INNOCENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE PUBLIC

by

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ABSTRACT

The "Innocence Movement" has sparked a debate regarding the efficacy and reliability of the American justice system. In recent years, exonerations of death row inmates and incarcerated persons has become more frequent and more heavily publicized. During the same time frame, public opinion regarding capital punishment has become more negative. Previous scholarly literature focusing on the relationship between exonerations and public support of capital punishment has largely established that exonerations decrease public opinion for the practice. However, the literature diverges when discussing causal factors such as framing effects and the way information is presented. Thus, this research explores how the type of information delivery regarding exonerations, being informal or formal, impacts public support for the death penalty. Additionally, this research focuses on the type of exoneration, based on DNA evidence or procedural concerns, and how that impacts public opinion on capital punishment. It is hypothesized that article style delivery and DNA based evidence, compared to meme style delivery and procedural based evidence, will cause the most pronounced decrease in public support for the death penalty. This study was performed using an experimental survey, employing one control group and four treatment groups; an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression statistical test was performed to analyze the data gathered. The findings of this research show that article style delivery does result in a more pronounced decrease in public support for capital punishment than the more informal, meme style delivery. However, the implications of this study indicate that the type of exoneration, DNA based or procedural based, does not have a statistically significant impact on public opinion regarding the death penalty. Contributing to the development of scholarly research surrounding capital punishment and public sentiment, this research illuminates the impact of information delivery on public opinion.

Introduction

As of 2021, there have been 174 death-row exonerations (Center 2021). When looking at all exonerations not limited to death row, there have been over 3,200 since 1989 (Cole et al. 2023). The "Innocence Movement" has sparked a moral debate regarding capital punishment; if the U.S. justice system has failed to recognize the innocence of and has incarcerated thousands of blameless individuals, ethical questions regarding the appropriateness of the death penalty in a broken system begin to arise. Interestingly, we see trends over time that indicate a public opinion shift away from support for the death penalty. For instance, in 1985, Gallup reported that 56% of individuals favored the death penalty over life in prison without the possibility of parole. As of October 2023, only 36% of individuals favored the death penalty over life in prison. Further, 50% of individuals today believe capital punishment is applied unfairly compared to only 41% in 2000 (Gallup, Inc. 2024).

Considering the timing of these public polling shifts and the fact that "the innocence argument has gained increasing attention" since the mid 1990s, it is likely that exonerations and wrongful convictions impact public opinion on the death penalty (Wu 2021, 1). After all, scholarly research has found that those who believe in and know about wrongful convictions are less likely to favor capital punishment (Wu 2021). Though, individual level studies are less illuminating and often produce mixed conclusions in terms of exonerations limiting death penalty support (Norris and Mullinix 2019). That being said, further research regarding the impact of exonerations on public support for capital punishment is necessary in order to understand the effects of innocence on punitive sentiment. Thus, this paper will explore the possible relationship between public opinion on the death penalty and exonerations. More

specifically, do major exonerations affect public opinion on capital punishment? Also, does the method of information delivery or the type of exoneration have an impact on changing public opinion regarding the death penalty? The findings of this research topic not only shed light on public support for the death penalty, but they present substantive theoretical questions regarding human nature, the regard for life, the value of innocence, and the pursuit of true justice.

Review of Scholarly Literature

Just as the practice and execution of the death penalty has varied and evolved over time, the literature surrounding public opinion and capital punishment has also developed and expanded. It has been found and emphasized that there are many factors affecting public sentiment for the death penalty creating a complex issue to dissect. In specific regard to exonerations and their effect on public support for capital punishment, this review will begin with analysis of literature at the "basic" level; this will cover literature that simply finds relationships between exonerations and public opinion. Further analysis will look at the frequency of exonerations and its impact on death penalty support. Finally, this section will look at the impact of framing and information exposure regarding innocence and exonerations on public capital punishment sentiment; here, there will be a focus on the Marshall hypothesis and the variables that Justice Thurgood Marshall believed would diminish public support for capital punishment. While most pieces agree that exonerations decrease public opinion on the death penalty, it is also valuable to analyze literature that diverges from this overall opinion; this will be addressed as well. Review of previous scholarly work will show that while there is a general consensus regarding the negative relationship between exonerations and public support for capital punishment, further research is necessary to clarify the connection and determine factors that enhance such an effect.

In their work on the relationship between innocence and capital punishment, Unnever and Cullen assert that a little over three fourths of Americans believe that executions of the innocent have taken place in recent years; this statistic was associated with diminished support levels for the death penalty (Unnever and Cullen 2005). This research produced convincing statistics such as the fact that about 48% of respondents who believed that the innocent have been executed supported the death penalty over alternative means such as life in prison without the possibility of parole (Unnever and Cullen 2005). Unnever and Cullen further emphasized the impact of innocence on public sentiment for capital punishment by pointing out that among those who deny the idea of innocents being executed, a little over 67% supported the death penalty. Thus, here, innocence seems to vary public support for the death penalty by almost 20%. Further impacting public support for capital punishment is whether or not individuals feel as though the practice is applied fairly. In fact, it was found that the relationship between support for the death penalty and believing innocent people are executed was more sizable when it is perceived that the death penalty is applied unfairly (Unnever and Cullen 2005).

Not only do Unnever and Cullen assert the fact that innocence impacts public sentiment, they also present other contributing factors worth analyzing that may affect public support for capital punishment; in order to truly understand the impact of innocence and exonerations on public opinion, the other relevant variables and their influences must be understood as well. For instance, the strongest indicator of support for the death penalty was individual confidence in government in that those who had confidence in the executive branch were more likely to support capital punishment; race was the second most impactful variable (Unnever and Cullen 2005). Despite finding such relationships between innocence and capital punishment support, Unnever and Cullen assert that their findings suggest that exposure to information regarding

innocent people being executed potentially lessens support even further. This is an idea that will be looked at further in this review and is reflected in more recent scholarly research.

