

Vengeance, Retribution, or Mistake? Discussing the Death Penalty in America, 1960-2002

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Presentation Highlights

- Background on Issue Definition
- Longitudinal Study on Changing Definition of Death Penalty Issue
- Public Opinion Research
- Future Projects

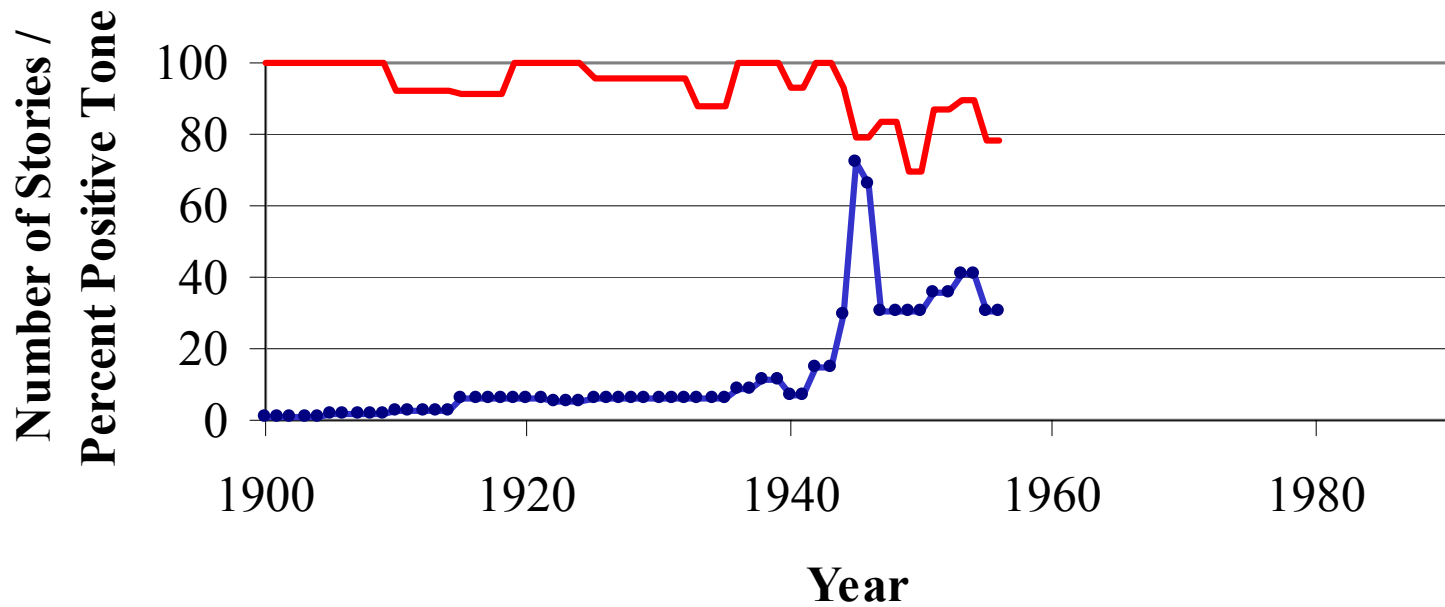
Issue Definitions and Their Policy Consequences

- All issues are inherently multi-dimensional.
- Attention often focuses on one set of dimensions at a time, surprisingly.
- Attention can shift dramatically and with long-lasting policy consequences.
- Pesticides as an example:

■ (Drawn from *Agendas and Instability*, Fig. 5.3)

