

Ethnicity and Perceptions of Death Penalty: Is Ethnicity One Reason Why Asians Support Capital Punishment

Mohammed F Iftikhar¹

¹ University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX, United States

Correspondence: Mohammed F Iftikhar, University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX, United States.

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Abstract

This survey-based study sought to examine the association between Asian ethnicity and support for death penalty. The study does not aim to establish causality but rather explores death penalty perceptions using a convenient sample. The study used explicit measures to define ethnicity and used ethnicity as a primary independent variable. The research design consisted of a survey questionnaire and a non-probability sampling technique combining elements of both convenient and purposive samples. Because this research was conducted during holidays around Thanksgiving, the sample remained smaller, n=137 as an extension beyond this number was not feasible. One important purpose of this research was also to present a model for any future studies that attempt to operationalize ethnicity since prior studies including ethnicity as a predictor of death penalty support have not operationalized it the way it was done in this study. Using logistic regression and analysis of odds ratio and log odds, results showed that Asians who adhere to their ethnic traditions are likely to have a stronger support for death penalty controlling for religiosity, political affiliation and media reliance/influence. The results thus indicate that Asian ethnicity can be associated with how Asians view or support death penalty.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Asians, Death Penalty, Media Influence, Religiousness, Political Affiliation

1. Introduction

This research seeks to test the relationship between ethnicity and death penalty support using survey method and binary logistic regression. In other words, how one's ethnic background or adherence to ethnic traditions can influence one's perceptions of death penalty and to be more specific, whether adherence to ethnic traditions among Asians is associated with more favorable views towards death penalty. One important reason behind writing this research paper is to offer readers a unique perspective by operationalizing ethnicity in a way that has not been done before. Nearly all prior studies on death penalty perceptions that included ethnicity as a predictor treated ethnicity as static rather than attaching specific meanings to it. This study, however, attempts to define ethnicity meaningfully and conceptually. At the same time, it is important for readers to know the views of Asian people on death penalty since this ethnic group is one of the most underrepresented groups in American criminological studies (Shah & Kandula, 2020). 137 people of Asian ethnicity who reside in America and immigrated to America at or after the age of 21 were surveyed with regards to their opinion on death penalty. These respondents included people from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, China, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. To better assess the generalizability of results across Asian countries and to see whether sample and results can be representative of a larger Asian community, it was vital to include multiple Asian countries rather than surveying people from a single Asian country such as India or China. Only those Asians were interviewed who immigrated to the United States during adulthood at or after the age of 21. This age restriction can ensure stronger detection of ethnic adherence among Asians assuming their strong assimilation in their culture of upbringing as opposed to Asians born and brought up in US who would likely be more assimilated into western culture and therefore may not constitute an ideal sample to test the association between Asian ethnic loyalty and death penalty support.

Another important point is that studies that previously tested association between Asian ethnicity and death penalty perceptions are scarce. Fewer studies appear to have tested ethnicity and support for death penalty across diverse ethnic groups as most studies are confined to a single race, either whites or African Americans. In short, most prior research appears to have examined the effects of ethnicity on death penalty surveying Caucasians with limited inclusion of other racial and ethnic groups. And as stated before, an important objective of this research is to come up with a design that

specifically operationalizes ethnicity as prior studies have simply used ethnicity in static terms such as African, Asian or American rather than conceptually defining it and/or meaningfully operationalizing it. It further needs to be mentioned here that this paper is not a theory-testing paper, nor should its title lead one into thinking that there is an attempt to incorporate deterrence theory into this paper. While deterrence theory is mentioned in this paper in the conclusion section to some extent, the study's primary purpose is to test ethnic adherence and death penalty support empirically and not anything beyond that.

2. Literature Review

Studies have been conducted on support for death penalty. However, very few of these studies specifically include Asians. Critiques have often said that Asian community which comprises a large portion of people in United States has mostly been overlooked in criminal justice studies (Wu, 2013). Some critiques have even argued that survey research whose respondents are white have often been deemed more reliable than survey research whose respondents are Asian or Black (Meyer & Wu, 2024). It is, however, unclear as to why this is the case.