Further, other research takes it a step farther and asserts that it may not only be the fact that individuals believe in wrongful convictions at the death penalty level that impact public opinion. Indeed, Wu suggests that what matters may be individuals' beliefs about the frequency of wrongful convictions. For instance, people who perceived a more elevated execution/wrongful conviction rate were less likely to support capital punishment (Wu 2021). Wu also touches on the issue of race and its impact on public sentiment for the death penalty. African Americans recognized a higher execution/wrongful conviction rate compared to Whites (Wu 2021). Thus, it appears that research has found that the impact of innocents being executed on public opinion can be further exacerbated by other variables, such as race. Wu's work, by quantifying wrongful convictions and focusing on frequency, seems to explain variations in previous research findings. After all, awareness of innocent people having been executed combined with believing such an event occurs often has exposed a negative relationship with death penalty support. Whereas, null findings are determined when it is known that innocent people have been executed, but it is believed it rarely occurs (Wu 2021).

Moving to scholarly literature that asserts information and framing of wrongful executions further and more intensely impacts public sentiment for the death penalty, Norris and Mullinix hold that wrongful convictions impact public opinion but such an effect is limited based on how the information is presented to the public. In their work, they utilized survey experiments with a control group and treatment conditions where the number of exonerations were presented to respondents in a variety of frames prior to being questioned about their support for the death penalty (Norris and Mullinix 2019). They found that the actual statistics being presented did

reduce support for the death penalty, but the narrative around which the statistics were introduced had "a more pronounced effect," (Norris and Mullinix 2019, 329); stated otherwise, statistics were compelling in reducing support for capital punishment, but the way in which the information was presented was more influential. Therefore, Norris and Mullinix found that framing effects are highly influential on public support for the death penalty, since the way information is presented has a proven effect on beliefs and attitudes. Similarly, Dardis et al. found that the "innocence frame" significantly impacts public support for the death penalty. They show that 40% of those who support the death penalty and were exposed to the innocence frame considered such ideas in the determination of their opinion; this is substantial when compared to the morality frame that only 13% of exposed individuals incorporated into their opinion crafting (Dardis et al. 2008). Further, it was also found that exonerations that are highly publicized and followed by significant media coverage of the innocence argument have already made impacts in the legal realm (Dardis et al. 2008). In agreement, Fan, Keltner, and Wyatt assert that variations in capital punishment support can be attributed to the media honing in on convictions of the innocent. They found compelling results such as the fact that media information focusing on innocence was over three times as powerful in its impact on public opinion on capital punishment as the second strongest variable, information favoring the death penalty (Fan, Keltner, and Wyatt 2002). Evidently, the innocence frame plays a vital role in the movement of public opinion on capital punishment, since its impact is over ten times as strong as general unfavorable coverage on the death penalty (Fan, Keltner, and Wyatt 2002).

In addition to the way information is framed to the public having an impact on support for capital punishment, the availability of and exposure to information itself, specifically regarding exonerations and wrongful convictions, also has been found to affect public opinion.

Lambert et al. did an experiment that found that information on innocence is followed by reduced support for capital punishment (Lambert et al. 2008). Astonishingly, those who were exposed to innocence information were more likely to change their opinions by 632% (Lambert et al. 2008). They did assert that the magnitude of the impact varies due to characteristics of individuals; for instance, those with higher levels of previous knowledge were more set in their beliefs (Lambert et al. 2008). In accordance with the fact that information and knowledge may impact sentiment for capital punishment, previous scholarly research has looked to the Marshall hypothesis developed by Justice Thurgood Marshall in his *Furman v. Georgia* opinion. The three-pronged hypothesis contains one stance that "an informed American public would not support the death penalty," (Lee, Böhm, and Pazzani 2013, 643). Marshall believed that death penalty information focusing on variables such as morality, the deterrence effect, cost to execute, error, type of lawyer, and discrimination would keep individuals from supporting capital punishment (Mitchell 2006).

However, this is where the research regarding the impact of exonerations, innocence, and exposure to related information on public support diverges and is debated. Mitchell tested this theory by providing a control group and an experimental group with a pre-test questionnaire, exposing the experimental group to stimuli focused on Marshall's variables, and giving both groups a post-test questionnaire. It was found that knowledge related to Marshall's variables decreased support for capital punishment (Mitchell 2006). However, Mitchell indicates that further research is necessary to look deeper into underlying factors such as education, race, age, party affiliation, and gender; trends were identified indicating that democrats, African Americans, women, younger individuals, and less educated persons were less likely to support the death penalty despite Marshall's variables. Similarly, Murray held that the Marshall

hypothesis is supported and when information is presented about the questionability of death penalty administration, public attitudes regarding the practice become more negative (Murray 2003). On the other hand, in another study, it was found that death penalty knowledge and support of the practice being inversely related as asserted in the Marshall hypothesis is not supported by data (Lee, Böhm, and Pazzani 2013). Interestingly, it was determined that while information exposure does not impact support for the death penalty, it does increase support for other punitive alternatives (Lee, Böhm, and Pazzani 2013). Another study found that even though respondents may be receptive to information that is critical to the death penalty, it is unlikely to change support for the practice (Vollum and Buffington-Vollum 2009). The authors of this research hold that opinions regarding capital punishment are "value-expressive" making it unlikely that individuals would compromise their deeply held principles due to information exposure (Vollum and Buffington-Vollum 2009, 20). Despite determining that critical information is unlikely to impact public opinion on capital punishment, Vollum and Buffington-Vollum find that information regarding executions and wrongful convictions received the highest levels of receptivity with over 90% of respondents determining that the information was compelling.

Evidently, there is a broad level of consensus that exonerations, innocence, and wrongful convictions lessen public support for capital punishment. Scholarly research is more prone to diverge when the specifics of how and why this phenomenon occurs come into play. It is unlikely that exonerations solely impact public sentiment for the death penalty, and it has been found that other factors such as race, ideology, framing, and information may also play vital roles. However, further research is necessary to resolve scholarly contentions like those mentioned above.

