: 1997 through 2002	249	3.8
Millennial: 1981 through 1996	1689	25.7
Generation X: 1965 through 1980	1641	24.9
Baby Boomers: 1946 through 1964	2354	35.8
Silent: 1928 through 1945	650	9.9
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	3014	45.8
Female	3569	54.2
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>		
Heterosexual	6163	93.6
Non-Heterosexual	420	6.4
Homosexual, Gay, or Lesbian	171	2.6
Bisexual	183	2.8
Something Else	66	1.0
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White/non-Hispanic	4867	73.9
Black/non-Hispanic	581	8.8
Hispanic	576	8.7
Other	559	8.5
Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	226	3.4
Native American, Alaska Native, Other	124	1.9
Multiple Races	209	3.2
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Are/Have been married	5065	76.9

Never Married	1518	23.1
<i>Social Class</i>		
Lower Class	468	7.1
Working Class	2234	33.9
Middle Class	3549	53.9
Upper Class	332	5.0
<i>Education</i>		
High School, GED, or less	1315	20.0
Some College	2251	34.2
Bachelor's Degree	1702	25.9
Masters or Professional Degree	1315	20.0
<i>Party ID</i>		
Democrat	2410	36.6
Republican	2116	32.1
Independent	2057	31.2

A chi-square analysis was conducted to assess the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. There was a significant association between voter support for the death penalty and the perception of the frequency of police use of excessive force ( $X^2=352.596$ ;  $df= 2$ ;  $p<.001$ ). An effect size based on Cramer's V illustrates a significant moderate relationship (0.231,  $p<.001$ ). Those who responded that the police never/rarely or about half the time were more likely to favor the death penalty. Whereas respondents who stated that police use more force than necessary most/all the time are significantly more likely to oppose the death penalty. See Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Chi-Square*

Police Use Excessive Force	Support for the Death Penalty	
	Oppose ( $n=2563$ )	Favor ( $n=4020$ )
Never/Rarely	26.9%	73.1%
About Half the Time	44.8%	55.2%
Most/All of the time	54.2%	45.8%

$$\chi^2 = (352.596); df=2; p = <.001$$

Finally, binary logistic regression was used to examine the research question, *What is the relationship between voter perceptions of the frequency of police use of excessive force and their support for the death penalty?* The dependent variable, support for the death penalty, was regressed on 20 items in total. The results are presented in Table 3. The independent variable, perception of how often police use excessive force, was significant in both categories, demonstrating that there is a significant relationship between voter perceptions of the frequency of police use of force and support for the death penalty. Voters who perceive that the police use excessive force about half of the time have a 34.4% reduction in the odds (0.656 times) of favoring the death penalty than those who perceive that the police use excessive force never or rarely ( $b=-0.421$ ,  $SE=0.067$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Similarly, respondents who perceive police use excessive force most/all of the time have a 49.3% reduction in the odds (0.507 times) of favoring the death penalty ( $b=-0.680$ ,  $SE=0.082$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) in comparison to those who perceive that police use rarely or never use excessive force.

The demographic control variables provided a variety of outcomes. In terms of voter age, two of the four generational categories presented significant relationships. In comparison to the Baby Boomer Generation (age 56-74), voters in both Generation Z (age 18-23) ( $b=-0.435$ ,  $SE=0.160$ ,  $p=0.006$ ) and the Silent Generation (age 75+) ( $b=-0.270$ ,  $SE=0.102$ ,  $p=0.008$ ) have significantly lower odds of favoring the death penalty. However, neither Generation X ( $b=0.115$ ,  $SE=0.075$ ,  $p=0.123$ ) nor Millennial Generation ( $b=-0.085$ ,  $SE=0.079$ ,  $p=0.281$ ) voters' support for the death penalty differed significantly from the Baby Boomer Generation.

When considering voter sex, female voters have lower odds (0.832 times) of favoring the death penalty ( $b=-0.184$ ,  $SE=0.057$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) than males when holding all else constant.

Consistent with prior research, female survey respondents have a 16.8% reduction in the odds of favoring the death penalty when holding all else constant. As for sexual orientation, voters who identify as non-heterosexual have lower odds of favoring the death penalty than heterosexuals ( $b=-0.253$ ,  $SE=0.113$ ,  $p=0.025$ ). Of the remaining race/ethnicity categories, none were significant predictors of support for the death penalty. Marital status was also a significant predictor of support for the death penalty; those who reported having never been married have lower odds (0.843) of supporting the death penalty ( $b=$ ,  $SE=$ ,  $p=0.027$ ).