Pesticides: Looking Good after World War Two

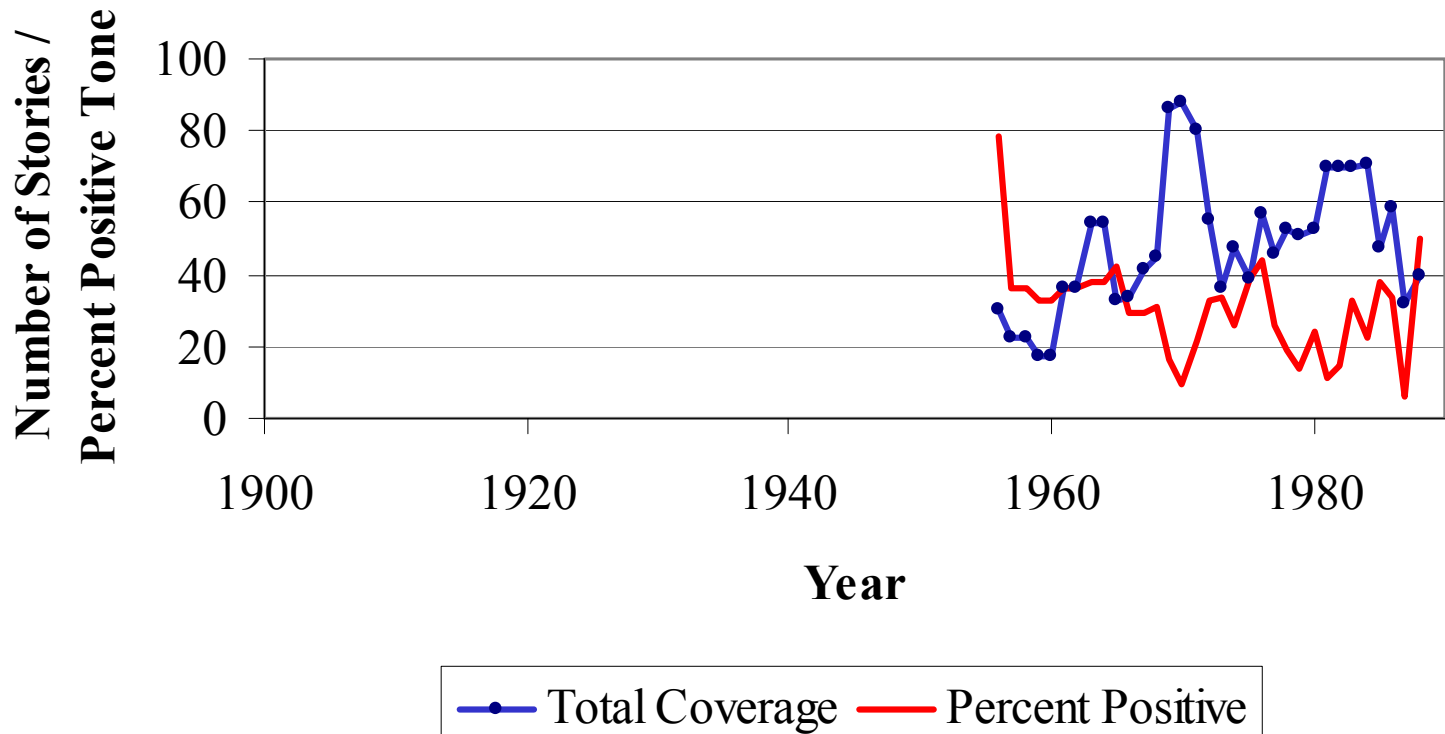
Media Coverage of Pesticides, 1900-1990



—●— Total Coverage — Percent Positive

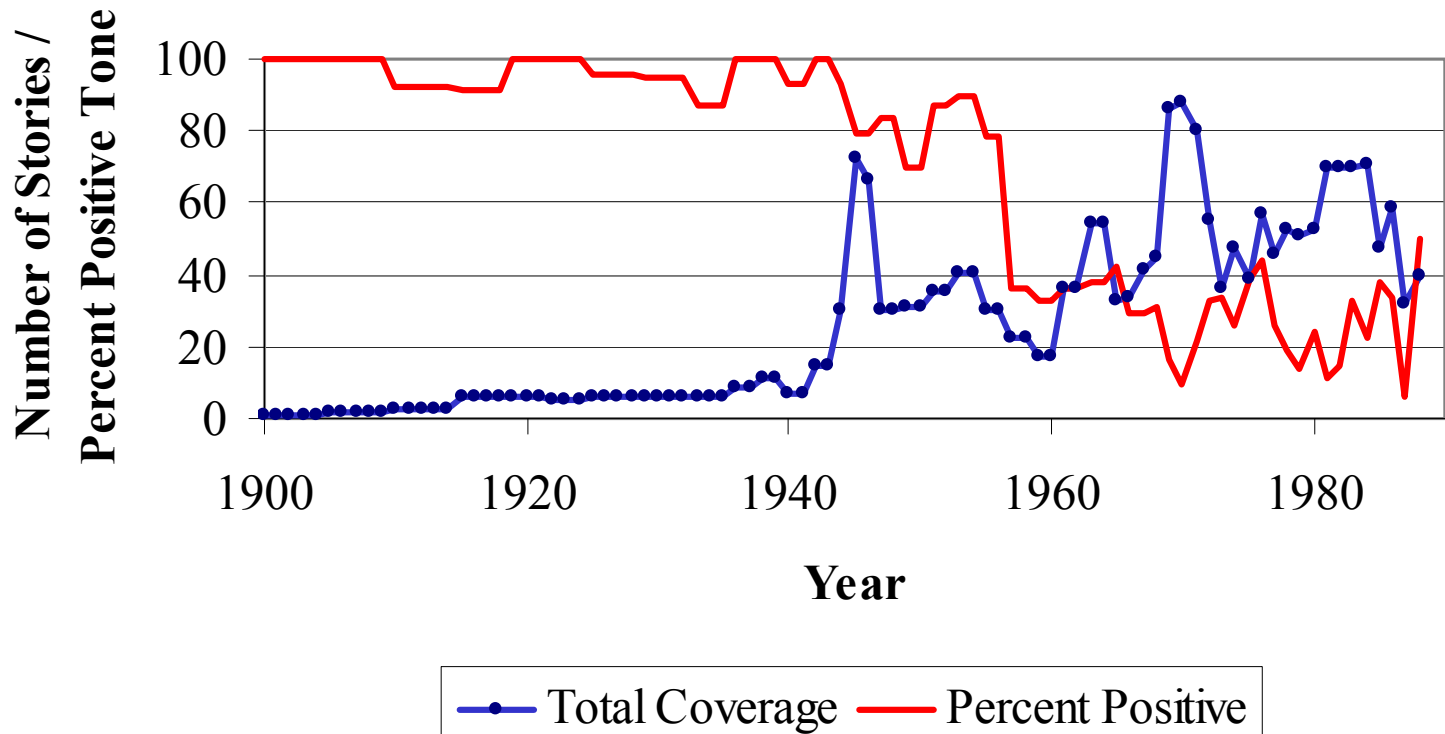
Pesticides: No Longer Such Good News after 1956

Media Coverage of Pesticides, 1900-1990



Pesticides: From Green Revolution to Nobody's Baby

Media Coverage of Pesticides, 1900-1990



Are we on the verge, or indeed in
the middle of, a major
redefinition of public
understanding of the death
penalty in America?