Theory

In knowing that previous scholarly literature, while settling on the consensus that exonerations do impact public support for the death penalty, diverges on the issue of how and by what means this phenomenon occurs, this research will look to settle some of those contentions. Having looked at the works of scholars like Norris and Mullinix, Lambert, and others, it is evident that information and the way it is presented can have an impact on public opinion on the death penalty. However, as seen in the works of other researchers mentioned above including Vollum and Buffington-Vollum, there are still questions surrounding the strength and accuracy of such a declaration. The theory of this research will focus on how the way information regarding major exonerations is presented impacts public support for the death penalty. Further, this research's theory will also include an emphasis on how the type of exoneration, DNA based or procedural based, influences public opinion on capital punishment; this is a facet of research that has not been explored for this topic.

To do so, the dependent variable being examined will be death penalty support, and the independent variables will be exoneration information presented in the form of a news article, in the form of a meme, in regards to a DNA based exoneration, and in regards to a procedural based exoneration. It is predicted that exoneration information presented in the form of an article regarding a DNA based exoneration will result in the highest decrease in death penalty support. Specifically, when survey respondents are presented with a news article highlighting a major exoneration of a death row inmate based on DNA evidence, their support for capital punishment will decrease. Accordingly, it is expected that when presented with a meme regarding a procedural based exoneration, individuals' support for the death penalty will decrease the least, if at all. I anticipate that news article presentation regarding a procedural based exoneration and

meme presentation regarding a DNA based exoneration will result in decreases in public opinion that fall between the two results previously mentioned. This translates to the theoretical idea that news articles carry the most weight in terms of legitimacy meaning individuals will consider the report more seriously when determining personal opinions compared to the less formal memes. In a similar fashion, the theory of this research also predicts that DNA based exonerations are considered more gravely by the public since DNA exonerations present more concrete innocence evidence. Thus, DNA based exonerations will impact public support for the death penalty at a higher rate than procedural based exonerations. Having discussed the theory of this research, the hypotheses fueling this survey experiment are as follows:

H_1 = Exposure to information regarding DNA based exonerations will result in a higher drop in public opinion than exposure to information regarding procedural based exonerations.

H_2= Exposure to news articles about exoneration information will result in a higher drop in public opinion than exposure to memes about exoneration information.

Research Methods

To test the hypotheses stated above, I conducted a survey experiment. Using the Qualtrics Online Survey Software and Prolific, I produced an experiment with four experimental groups and one control group. Before beginning the survey, all potential participants were presented with the Informed Consent statement, available in Appendix 1. If participants wished to continue with the survey after reading the Informed Consent statement, they were able to select "Agree to Participate." If participants did not wish to continue with the survey, they selected "I do not Agree to Participate," which caused the user to be directed to the end of the survey; the user was not able to continue with the survey if they selected "I do not Agree to Participate." After

selecting “Agree to Participate,” participants received a pre-test questionnaire which included the following demographic questions: gender, age range, ethnicity, marital status, highest education level achieved, annual income, and self-identified political ideology. The measure of political ideology was conducted using a slider with 0 being “Extreme left” and 7 being “Extreme right.” Respondents had the option to move the slider to whole numbers from 0-7 indicating their self-scored ideological standing.

In addition to demographic inquiries, the pre-test questionnaire also included questions that allowed me as the researcher to establish where individuals’ baseline opinions on capital punishment stood. In order to ensure respondents were not fully aware of the goal of the survey and to minimize response bias, the baseline questions included topics outside of capital punishment as well. Thus, these questions included inquiries into respondents’ opinions on the death penalty, gun control, abortion, immigration laws, and the legalization of marijuana. Most relevant to the research, the death penalty pre-test question was expressed as, “In general, how much do you agree or disagree with the practice of the death penalty?” The response options presented for all pre-test questionnaire questions asked respondents to report support based on the following seven choices: “Strongly disagree,” “Disagree,” “Somewhat disagree,” “Neither agree nor disagree,” “Somewhat agree,” “Agree,” and “Strongly agree.”

Following the pre-test questionnaire, participants were sorted into five groups. Two experimental groups received news articles regarding a death row exoneration, two experimental groups received memes regarding a death row exoneration, and the control group received an article regarding a completely unrelated topic. This tested how the presentation of exoneration information and type of exoneration impacts public opinion on the death penalty. One group was exposed to a news article that described an exoneration based on DNA evidence, while another

group received an article regarding a procedural based exoneration; this tested how the method of exoneration impacts public support for capital punishment. Similarly, two groups were exposed to "meme" style exoneration information to test if a less serious method of delivery impacts public support differently. Just as with the two groups receiving articles, one meme group viewed information regarding a DNA based exoneration, while the other meme group was exposed to information about a procedural based exoneration. The articles and memes presented to the four experimental groups, as well as the article presented to the control group, are available in Appendices 2-6. After viewing the article or meme treatment, respondents were then directed to a post-test questionnaire where they responded to the same questions as the pre-test questionnaire minus the demographic information. By performing the survey in this manner, I was able to effectively test and understand the impact of the presentation method and exoneration method on public support for the death penalty.

Moving more into the specifics of the survey experiment and its mechanics, a sample size of 560 respondents was employed, with 112 participants per experimental group. Since I used Qualtrics and Prolific, a random sample was generated and utilized. Additionally, the articles used in the two experimental groups and in the control group were sourced from AP News. Being a reliably impartial news source often unassociated with political bias, this source was chosen to help ensure the article was not disregarded by participants from the start due to political preference biases; this allowed the article to receive fair consideration from survey respondents. Additionally, the memes presented to participants referenced the same exoneration event that the article counterpart presented. That is, the exoneration case presented in the DNA article treatment was the same case presented in the DNA meme treatment; the same approach was applied to the procedural article and meme treatments.

After administration of the survey, I viewed the results to see how opinions regarding death penalty support changed after being exposed to either a DNA based article, procedural based article, DNA based meme, or procedural based meme. To do so, I compared respondents' reported support for capital punishment from the pre-test questionnaire to respondents' reported support from the post-test questionnaire. Additionally, I grouped results based on the demographic questions asked during the pre-test questionnaire. In doing so, I hoped to identify any contributing factors to the changes in opinion. It is interesting to see if the stimuli presented to respondents in the survey impact public support for the death penalty differently based on demographic factors such as gender, age range, ethnicity, marital status, highest education level achieved, annual income, and self-identified political ideology. Finally, I also performed an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression statistical test to determine if any relationships observed were statistically significant. By employing an experimental survey that focused on the method of information delivery and the type of exoneration, I was able to explore potential relationships with public opinion that have not yet been tested in this way with such a focus. Thus, the novelty of this research and its methods presents an opportunity for identifying unique and significant trends as a contribution to the wider network of scholarly research.