As stated earlier, numerous studies exist on capital punishment but only a handful of these tests the influence of race/ethnicity on perceptions of death penalty. For example, an article from Meyer et al. (2022) sought to test the relationship between genetic influence and support for harsher punishments. While race as a separate variable was not part of this study, the unit of analysis was mostly people of white race as implied by the study. Meyer et al. (2022) concluded that genetic predisposition can determine whether people would support death penalty and other harsher punishments. The study also found that one's genes can also increase one's proclivity to support spending government's resources more towards law enforcement than towards social support.

A study by Cullen and Unnever (2012) sought to assess the relationship between prejudice of white people and support for death penalty for Blacks and Hispanics. This study found that whites perceive Blacks and Hispanics as more prone to violence and support death penalty for those convicted of murders. Cullen's study was specifically tailored towards whites and highlighted the perceptual prejudice regarding death penalty support. The study only included whites, reflecting a broader tendency within the literature to prioritize majority racial groups. In one study, Britto (2014) tested the theoretical connection between media consumption and perceptions of capital punishment. Britto used a non-probability sample in this survey-based study and Asians made up only 3.6% of the sample. Majority of this sample consisted of whites. Due to other races being underrepresented, Britto's cautioned against generalizing the results to larger populations. Another study from Cullen (2007) provides powerful insights into the association between race and support for death penalty. Cullen sought to examine whether racist whites and non-racist whites both support death penalty at the same level as African Americans. According to Cullen's argument, African Americans are considerably less likely to support death penalty than whites. But Cullen's research design separated racist whites from non-racist whites. Cullen then sought to examine the differences in attitudes of the two groups towards death penalty. The study concluded with racist whites showing considerable support for death penalty whereas the non-racist whites' support level for death penalty was nearly same as that of African Americans. This study, like some of the previous ones, included whites and blacks only but no other race.

Boateng (2022) stated in his research on death penalty support in Brazil that large majority of Brazilians support death penalty. He also highlighted the constitutional prohibition for death penalty for ordinary crimes in Brazilian law. It is important to note however that death penalty for ordinary crimes is a rare thing to occur in today's age. Boateng discussed some important factors that are influential in Brazilians' attitude towards supporting death penalty and those were fear of murder, sense of insecurity and perceived institutional legitimacy. Though comprehensive, Boateng's research and generalizability of its findings are limited to one locality only. And the study entailed discussion of a national sentiment rather than race/ethnicity influence on death penalty support.

Wu and Sun (2011) conducted a cross-sectional study by comparing Chinese and American students to assess death penalty support. They contend that while previous studies had examined the American people's views on death penalty, no study was done to examine Chinese perception. Wu's study collected survey data from different universities in US and China and found that Chinese overwhelmingly support death penalty when compared to their US counterparts. Gender, victimization and criminal justice-related concerns were found to be influential in shaping Chinese and American people's attitudes towards death penalty. And according to Eisenberg (2001), race can be influential in voting for death sentence verdict when jurors are white as opposed to when jurors are black. However, Eisenberg's study like the previous ones did not specify how exactly the race/ethnicity should be measured when using it as predictor in scientific research. For example, one can argue that whites are more influenced by media coverage than race or ethnicity-related sentiments.

A brief overview of some of the prior literature suggests that while some research has been done on race/ethnicity effects on perceptions of death penalty, no study included Asians systematically as a group to examine their perceptions.

For example, Brito's study (2014) included an extremely small number of Asians while the primary group of study remained white. Wu's study (2011) is notable for including China since it is the largest country in Asia, but findings of Wu's study may not be generalized to the entire Asian continent. Another important gap that exists in these studies is that none of these studies have specifically operationalized race/ethnicity or created a measure to test the impact of ethnicity on one's perceptions regarding death penalty. While creating a measure of race/ethnicity may be a complex task, it may be argued that one's race or ethnicity can tell way more than one's physical attributes or hair color. One's race or ethnicity entails an array of things ranging from certain personality traits to a whole set of beliefs. It can determine how one thinks, behaves, believes, views or conforms to one's cultural norms and traditions. Arguably, each ethnicity stems from a unique culture and a set of beliefs that are often product of long-held traditions. Once again, although these prior studies surveyed Whites, African American or Chinese to examine their views on death penalty, the findings lean more towards simply answering what one group thinks of death penalty as opposed to another rather than demonstrating whether the group views death penalty in such light due to its specific race or ethnicity.