Major Dimensions of Death Penalty Debate

- **Efficacy**- Does the punishment serve a functional purpose?
- **Moral**- Should we use the death penalty at all?
- **Fairness**- Is the capital punishment process fair?
- **Constitutionality/Judiciary**- Is the penalty constitutional and how much power do the courts have?
- **Cost**- Is the death penalty cost-effective?
- **Mode of Execution**- Which modes of execution should be permitted?
- **International**- We should consider the many complaints from abroad regarding our death penalty system

Methodology

- Developed coding scheme incorporating all of these possible arguments about the death penalty
- Coded 3,500 New York Times abstracts under the index title “Capital Punishment”
- This represents the whole set of articles from 1960-2001

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ID: NYT Year: Day / Month: Front Page: 3 Tone:

Subject: NYT Page: First Three Words: 4 Story Type:

NYT Column:

Victim Characteristics

- 10 Officer
- 11 Child
- 12 Multiple
- 13 Family Mention
- 14 Female
- 19 Other

Defendant Characteristics

- 20 Terrorist
- 21 Minority
- 22 Mentally Handicapped
- 23 Female
- 24 Parent
- 25 Juvenile
- 27 Humanized
- 29 Other Vul Char

Nature of Crime/ Mode of Execution

- 30 Mode of execution discussed
- 31 Type of Crime
- 32 Violence of crime discussed
- 40 Legislative Initiative

Dimensions of Debate

100 Efficacy

- 101 Deterrence
- 102 Incapacitation
- 103 Alts Flawed
- 109 General Pro
- 110 Not Deterrent
- 111 Alt Systems Pro
- 119 General Anti

200 Moral

- 201 Retribution
- 202 Family Vengeance
- 203 Type Crime/Extension
- 209 General Pro
- 210 Killing Ven Bad
- 211 Family Opposed
- 219 General Anti

900 Other Dimension

300 Fairness/Process

- 301 Are Fair
- 302 Abbreviated Process
- 303 Flaws Overstated
- 304 No Blanket Regs
- 309 General Pro
- 310 Inadequate Rep
- 311 Arbitrary
- 312a Racist
- 312b Classist
- 312c Other Demographic
- 313a Vulnerable Popul
- 313b Mitigating
- 314 Mandatory Sent Bad
- 315 No Alt Punish
- 316 Evidence
- 317 Innocence
- 318 Broken
- 319 General Anti

400 Const/PopControl

- 401 Not Cruel
- 402 Process Upheld
- 403 Pop Support Pro
- 404 States Rights Pro
- 405 Fed Juris Pro
- 409 General Pro
- 410 Cruel Unusual
- 411 Vio Due Process
- 412 Pop Support Anti
- 413 State Rights Anti
- 414 Fed Juris Anti
- 419 General Anti

500 Cost

- 501 Worth It
- 502 Prison Exp
- 509 General Pro
- 510 Not Worth It
- 511 Prison Cheaper
- 519 General Anti

600 Mode

- 601 Mode Just
- 609 General Pro
- 610 Mode Questioned
- 619 General Anti

700 International

- 709 General Pro
- 710 Int Complaints
- 711 Extradition Probs
- 712 Foreign Natts
- 719 General Anti