Results

The results from the survey experiment proved to be enlightening in regards to how the method of information delivery impacts public opinion on the death penalty. To start, the overall results, without being controlled for by a demographic element, show that there is a statistically significant decrease in public support for capital punishment when exposed to the two article treatments. Referencing Table 1 below, it can be seen that the difference between post-test and

pre-test attitudes on the death penalty (DP) were statistically significant at a 95% confidence level in regards to the two article treatments.

Table 1: Effects of Experimental Treatments on Post-test – Pre-test Attitudes

	Guns	Abortion	DP	Pot	Immigration
Article-DNA	-0.012	0.11	-0.187**	0.107	-0.056
	(0.079)	(0.092)	(0.08)	(0.072)	(0.083)
Article-Procedure	-0.018	0.022	-0.19**	0.119*	0.012
	(0.084)	(0.099)	(0.082)	(0.071)	(0.078)
Meme-DNA	-0.065	0.114	-0.062	0.119	-0.069
	(0.098)	(0.093)	(0.086)	(0.073)	(0.09)
Meme-Procedure	-0.071	0.099	-0.076	0.24**	-0.01
	(0.079)	(0.097)	(0.076)	(0.109)	(0.084)
Female	0.003	0.018	0.041	-0.02	0.065
	(0.055)	(0.063)	(0.058)	(0.06)	(0.051)
Education	-0.032	-0.029**	0.022	0.0003	0.009
	(0.021)	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.009)	(0.014)
Ideology	-0.003	-0.006	0.024*	-0.014	0.01
	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Age	-0.01	-0.027	0.027	0.032	0.023
	(0.018)	(0.033)	(0.022)	(0.033)	(0.018)
Married	0.0009	-0.013	0.018	0.01	0.017
	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.015)
Constant	0.255	0.229	-0.334**	-0.198	-0.203
	(0.203)	(0.16)	(0.156)	(0.156)	(0.187)
Observations	550	549	549	544	548
R-squared	0.013	0.013	0.029	0.026	0.013

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Specifically, with a p-value less than 0.05, when exposed to the DNA article treatment, respondents' post-test attitudes were 0.187, or 2.67%, less than respondents' pre-test attitudes. Similarly, in the procedural article treatment, respondents' post-test attitudes toward the death penalty were 0.19, or 2.86%, less than respondents' pre-test attitudes at a 95% confidence level.

However, as seen in Table 1, the two meme treatments had a lesser effect on post-test attitudes and lacked statistical significance. Such a finding suggests that H_2 is supported. Presenting information regarding exonerations in article form has a larger impact on the change of attitudes regarding the death penalty than the presentation of information in the more informal, meme format. Furthermore, interestingly, the control group saw decreased support for the death penalty of 0.334, or 4.77%, when exposed to an unrelated article about a bridge replacement initiative. While this decrease is statistically significant at a 95% confidence level, the reason for its occurrence is unknown. It is possible that respondents were more comfortable with the survey upon reaching the post-test portion and, thus, responded with more honest answers. Additionally, it is possible that the nature of the control group's article somehow instigated thought on the death penalty despite the topic being unrelated. For example, perhaps the discussion of funding for the bridge initiative spurred the idea that funds should be redirected away from the death penalty towards more community focused projects. It is also possible that this trend could look different if a larger sample size were employed. Overall, it is difficult to determine why the control group reflected such results.

Additionally, when looking into how the demographics of the sample may have impacted the decrease in death penalty support, it is important to note that ideology is a contributing factor; this can be seen in Table 1 where ideology is the only demographic variable with a statistically significant asterisk next to the result. To further investigate this finding, Table 2 and the graphic below depict the difference in post-test and pre-test attitudes on the death penalty when controlling for ideology. Clearly, the graphic helps illustrate how an increase in conservatism leads to an increase in support for the death penalty. Even when exposed to the control article about bridges, the more conservative a person was, the more they supported the

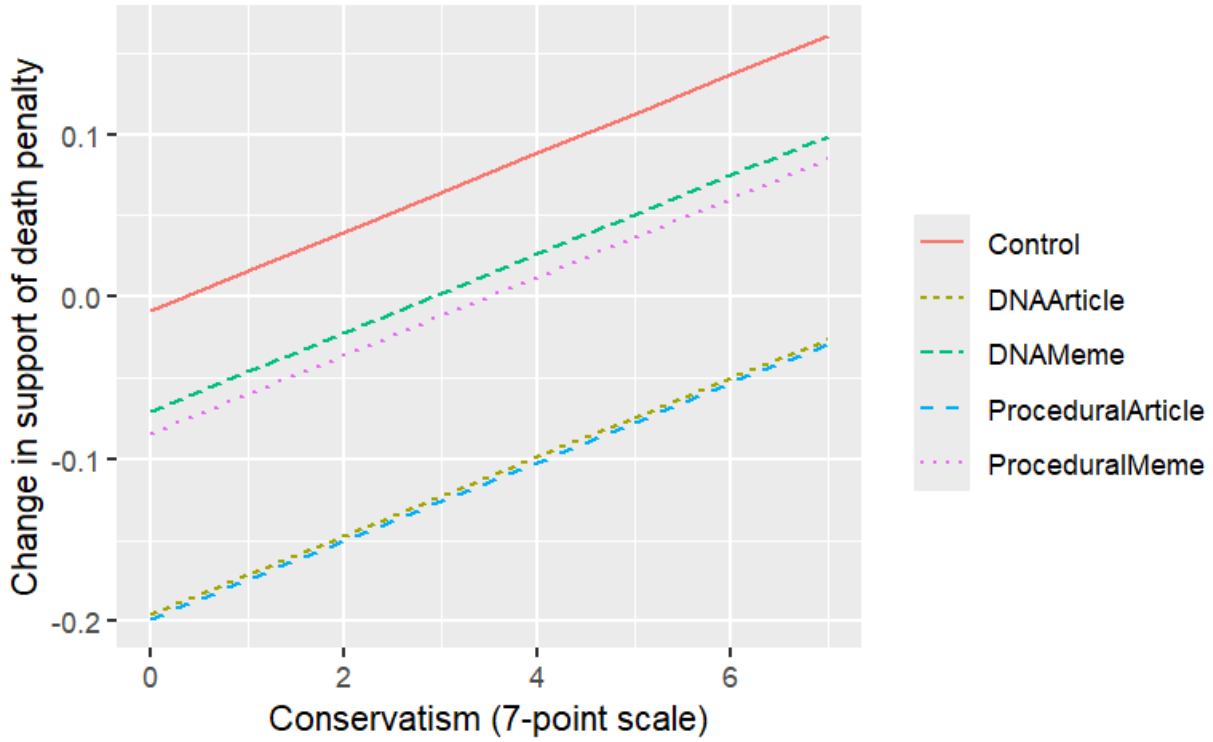
death penalty following the encounter with the article. Additionally, it can be seen that the DNA article treatment and the procedural article treatment resulted in a more negative change in support for the death penalty, but the impact of conservatism remains the same with more conservative respondents having a smaller decrease in support than less conservative respondents.