Hypotheses

- (I) Asians who adhere to their ethnic traditions demonstrate stronger tendency to support death penalty.
- (II) Asian people's trust and confidence on the effectiveness of their countries' penal code is associated with their subsequent support for death penalty.

3. Methodology

It is important to mention at this juncture that while the words "race" and "ethnicity" are often used interchangeably such as on job applications in the US, the scholars or deep thinkers have separated the two. "According to some, race is to be defined as more of a biological trait and hence could be difficult to measure in pure statistical terms whereas ethnicity emanates from shared identity and adherence to shared cultural values which makes it practically easier to measure" (Mukkamala & Curley, 2020).

For this research, 137 Asians were selected for survey questionnaire using a non-probability sampling technique. Only those Asians were selected who immigrated to the United States during adulthood or after turning 21 thus allowing for a stronger detection of ethnic loyalty or adherence towards Asian traditions. As far as sampling goes, the sample for this study is a combination of both purposive and convenient samples. 80 Asians were selected for survey questions from different parts of Dallas including neighborhoods, schools and other random places while the other 57 were selected from Georgia, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York and California from within relatives, friends, acquaintances and friends of relatives. No specific reason to select respondents from the aforesaid states except the sampling convenience. The 137 respondents belonged to the following Asian countries: Pakistan (20) India (30), Bangladesh (15), China (30), Korea (20), Hong Kong (7), Taiwan (5) and Japan (10). To better assess the generalizability of the results and strength of the sample's representativeness, it was vital to include the aforesaid multiple Asian countries rather than surveying people from a single Asian country such as India or China. The largest groups among 137 respondents comprised of Asians from India and China both having 30 respondents from each country while the smallest group of respondents was from Japan with 10 respondents. The minimum age of respondents was 21, encompassing nearly all age groups with the maximum age of 70. Logistic regression was run including two IV's which conceptualized ethnicity in a meaningful way: (conformation to long-held traditions of the Asian culture) and (belief that Asian punitive laws are better or more effective than the laws of most other countries), one DV (subsequent support for death penalty) and three control variables (religiosity, political ideology and media reliance) were included. For this study, the aforesaid three control variables were deemed the most relevant. While examining the ethnicity effects on death penalty support, it was imperative to isolate the effects of religiosity, political ideology and media reliance or influence. The regression model is the binary logistic regression. Each respondent was asked six questions, and one question was created for each of the six variables. The survey approach was a combination of telephonic and face-to-face interviews. 70 respondents were interviewed on phone, and the remaining 67 were interviewed face-to-face. The two questions which were created for each of the two independent variables can in fact be strong proxy indicators of ethnic adherence or ethnic loyalty. Following questions were asked:

Question 1 (IV1): When it comes to Asian culture's long-held traditions and values, do you see yourself as a conformist or non-conformist?

Conformist coded as 1 and non-conformist coded as 0

Question 2 (IV2): Do you believe that Asian punitive laws are better or more effective than the punitive laws of most other countries?

Yes = 1 No = 0

Question 3 (DV): Do you support death penalty?

Yes = 1 No =0

Question 4 (Control 1): Do you categorize yourself as a very religious person?

Yes = 1 No = 0.

Question 5 (Control 2): In the context of American political ideology, do you consider yourself a democrat?

Yes = 1 No =0

Question 6 (Control 3): In forming your opinion over crime and punishment, do you believe that media news or coverage is a valid source of information?

Yes = 1 No =0

“The first survey question was designed to measure the strength of ethnic adherence or loyalty. An Asian’s conformation to long-held Asian traditions solidifies ethnic adherence or loyalty. The second question serves the same purpose. Having a belief that Asian punitive laws are more effective than the punitive laws of most other countries can be tantamount to ethnic firmness or loyalty even if empirical research shows otherwise. The third question created for DV is simple and straight forward. Either you support death penalty or not. To isolate the plausible effects of religiousness on death penalty support, the question was purposefully framed as “are you very religious” as opposed to simply asking whether you are religious as some people even with average or low levels of religiosity could still claim to be religious and say yes to the question. The fifth question aimed to isolate the effects of political ideology by asking whether the respondent aligns himself with democratic ideology since most democrats within the US are likely to oppose death penalty. It is important to mention that death penalty has been outlawed in nearly all democratic states in the US. Malhotra and colleagues (2016) found that many Asians who live in America vote for democrats in the elections. Thus, the question was created to isolate the effects of possible democratic ideology that consistently opposes death penalty (Garret & Jakubow, 2014). And the last question was created to measure the influence of media coverage on Asians as far as their opinions on crimes and certain punishments.