900 Description

Notes

Sample Abstracts and Codes Received

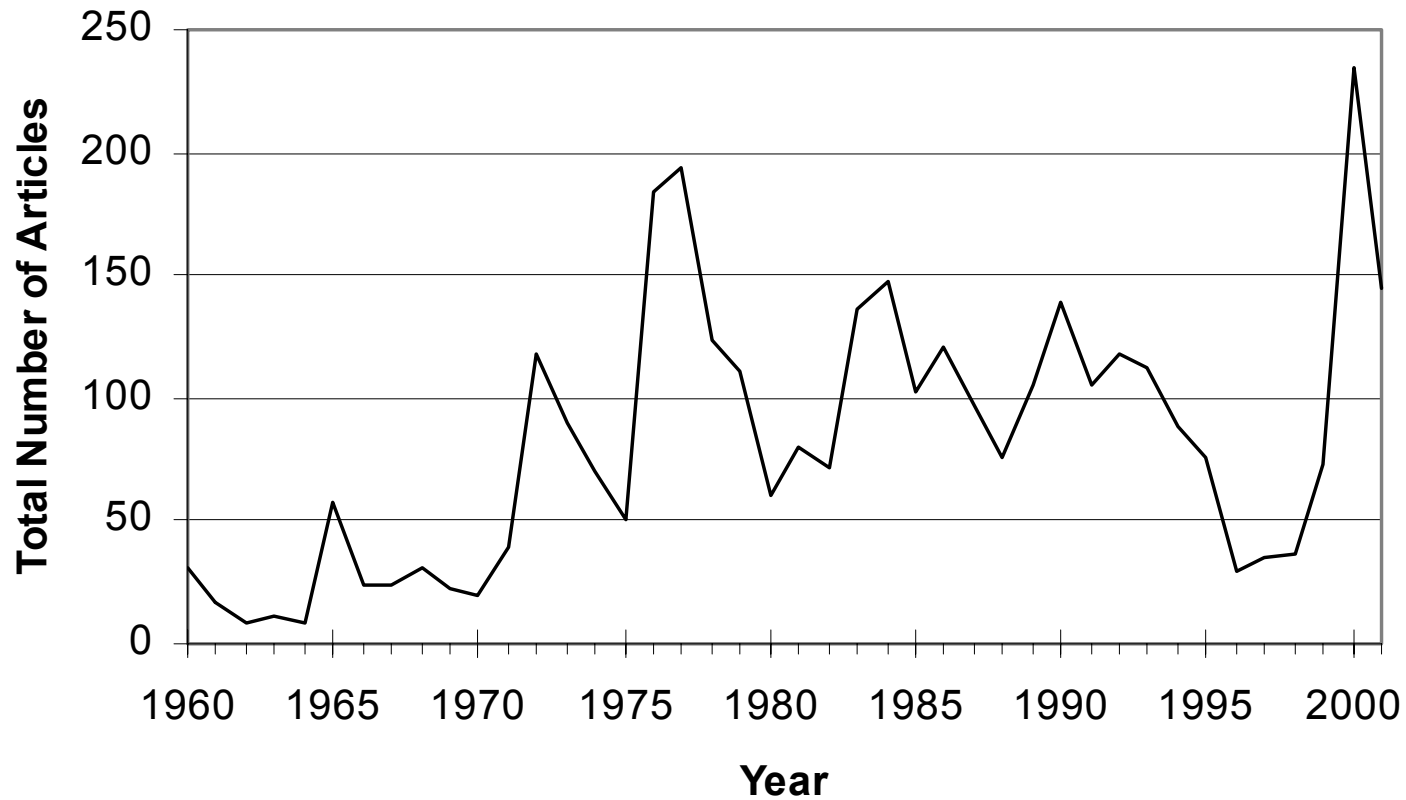
- *“Critics of capital punishment accuse Virginia officials of being vindictive for not allowing Earl Washington Jr to appear at news conference on Capitol Hill to talk about death sentence he narrowly escaped for rape and murder he did not commit; news conference is part of campaign to legislate greater opportunities for appeal under death penalty”*

Codes Received: Strong anti tone, News story type, Type of crime committed, Violence of crime committed, Legislative initiative, Innocence, General fairness anti-death penalty

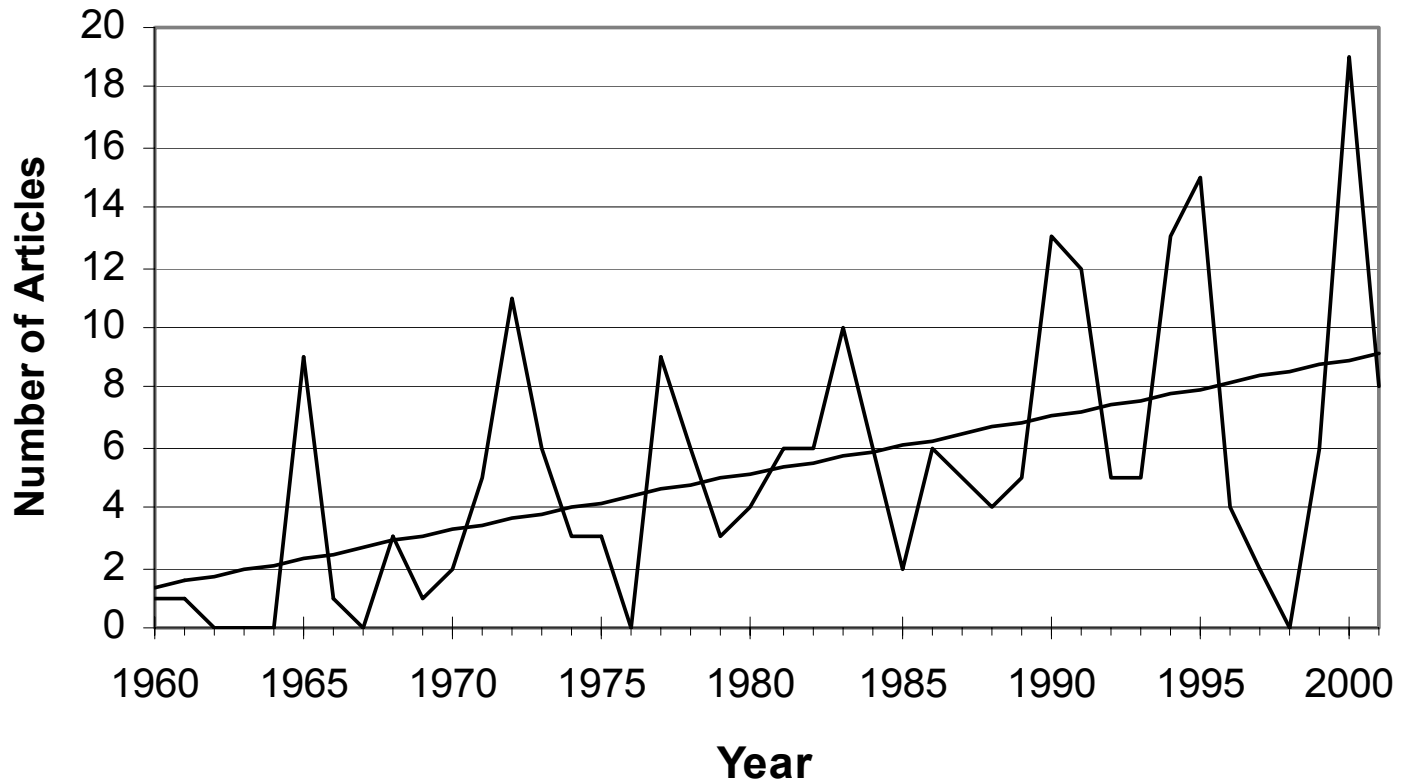
- *“State of Missouri will execute 26-year old Antoniao Richardson, mentally retarded man, despite pleas for clemency from mother of his two victims; he was 16 years old in 1991, when he murdered 20-year-old Julie Kerry and 19-year-old sister Robin”*