When focusing on social class, only one, upper class, was a significant predictor for support of the death penalty. Participants who classify as upper class have lower odds of favoring the death penalty in comparison to participants who identify as middle class ( $b=-0.324$ ,  $SE=0.130$ ,  $p=0.013$ ). Specifically, in comparison to those who identify as middle class, respondents who identify as upper class have a 27.7% reduction in the odds of favoring the death penalty when holding all else constant.

All three categories of education were significant predictors of voter support for the death penalty. In comparison to voters with some college education, those with high school diplomas, GEDs, or less education ( $b=0.362$ ,  $SE=0.083$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) have 1.987 higher odds of favoring the death penalty. On the other hand, voters who possess a bachelor's ( $b=-0.407$ ;  $SE=0.075$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and voters who have earned a master's or professional degree have lower odds (0.665 times) of favoring the death penalty ( $b=-0.875$ ,  $SE=0.083$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), in comparison to those with some college education. Therefore, it can be concluded that as education increases, support for the death penalty decreases.

Finally, political affiliation demonstrated a significant relationship with support for the death penalty. Compared to voters who identify as Democrats, Republican voters had a 5.051

increase in odds of favoring the death penalty ( $b=1.620$ ;  $SE=0.80$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). Those who identify as Independent have increased odds (1.761 times) of favoring the death penalty ( $b=0.566$ ;  $SE=0.065$ ;  $p<0.001$ ).

**Table 3**

*Binary Logistic Regression (N=6583)*

Variable	<i>b</i>	SE	Exp( <i>b</i> )
Police Force: About Half of the Time	-0.421***	0.067	0.656
Police Force: Most/All of the Time	-0.680***	0.082	0.507
Age: Generation Z	-0.435**	0.160	0.647
Age: Millennial	-0.085	0.079	0.918
Age: Generation X	0.115	0.075	1.122
Age: Silent	-0.270**	0.102	0.763
Sex: Female	-0.184***	0.057	0.832
Sexual Orientation: Non-Heterosexual	-0.253**	0.113	0.777
Race: Black, non-Hispanic	-0.107	0.102	0.898
Race: Hispanic	0.191	0.102	1.211
Race: Other	0.060	0.100	1.062
Marital: Never Married	-0.171*	0.077	0.843
Class: Lower Class	0.166	0.117	1.180
Class: Working Class	0.104	0.066	1.110
Class: Upper Class	-0.324*	0.130	0.723
Education: HS/GED or Less	0.362***	0.083	1.436
Education: Bachelor's Degree	-0.407***	0.075	0.665
Education: Masters/Professional Degree	-0.875***	0.083	0.417
Party ID: Republican	1.620***	0.080	5.051
Party ID: Independent	0.566***	0.065	1.761
Constant	0.513***	0.095	1.671

Note: \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Discussion

This study examined the relationship between voter perception of police use of force and support for the death penalty. Prior studies researching the connection between police use of force focus on an array of connections such as warranted police use of force in connection to

death penalty support, legal concerns between how police use of force can be seen as the death penalty, and how politicized policing can be impacted by death penalty support. These studies leave room for questions concerning further connections in the relationship between police use of force and support for the death penalty. The outcome of this study demonstrates a relationship between voter opinions of the death penalty and their perception of the frequency with which police use excessive force exists, expanding upon existing literature by directly researching the relationship between voter perception of police use of force and support for the death penalty. These findings conclude that those who support the death penalty perceive that the police use excessive force significantly less.

First, the results of this study indicated that voters who perceive the police as using excessive force about half of the time and most/all of the time have significantly lower odds of favoring the death penalty than respondents who perceive police officers use more force than necessary never/rarely. Similar to findings from Halim and Stiles who concluded that those who are less likely to support the death penalty are also less likely to believe that police use of force is warranted (2001), this study found that those who believe police use of force more than never/rarely were significantly less likely to support the death penalty.

