

The Association between Belief in the American Dream and Stance on Capital Punishment

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Introduction

- In the U.S., potential death penalty cases are decided with a jury trial, and the alternative sentence is usually life in prison without parole (Death Penalty Information Center).
- The death penalty is a controversial topic, with critics such as the American Civil Liberties Union arguing that the trial process is filled with error, discriminatory, arbitrary, costly, ineffective, and harmful (ACLU).
- There is clear evidence that extralegal factors play a major role in the probability of a death sentence conviction, especially individuals' symbolic perspectives (Gould & Leon, 2017).
- In 2007, Rafael Di Tella and Juan Dubra found an association between countries with a belief in the idea that "effort prevails" (i.e. the American dream) and harsher punishment for crime (Di Tella and Dubra, 2007).

Research Questions

- Is there a relationship between a person's view of the American Dream and their stance on capital punishment?
- Does this relationship still hold when controlling for other significant extralegal factors, specifically region, religion, education, race, and gender?

Methods

Sample

- Respondents (n=1495) were drawn from the 2012 Outlook On Life Survey, a nationally representative sample of non-institutionalized adults residing in the United States.

Measures

- Stance on life imprisonment versus capital punishment was measured with a survey question. For this analysis missing values were removed and the numerical responses were recoded as categorical (either "Death Penalty" or "Life Imprisonment").
- Belief in the American Dream was measured similarly. The responses ranged from 1 (extremely true) to 7 (extremely false). For the purpose of this analysis, the variable was collapsed to have only three responses: true, neither, or false. Missing values were also removed.
- All controls were also coded as categorical with labels added, and missing values removed.

Discussion

- This model suggests that a major worldview like a belief in the American Dream is a potential indicator for a person's stance on capital punishment. More specifically, it reveals that a person who believes that the American Dream is false or is neutral on the issue is more likely to support life imprisonment over capital punishment as a punishment for murder.
- We already know that factors like region, race, gender, etc. are linked to the probability of a death penalty conviction. This model suggests that a person's view of the American Dream should be added to that list.
- This is valuable information for selecting unbiased juries. If we know the kinds of outlooks on life that make a person more likely to support the death penalty, then we can take institutional steps to prevent bias in juries.
- Further research will be needed to solidify these findings, as there are many other extralegal factors that could be controlled for. Additional research could also be done to explore potential moderating relationships.

Results

Univariate

- 66.8% of respondents believe that the American Dream is true.
- 51.31% of respondents stated that they think life imprisonment is a better penalty for murder than the death penalty.

Bivariate

- A chi-square test of independence revealed a significant relationship between beliefs about the American Dream and opinions of capital punishment, with a p value of 0.003038.
- People who do not believe in the American dream were more likely to support the death penalty (55.8%). Both people who do believe in the American dream or were neutral were more likely to support life imprisonment (52.4% and 59.5%). (Figure 1)
- Post hoc tests showed a statistically significant difference between false vs. neither and false vs. true American dream responses. Neither vs. true responses were statistically similar.

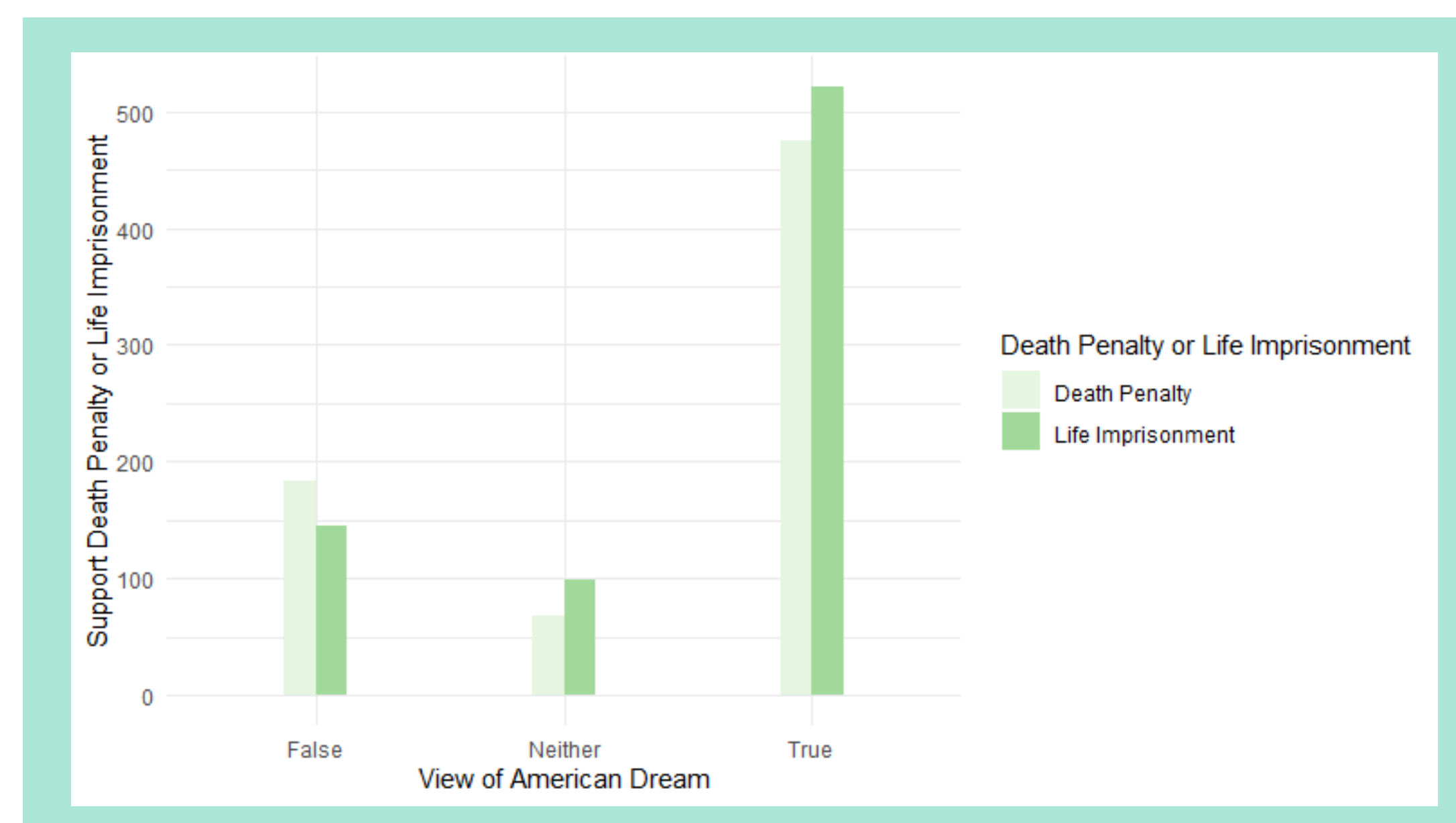


Figure 1. Proportion of Participants that Support the Death Penalty based on View of American Dream

Multivariate

- Control variables were added to the regression based on a review of the literature. These variables were region, religion, education, race, and gender. Figure 2 depicts the addition of region to the model.
- After controlling for these variables, believing that the American dream is false or being neutral were still significantly associated with a preference for life imprisonment (Coefficients: 0.561618 and 0.456547, O.R. 1.753507e+00 and 1.578614e+00 respectively).
- In contrast, believing that the American dream is true was not found to be significantly associated with the death penalty variable once the controls were included.

Figure 2. Proportion of Subjects that Support the Death Penalty based on View of American Dream and Region