Codes Received: Weak pro tone, News story type, Type of crime committed, Victim multiple mentioned, Victim female, Victim family mentioned, Defendant mentally handicapped, Defendant juvenile, Victim family morally opposed

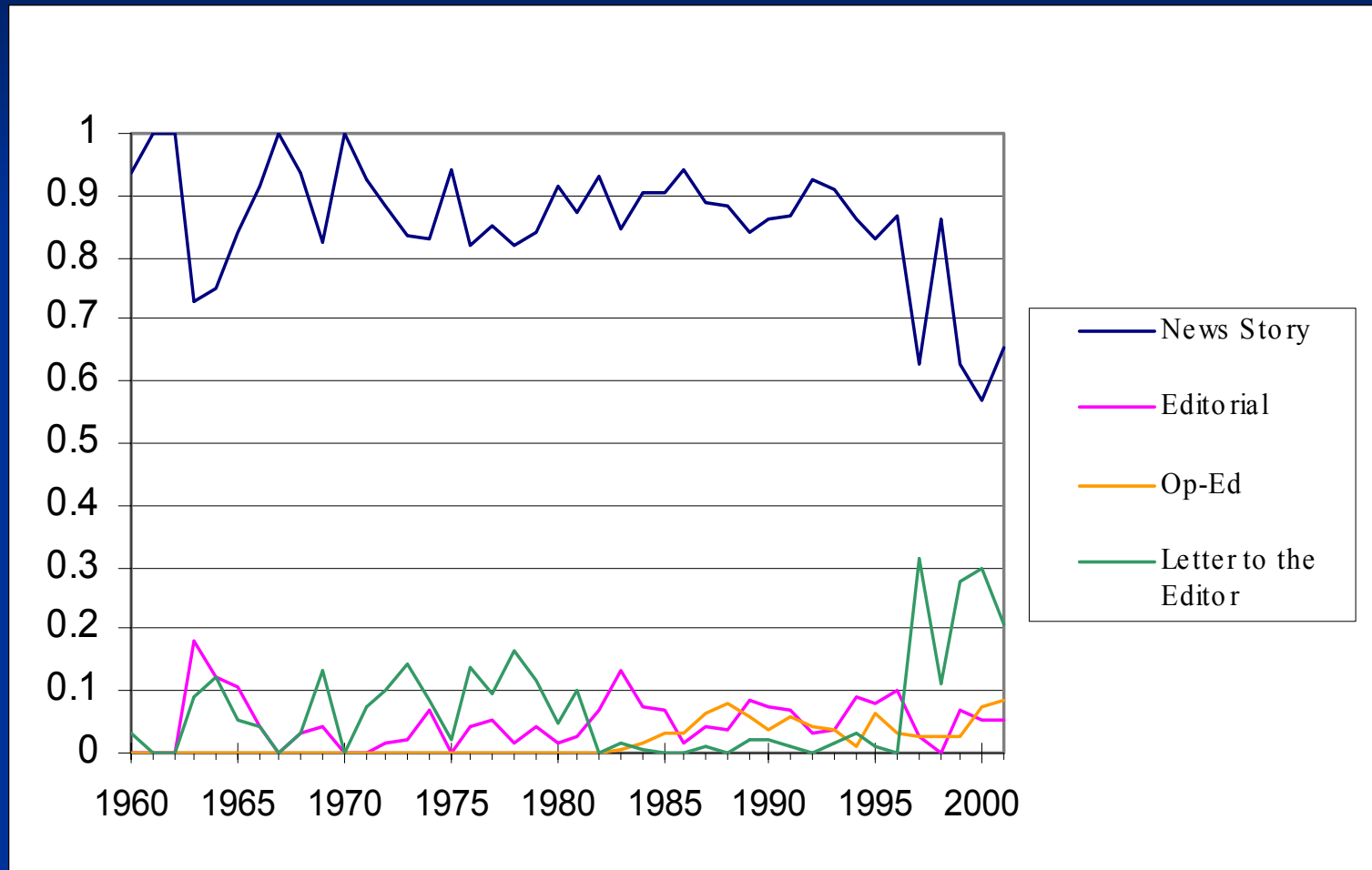
Total Number of *NYT* Articles, 1960-2001