Table 2: Post-test – Pre-test Death Penalty Attitudes by Ideology

	Everyone	Liberals	Conservatives	Extreme Lib.	Extreme Cons.
Article-DNA	-0.191**	-0.200**	-0.178*	-0.291**	-0.0179
	(0.0803)	(0.102)	(0.130)	(0.167)	(0.225)
Article-Procedure	-0.200**	-0.197**	-0.203*	-0.381***	0.125
	(0.0785)	(0.0941)	(0.136)	(0.124)	(0.241)
Meme-DNA	-0.0725	-0.0772	-0.0667	-0.220	0.0481
	(0.0862)	(0.107)	(0.143)	(0.165)	(0.217)
Meme-Procedure	-0.0901	-0.0821	-0.0889	-0.125	0.250
	(0.0776)	(0.0883)	(0.142)	(0.100)	(0.236)
Constant	0.0270	-0.0152	0.0889	0.0909	-0.125
	(0.0550)	(0.0550)	(0.109)	(0.0799)	(0.203)
Observations	552	334	218	154	67
R-squared	0.015	0.015	0.016	0.047	0.028

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.



In looking at Table 2 above, some definitions are necessary to enhance understanding of the findings. Liberals in this context are defined as participants who self-scored their ideology as a 0, 1, 2, or 3, with 0 being extremely left leaning. Conservatives are defined as participants who self-scored their ideology as a 4, 5, 6, or 7, with 7 being extremely right leaning. Extreme Liberals are defined as participants who self-scored their ideology as 0, 1, or 2. Similarly, Extreme Conservatives are defined as respondents who self-scored their ideology as 5, 6, or 7. Leaving out those who self-scored as a 3 or 4 for the two extreme ideological groups removes participants who may be more moderate in an attempt to analyze how more solidly leaning conservatives or liberals were impacted by the treatments.

All that said, with 95% confidence, it can be held that liberals' change in attitude towards the death penalty decreased by 0.2, or 2.86%, after being exposed to the DNA article treatment.

When exposed to the procedural article treatment, with 95% confidence, liberals' post-test attitudes regarding the death penalty were 0.197, or 2.81%, less than pre-test attitudes. When it comes to conservatives, the decrease in support for the death penalty was less statistically significant. With 90% confidence, it can be said that conservatives' attitudes towards the death penalty fell by 2.54% when exposed to the DNA article treatment. When exposed to the procedural article treatment, conservatives' attitudes for the death penalty decreased by 2.9% at a 90% confidence level. Therefore, support for the death penalty after being exposed to either of the article treatment groups decreases for both groups, but it is stronger for liberals. Again, in line with the findings depicted in Table 1, the two meme treatments lacked a statistically significant effect for liberals and conservatives.

Interestingly, when ideology is narrowed to only include extreme conservatives and extreme liberals, the results differ. For extreme liberals, the DNA article treatment showed a greater decrease in support for the death penalty between post-test and pre-test attitudes compared to the decrease presented when liberals in general were included. With 95% confidence, extreme liberals' support for the death penalty decreased by 4.157% after exposure to the DNA article. This finding is a decrease of 1.297% more than when controlling for the broader group of liberals. Further, when controlling for extreme liberals, the exposure to the procedural article showed not only a larger decrease in support for the death penalty than when controlling for liberals in general, but the decrease was statistically significant at the 99% confidence level compared to the previous 95% confidence level. When exposed to the procedural article treatment, extreme liberals' attitudes on the death penalty decreased by 5.442%, a figure that is statistically significant at a p-value of less than 0.01. This finding is a decrease of 2.632% more than when controlling for the broader group of liberals. It is hard to tell

with such a small sample size why the procedural article treatment seemed to have a more influential effect on attitudes regarding the death penalty for extreme liberals than the DNA article treatment, but it is an interesting statistic worthy of further testing with a larger sample.

However, what is most intriguing is the fact that when controlling for extreme conservatives, the post-test and pre-test differences of attitudes on the death penalty were not statistically significant decreases. Considering the fact that the decreases in support were statistically significant for article treatments when controlling for the broader group of conservatives, it appears that the more conservative an individual is, the less likely it is that their opinion on the death penalty will change. Thus, it can be inferred that the attitudes of extreme conservatives on the death penalty are largely unchanged regardless of the treatment they were exposed to. Further, the results presented in Table 2 show that as an individual becomes more conservative, they support the death penalty at higher rates. It is important to note that, in accordance with the number of observations found in Table 2, there were more participants who identified themselves as liberal and extreme liberal than conservative and extreme conservative. That said, it appears that statistical significance in the change of death penalty support overall is driven by liberals or individuals who identified as more left leaning.