Regarding demographics, support for the death penalty was found to be significantly associated with police force, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, social class, education, and political affiliation. However, in terms of race and ethnicity, the findings were surprising. No significant relationships with race/ethnicity emerged. These findings were surprising given the numerous research findings of Whites being more supportive of the death penalty than non-Whites (Bobo & Johnson, 2004; Dotson & Carter, 2012; Oliphant, 2018). Additionally, this analysis supports evidence that education, social class, and political affiliation impact one's



perception of death penalty support. Consistent with prior findings, one's degree of education was a significant predictor in their support of the death penalty. Voters who obtained bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, or other professional degrees were significantly more likely to support the death penalty than voters with only some college education. On the other hand, voters who only had a high school education/GED or less were significantly more likely to support the death penalty when compared to those with some college. Numerous studies conclude similar findings; the higher one's education is, the less likely they are to support the death penalty (Sethuraju et al., 2016).

Contrary to Adinkrah and Clemens (2018), whose findings support that social class does not influence one's perception of the death penalty, my findings indicate that social class is a predictor of death penalty support. Voters who self-identified as upper class were significantly less likely to support the death penalty than respondents who identified as middle class. Not surprisingly, this study also concluded that males are more likely to support the death penalty. Historically, males have been found to support the death penalty more than females (Applegate et al., 2002; Dotson & Carter, 2012; Oliphant, 2018).

Consistent with the conclusions of extant research, the results reveal that political affiliation significantly impacts voter support for the death penalty. This was consistent across Democratic, Republican, and Independent affiliations. When voters were asked, "What political party are you registered with, if any?" respondents who identified as Republican and Independent were significantly more likely to support the death penalty than those affiliated with the Democratic party. Other literature concludes that political aspects regarding support for the death penalty reveal that Republicans support the death penalty more than Democrats (Jones, 2018; Oliphant, 2018).

This study does, however, further progress research indicative of age, marital status, and sexual orientation when compared to support for the death penalty. With mixed findings regarding age as a predictor, we conclude that voters within Generation Z and the Silent Generation were significantly less likely to support the death penalty than voters of the Baby Boomer Generation. This study contributes to the existing literature on how age is a predictor of death penalty support, given other ambiguous conclusions (Oliphant, 2018; Sims & Johnston, 2004; Unnever & Cullen, 2006). Literature regarding sexual orientation and marital status as indicators for the perception of the death penalty is limited. With this study, I concluded that marital status and sexual orientation are significant indicators of support for the death penalty. In comparison to voters who identified as heterosexual, those who identified as non-heterosexual were significantly less likely to support the death penalty. Similarly, marital status indicated that those who had been previously married were less likely to support the death penalty than a respondent who had never been married. Integrating this finding within future studies will provide more substance when researching how age, marital status, and sexual orientation indicate support for the death penalty.

### **Limitations**

Despite this study's contribution, it does have limitations. One limitation of this study is the use of secondary. As this study only contains 6,583, a larger sample size would increase the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, as the sample is composed of only voters, it may not represent the overall population. This limitation may have contributed to the lack of significant findings when controlling for certain demographic factors, particularly with low representation of non-White voters.

Another limitation of relying on secondary data is utilizing data from questions not specific to this study. Therefore, some of the indicators are vague. For example, respondents were asked, “How often do you think police officers use more force than necessary?”. This question does not specify a scenario, such as during arrests or investigatory stops.

### **Future Research**

Future studies exploring the death penalty and police excessive force should include questions with context. Distinguishing between use of force and excessive force and accounting for situational factors may provide more nuanced outcomes. Additionally, administering the survey to a larger population, not limited by voting behavior, may provide differing outcomes. Finally, employing qualitative methods to assess perceptions of police force and death penalty support would provide richer insight into individual perspectives and how they view the relationship between these concepts.

### **Conclusion**

Police use of excessive force is one of the primary issues in current calls for police reform in the US. Similarly, discussions of criminal justice reforms frequently focus on the country’s use of the death penalty. This study explored the relationship between these two critical issues of the extreme physical impact of the criminal justice system. The key findings demonstrate that perceptions of police using excessive force about half the time or most/all the time, respondents who identified as female, education level, and votes towards candidates other than Trump in the 2020 election were predictors of opposing the death penalty. The results have implications for future research on public attitudes toward punitive measures by the criminal justice system and guide policymakers to address reform.

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