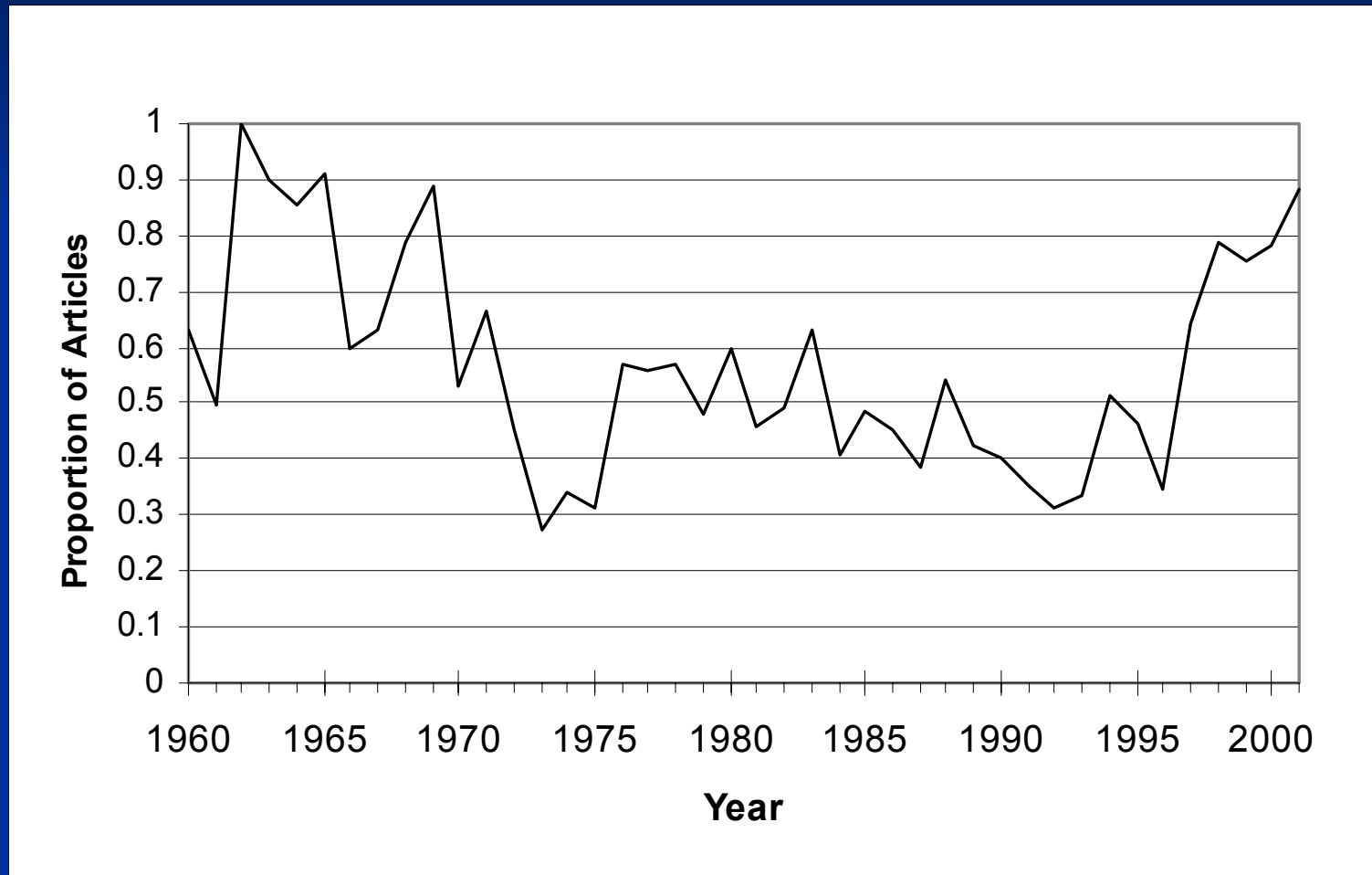
Front Page *NYT* Coverage, 1960-2001



Type of Story in *NYT*, 1960-2001

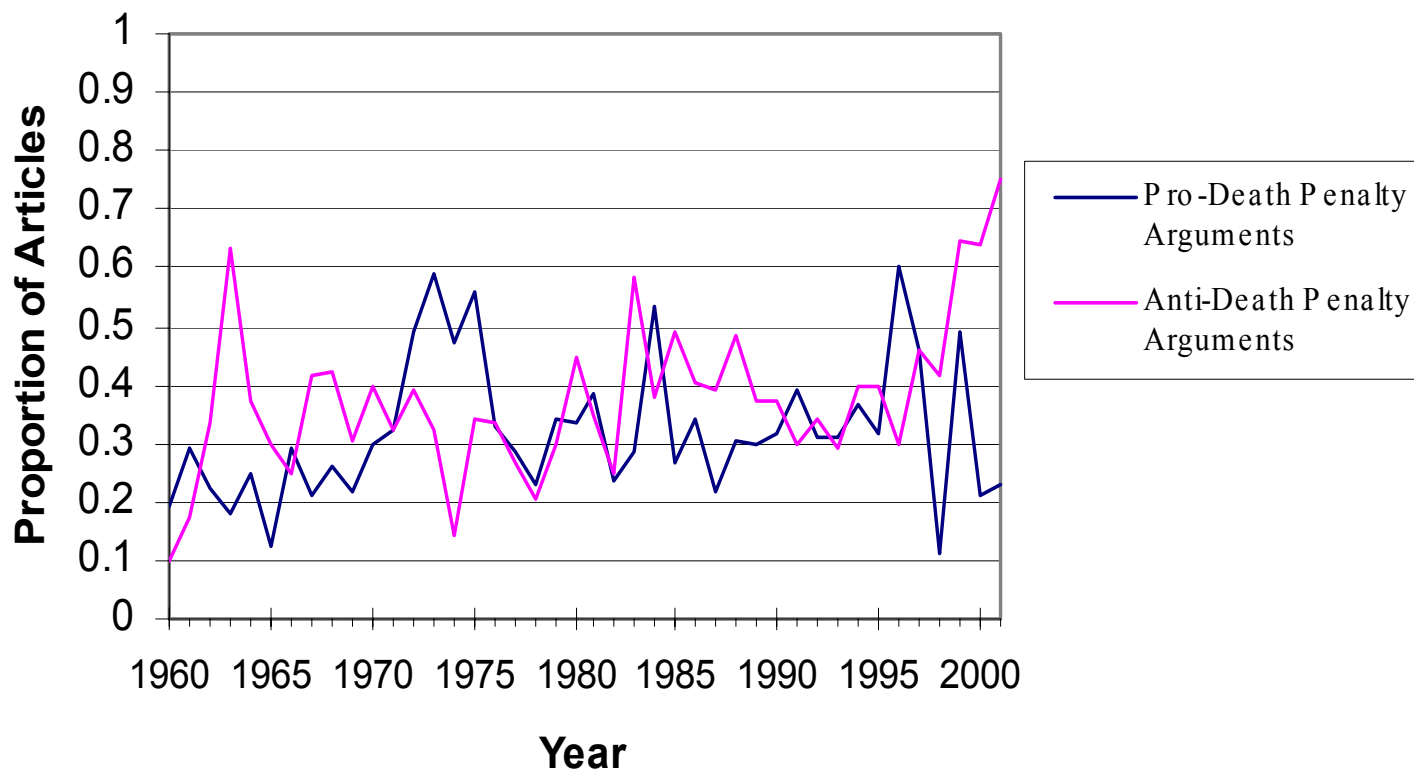