4. Results

Logit Equation

$$\log(p/(1-p)) = b_0 + b_1*\text{conf.iv1} + b_2*\text{penal.iv2} + b_3*\text{relig.c1} + b_4*\text{democ.c2} + b_5*\text{media.c3}$$

Binary Logit Regression Predicting Support for Capital Punishment

Table 1. Logistic Regression Results (log odds)

Coefficients:				
	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(> z)
(Intercept)	-1.2047	0.6235	-1.932	0.0533 .
Conform	2.0564	0.5200	3.955	7.67e-05 ***
Penal	2.0752	0.5221	3.975	7.05e-05 ***
Religion	0.7201	0.5551	1.297	0.1946
Democ	-0.2566	0.5261	-0.488	0.6258
Media	-0.3158	0.5357	-0.589	0.5555

Signif. codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1				

Source: Author’s calculations based on survey data

1 - (98.259 / 146.003) = Pseudo R-Square = 33%

McFadden’s $\approx$ **0.33 (Pseudo R²)**

Table 2. Odds Ratio and Confidence Intervals

	OR	2.5 %	97.5 %
(Intercept)	0.2997956	0.08172479	0.970584
Conform	7.8176313	2.89003654	22.607903
Penal	7.9660022	2.95343058	23.357328
Religion	2.0546954	0.70396607	6.379369
Democ	0.7736793	0.26825694	2.156471
Media	0.7292241	0.24950919	2.081895

Source: Author's calculations based on survey data

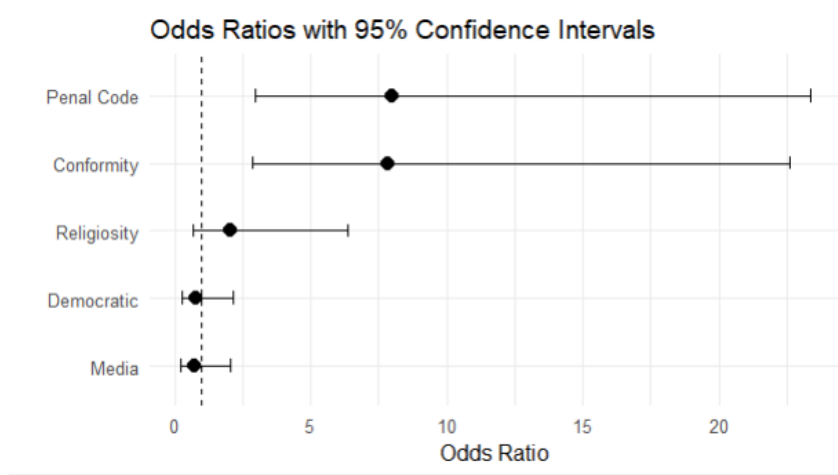
Odds Ratio Formula

$$OR = e^{\beta}$$

McFadden's Pseudo R-square was obtained to check the improvement of likelihood over the null model. With nearly 33% Pseudo R-square, the model (with five predictors) demonstrates a strong fit over a null model. This is particularly true for the two independent variables, conformity towards Asian ethnic traditions and belief that Asian punitive laws are more effective than laws of most other countries as inclusion of these two variables appear to have the largest improvement on the model. Table 2 with the odds ratio shows that a conformist is nearly 8 times more likely to support death penalty than a non-conformist. Similarly, those who believe that Asian punitive laws are more effective than other countries' laws are nearly 8 times more likely to support death penalty than those who do not hold such belief indicating that both these variables have a strong effect on death penalty support among Asians. Those who admitted being very religious during survey questioning are 2 times more likely to support death penalty than those who didn't categorize themselves as such. This shows a modest effect of religiosity on death penalty support among Asians, but it was not statistically significant due to p-value not meeting the threshold. However, the two other control variables, democratic allegiance and media reliance, appear to have very little effect on death penalty support among Asians. The p-values in table 1 for conformity and belief in the effectiveness of Asian punitive laws indicate that both predictors are statistically significant whereas religiosity with a p-value of 0.195 > 0.05, democratic allegiance with a p-value of 0.626 > 0.05 and media reliance with a p-value of 0.556 > 0.05 indicate that controls are essentially non-significant in this model.