Conclusion

This research has succeeded in illuminating several interesting trends. To start, with H_2 supported, it was found that the dissemination of information via an article has a more profound effect on the changes in opinion regarding the death penalty than more informal methods of communication. This may be attributed to the fact that articles are seen as more informative and reliable than a more informal meme presentation. In a world where digital media is expanding along with the constant need for fast, consumable information, such a finding provides hope that

individuals continue to seek more informative, formal, and reliable sources of information. Further, it is enlightening to find that the treatments impacted participants differently based on their ideology. Liberals appear to be more moved by the exoneration information presented than conservatives- a fact that is magnified when you look more closely at extreme liberals and extreme conservatives. Such a finding leads to the conclusion that conservatives are more fixed in their opinions regarding the death penalty than liberals. These findings suggest that any treatment or stimuli would fail to alter the opinions of conservatives or extreme conservatives. Conservatives and extreme conservatives are likely to remain unchanged in their opinions regarding the death penalty regardless of exoneration information and the format in which it is presented.

Having found intriguing, statistically significant results, it is valuable to also look at the hypothesis that was not supported. H_1 was not supported by the research. That is, it does not appear as though the type of exoneration has an impact on public support. I hypothesized that DNA based exoneration information, in the form of an article or meme, would result in a larger decrease in public support for the death penalty than procedural based exoneration information. The reasoning for this hypothesis hinged on the idea that individuals would find DNA based exonerations to be more compelling considering the evidence is highly concrete. On the other hand, it was presumed that individuals would find procedural based exonerations to be less influential, as some may consider the exoneration to be based on technicalities rather than true innocence. However, the data produced from this research does not appear to support such a theory.

While the findings of this research are intriguing and novel to the area of study, it is recommended that further research be conducted to confirm the research outcomes. Considering

the fact that the sample size was rather small, it is possible that findings may be even more profound at a larger level. Additionally, a larger sample size may illuminate further statistically significant findings. That said, the results of this research present trends and findings that may assist in understanding attitudes on the death penalty and the impact of the "Innocence Movement." However, scholarly research will benefit from a more extensive examination on how the presentation of information impacts public support for capital punishment.

Appendix 1

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Title of Research: Innocence and its Impact on the Public
Principal Investigator: Matthew D. Montgomery
[Co-investigators:] Rachel Lynch

Overview: You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be at least 18 years of age and live within the United States of America.
Study Details: This study is being conducted via Qualtrics, an online survey platform, with recruitment on MTurk. The purpose of this study is to observe respondent political knowledge and present various news articles related to the criminal justice in the United States. You will be asked to rate support for the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches of the federal government, along with your thoughts on capital punishment. You will be asked about this support after being provided information on the interaction between different institutions. This is a research project being conducted by Matthew Montgomery (Texas Christian University faculty) and Rachel Lynch (Texas Christian University student). It contains ~30 questions and should take less than 10 minutes to complete.
Participants: You are being asked to take part because we are interested in what residents in the United States think about how their government works. If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of 500 participants in this research study at TCU.
Voluntary Participation: Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty. You are free to decline to answer any question you do not wish to answer for any reason.
Confidentiality: Even if we publish the findings from this study, we will keep your information private and confidential. Anyone with authority to look at your records must keep them confidential.

What is the purpose of the research? The "Innocence Movement" that has emerged in recent decades has sparked a moral debate regarding capital punishment; if the U.S. justice system has failed to recognize the innocence of and has incarcerated thousands of blameless individuals, ethical questions regarding the appropriateness of the death penalty in a broken system begin to arise. Interestingly, we see trends over time that indicate a public opinion shift away from support for the death penalty. Considering the timing of public polling shifts, it is likely that exonerations and wrongful convictions impact public opinion on the death penalty. Though, individual level studies on the issue offer little insight and often produce mixed conclusions in terms of exonerations limiting death penalty support. That being said, further research regarding the impact of exonerations on public support for capital punishment is necessary in order to understand the effects of innocence on punitive sentiment. Thus, this research will explore the possible relationship between public opinion on the death penalty and exonerations

What are the risks of participating in this study, and how will they be minimized?
We don't believe there are any risks from participating in this research that are different from risk that you encounter in everyday life.

What is my involvement for participating in this study?
If you decide to participate, you will answer ~30 survey questions surrounding your views of various government institutions, along with demographic information. We expect your participation to take about 10 minutes.

Are there any alternatives and can I withdraw?
You do not have to participate in this research study, and if you would like to end participation at any time, you may exit out of the survey, and you will not be penalized.
You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. To withdraw, you may elect not to participate after reading this Informed Consent statement. You may also exit the survey at any time prior to completion without any form of penalty.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, others might benefit because your responses may help us learn more about how people form opinions about different government institutions.

Will I be compensated for participating in this study?
You will receive a payment of $0.50 (USD) for your participation. Compensation will be administered in no more than 7 days, and no workers will be blocked from participating.

What are my costs to participate in the study?
To participate in the research, you will not need to pay for anything.

How will my confidentiality be protected?
Every effort will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Your records may be reviewed by authorized University personnel or other individuals who will be bound by the same provisions of confidentiality. Matthew Montgomery and Rachel Lynch will have access to the information you provide, however, no identifying information will be collected. We do not collect your name or other identifying information. Any facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

What will happen to the information collected about me after the study is over?
Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from the research data collected as part of the project.
We may share your research data with other investigators without asking for your consent again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you.

Who should I contact if I have questions regarding the study or concerns regarding my rights as a study participant?
You can contact Matthew Montgomery at m.d.montgomery@tcu.edu or 817-257-4551 with any questions that you have about the study.
Dr. Brie Diamond, Chair, TCU Institutional Review Board, (817) 257-6152, b.diamond@tcu.edu; or Dr. Floyd Wormley, Vice Provost of Research, research@tcu.edu
By selecting "Agree to participate" below, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you agree. You will be given a copy of this document for your records upon request. If you have any questions about the study after you agree to participate, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

Appendix 2- DNA Article

2 men wrongfully sent to death row awarded $75M in damages

AP news article with no author listed from May 15, 2021.