Proportion of Articles with Anti-Death Penalty Tone, 1960-2001*

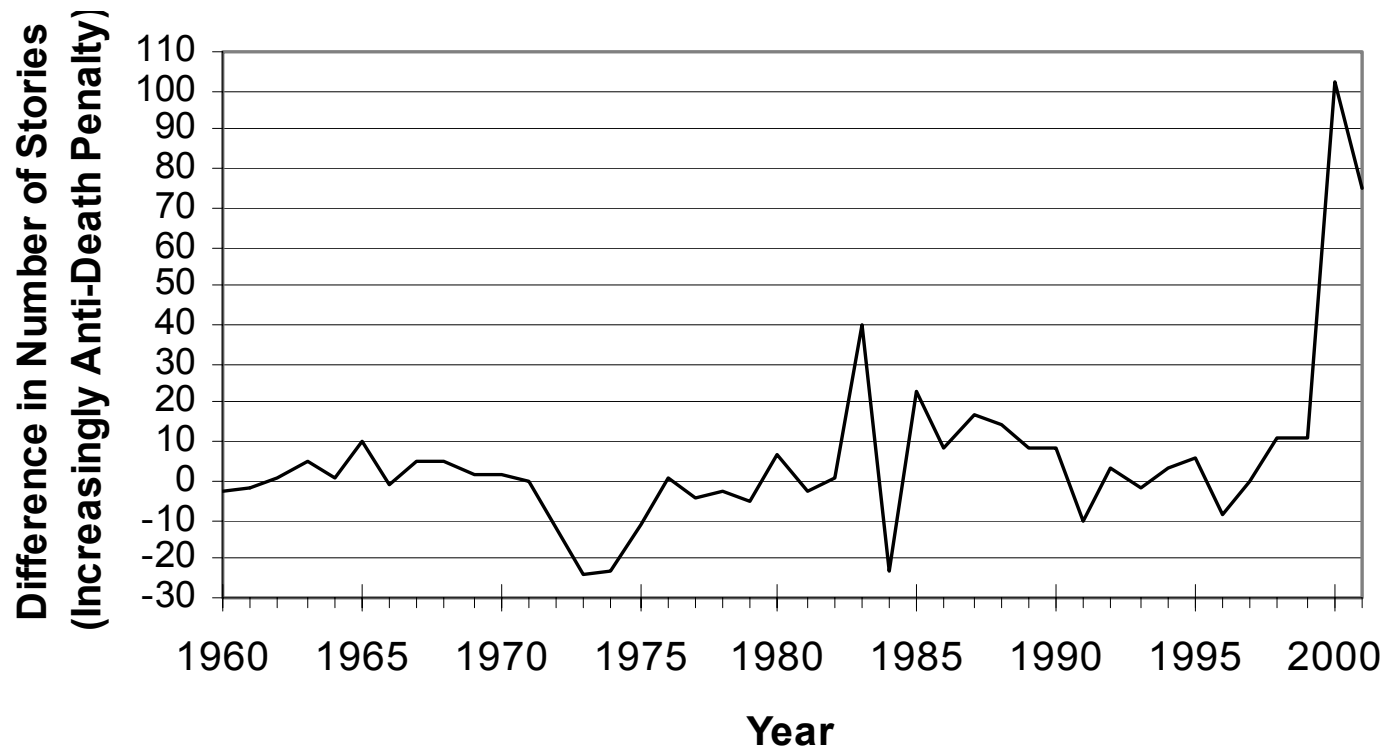


*Out of those articles which had an identifiable tone

Proportion of Articles Containing Pro-Death Penalty