To strengthen these analyses further, a short discussion of log odds is being added here. Table 1 which is an estimate of log odds for five predictors show the following: being a conformist increases the log odds of death penalty support by 2.06 and having a belief in the effectiveness of Asian punitive laws increases the log odds of death penalty support by 2.08. Both predictors are statistically significant as their p-values indicate. For religiosity, this effect is however small with the log odds increasing by only 0.72 and statistically insignificant. For democratic allegiance and media reliance, the relationship is in the opposite direction. Having a democratic allegiance decreases the death penalty support log odds by 0.26 and relying on media coverage decreases these log odds by 0.32. However, as we can see, the effects of the three control variables; religiosity, democratic allegiance and media reliance on death penalty support are trivial with little to no practical effect and their inclusion in the model does not diminish the effects, the primary independent variables have on death penalty support. Thus, the results of this regression model find considerable support for both of the above hypotheses. And finally, as per the rules of logit, the confidence intervals for the control variables (the last three predictors in the table) include 1 and therefore are non-significant whereas the confidence intervals for the two independent variables do not include 1. The confidence intervals therefore strengthen the earlier findings.

Coefficient Plot



Multicollinearity Test (VIF)

Conform	Penal	Religion	Democ	Media
1.096995	1.099587	1.067809	1.057400	1.084875

A variance inflation factor test was conducted to check for any multicollinearity among the independent (control) variables. The VIF score for all five variables remained between 1.05 to 1.09 which is way below the threshold of 5 thereby strengthening the model further. In other words, the VIF scores indicate that the independent variables are unrelated to each other and the model does not suffer from multicollinearity.

4. Discussion

This paper sought to examine the effects of ethnic adherence on death penalty support among people of Asian ethnicity. People from multiple Asian countries were selected to participate in survey. This was done to capture a broader view Asians hold for death penalty support across Asian continent. Using a convenient sample of 137 Asians across multiple age groups ranging from 21 to 70 years old, respondents were asked whether they support death penalty (in general). Ethnic adherence or ethnic loyalty which is the independent variable in this study was operationalized by asking respondents the two main questions: whether they view themselves as conformist when it comes to long-held Asian traditions and cultural values and whether they believe that Asian punitive laws are more effective than the punitive laws of most other countries. Religiosity, democratic allegiance and media reliance (influence) were statistically controlled. Logistic regression results with an analysis of odds ratio and log odds demonstrated a clear support for death penalty among Asians who adhere to their ethnic traditions whereas religiosity, democratic allegiance and media reliance to form opinions about crime and punishment had minimal effect. While no causal claim is being made here, the results of the survey indicate that one's ethnic background can have an impact on how one views or supports death penalty. The 2nd question in this survey (independent variable) which attempts to measure Asian people's belief on the effectiveness of their country's punitive laws in comparison to the punitive laws of other countries likely has some theoretical implications. The responses for this question demonstrate an implicit support for deterrence theory among Asians even if the empirical evidence may be saying otherwise. While the results of this study may not be generalized to the entire Asian population due to small sample size and the nature of the sampling, the study at least shows that there are ways to define and measure ethnicity in some meaningful way and that some relationship between ethnic adherence and death penalty support is probable. It is also important to acknowledge that the way the main argument attempts to define ethnicity in this paper is more subjective in nature than an objective definition. Some readers may agree with this, and some will not. Nonetheless, this attempt to define ethnicity beyond a static physical/biological trait at least fills an important research gap.

5. Conclusion

Findings of this survey research suggest that among Asians, conformity to Asian traditions and belief in the effectiveness of Asian punitive laws are strongly associated with death penalty support controlling for religiosity, democratic allegiance and media reliance (for information on crime and punishment). Both conformity and belief in the effectiveness of Asian punitive laws were used as proxy indicators of ethnicity or ethnic loyalty thereby leading to this plausible conclusion that Asian ethnicity is associated with death penalty support. Future research with a larger sample size and a more well-designed survey questionnaire can likely provide deeper insights into the relationship between ethnicity and death penalty support. In addition, this research proposes a practical way to conduct similar analysis in

future and demonstrates the feasibility of doing binary logistic regression though other methods can also be useful. At the end, this paper underscores the importance of including Asians in future criminological research.

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