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — A jury in a North Carolina federal civil rights case has awarded $75 million to two Black, intellectually disabled half brothers who spent decades behind bars after being wrongfully convicted in the 1983 rape and murder of an 11-year-old girl.

The eight-person jury on Friday decided Henry McCollum and Leon Brown should received $31 million each in compensatory damages, $1 million for every year spent in prison, The News & Observer reported. The jury also awarded them $13 million in punitive damages.

“The first jury to hear all of the evidence — including the wrongly suppressed evidence — found Henry and Leon to be innocent, found them to have been demonstrably and excruciatingly wronged, and has done what the law can do to make it right at this late date,” Raleigh attorney Elliot Abrams said after the trial.

Abrams was part of the brothers’ legal team, which issued a statement saying the decades-long wait “for recognition of the grave injustice” inflicted on the two by law enforcement was over. It added that “a jury ... has finally given Henry and Leon the ability to close this horrific chapter of their lives. They look forward to a brighter future surrounded by friends, family, and loved ones.”

McCollum and Brown have pursued the civil case against law enforcement members since 2015, arguing that their civil rights were violated during the interrogations that led to their convictions. The two were released from prison in 2014 after DNA evidence that pointed to a convicted

murderer exonerated them. They were teenagers when they were accused of the crime, which happened in Red Springs in Robeson County.

Attorneys for the men have said they were scared teenagers who had low IQs when they were questioned by police and coerced into confessing. McCollum was then 19, and Brown was 15. Both were convicted and sentenced to death.

McCollum spent most of his 31 years in prison on death row, becoming North Carolina's longest-serving death row inmate. Brown -- who the newspaper reported suffers from mental health conditions related to his time in prison and requires full-time care -- had his sentence later changed to life in prison.

"2 Men Wrongfully Sent to Death Row Awarded $75M in Damages." 2021. AP News. May 15, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/nc-state-wire-health-1d992026ccbf69fa5d7e617382e9c976.

Appendix 3- Procedural Article

Texas court finds Kerry Max Cook innocent of 1977 murder, ending decades-long quest for exoneration

AP news article written by Zach Despart and the Texas Tribune on June 20, 2024.

Kerry Max Cook is innocent of the 1977 murder of Linda Jo Edwards, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals found, citing stunning allegations of prosecutorial misconduct that led to Cook spending 20 years on death row for a crime he did not commit.

Cook was released from prison in 1997 and Smith County prosecutors set aside his conviction in 2016. The ruling Wednesday, by the state's highest criminal court, formally exonerates him.

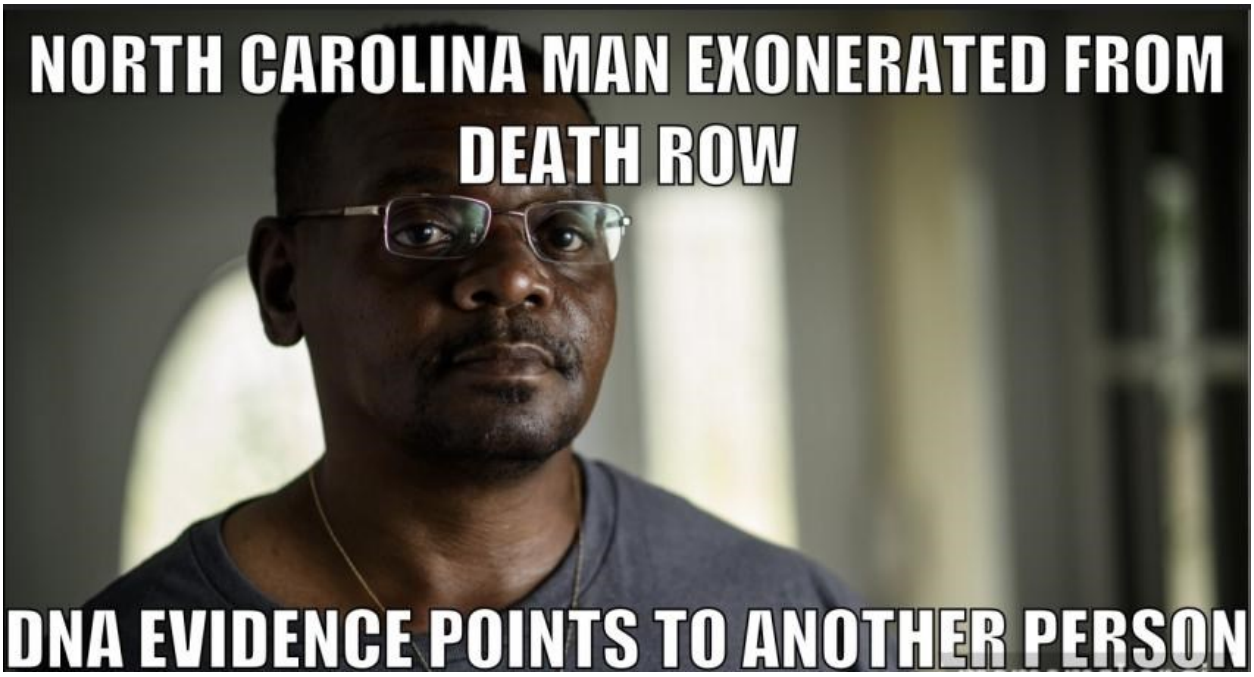
"This case is riddled with allegations of State misconduct that warrant setting aside Applicant's conviction," Judge Bert Richardson wrote in the majority opinion. "And when it comes to solid support for actual innocence, this case contains it all — uncontroverted Brady violations, proof of false testimony, admissions of perjury and new scientific evidence."

Cook, now 68, became an advocate against the death penalty after his release. The ruling ends, as Richardson wrote, a "winding legal odyssey" stretching 40 years that was "marked by bookends of deception."

Prosecutors in Smith County, in East Texas, accused Cook of the 1977 rape, murder and mutilation of 21-year-old Edwards. Cook's first conviction in 1978 was overturned. A second trial in 1992 ended in a mistrial and a third in 1994 concluded with a new conviction and death sentence. The Court of Criminal Appeals reversed the second verdict in 1996, stating that misconduct by police and prosecutors had tainted the case from the start.

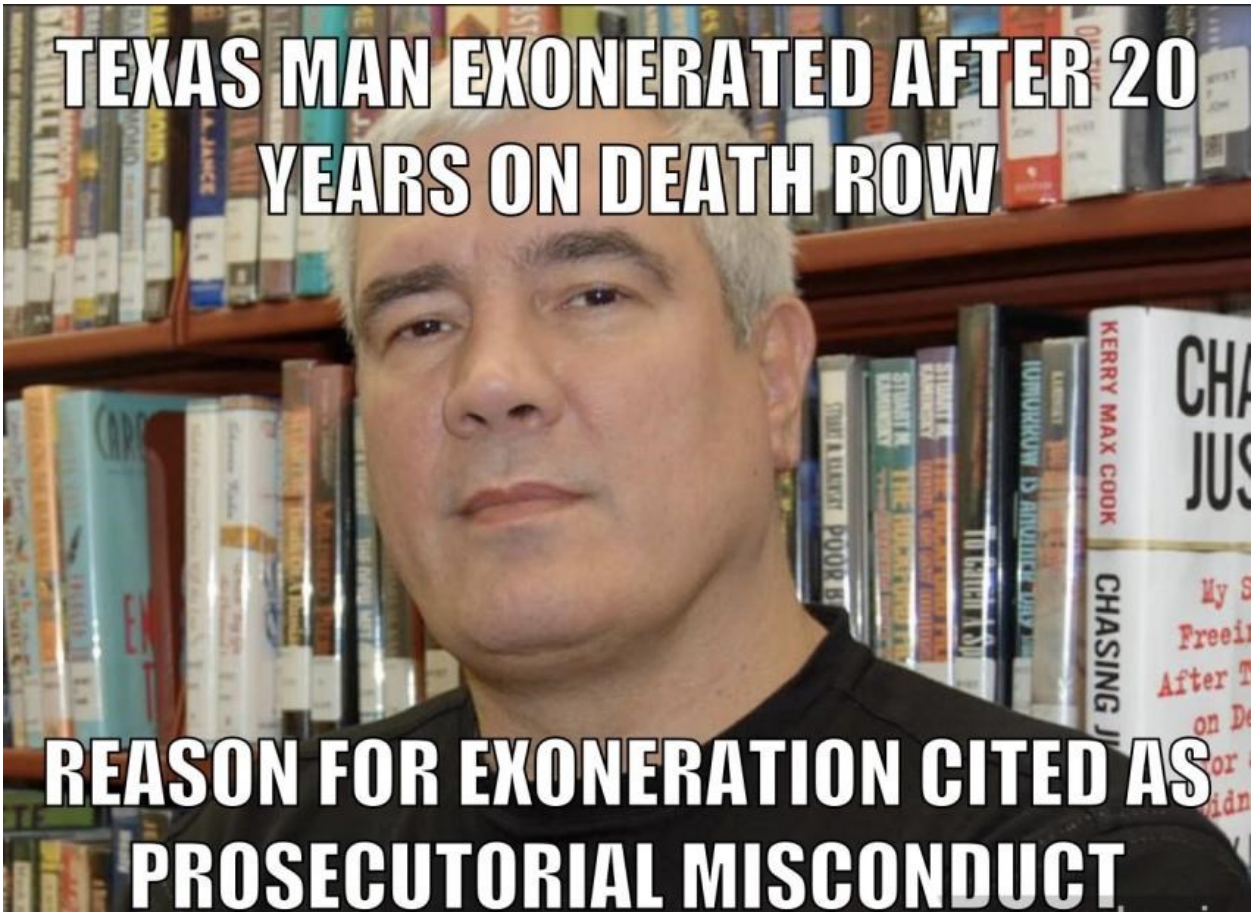
Despart, Zach. 2024. “Texas Court Finds Kerry Max Cook Innocent of 1977 Murder, Ending Decades-long Quest for Exoneration.” AP News. June 20, 2024. https://apnews.com/us-news/crime-courts-texas-legal-proceedings-homicide-8ad3136add311cba3f8e2e35f092a121.

Appendix 4- DNA Meme



Craft, Andrew. n.d. Photograph. The Fayetteville Observer. Innocence Project. https://innocenceproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/McCollum_Henry-photo-by-Andrew-Craft-The-Fayetteville-Observer-scaled.jpg.

Appendix 5- Procedural Meme



n.d. *Photograph of Kerry Max Cook*. The Texas Speakers Bureau. https://www.texasspeakersbureau.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Kerry-Cook-TEDx-head-shot.jpeg.

Appendix 6- Control Article

Massachusetts secures $1 billion in federal funds to help replace Cape Cod bridges

AP News article written by Steve Leblanc on July 14, 2024.

BOSTON (AP) — Massachusetts is making headway on putting together the funding needed to replace two aging bridges that connect Cape Cod to the rest of the state. Gov. Maura Healey announced Friday that the Massachusetts Department of Transportation and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have secured nearly $1 billion in additional federal dollars for the construction of the replacement spans over the Cape Cod Canal. The funding was included in a bipartisan bridge investment program. The additional $1 billion brings the total amount of federal funding secured for the project to nearly $1.72 billion, in addition to the $700 million in state funding pledged by the Healey administration.

The full cost to replace both bridges is estimated at around $4.5 billion. “This is a game-changing award for Massachusetts. We’ve never been closer to rebuilding the Cape Cod Bridges than we are right now. This funding will be critical for getting shovels in the ground,” Healey said. Cape Cod and the islands — Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket — are home to 263,000 permanent residents and are popular tourist destinations with five million annual visitors.

Leblanc, Steve. 2024. “Massachusetts Secures $1 Billion in Federal Funds to Help Replace Cape Cod Bridges.” AP News. July 14, 2024. https://apnews.com/article/cape-cod-bridges-replacement-sagamore-bourne-1361336bceb

f2c1dde931519e56a92d3#:~:text=Maura%20Healey%20announced%20Friday%20that,a%20bipartisan%20bridge%20investment%20program.

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