vs. Anti-Death Penalty Arguments



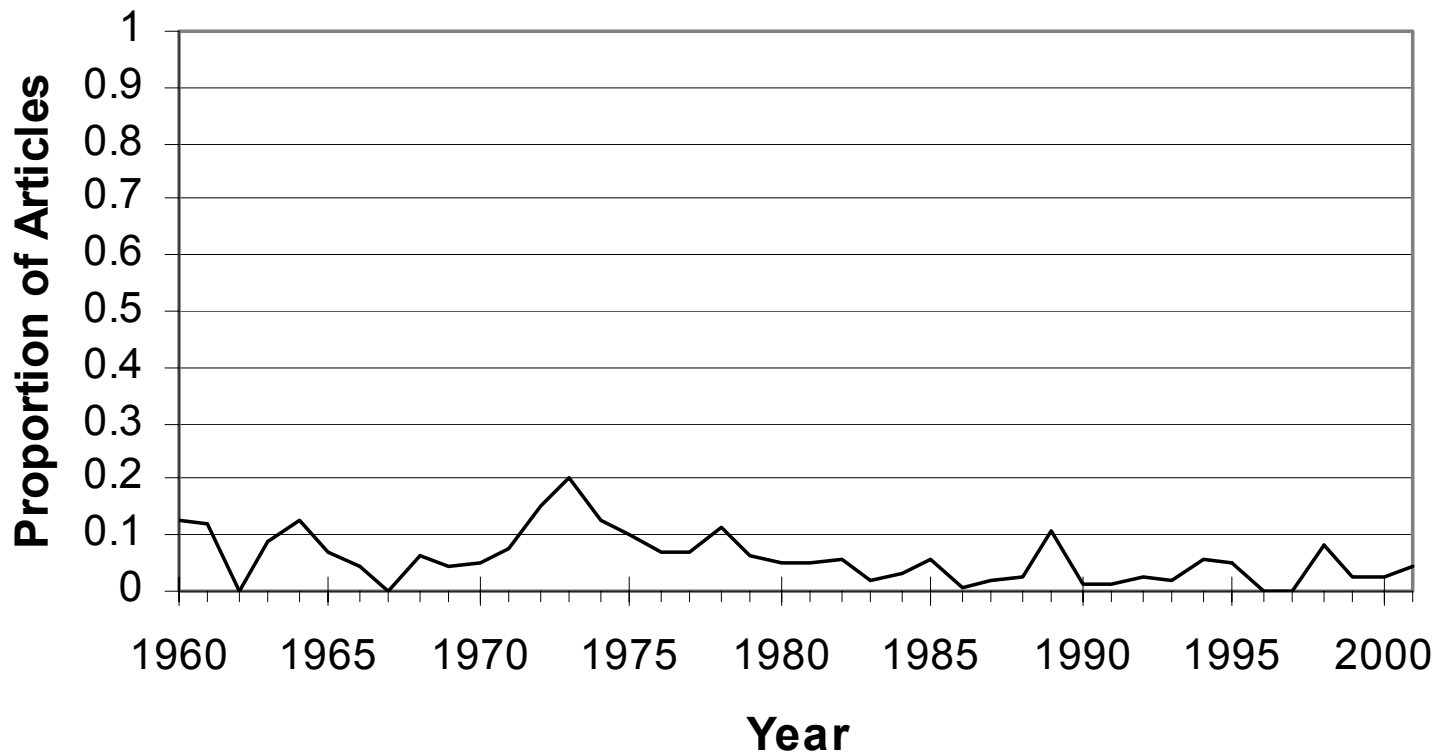
Growing Gap Between Number of Abstracts Containing Pro-Death Penalty and Anti-Death Penalty Arguments



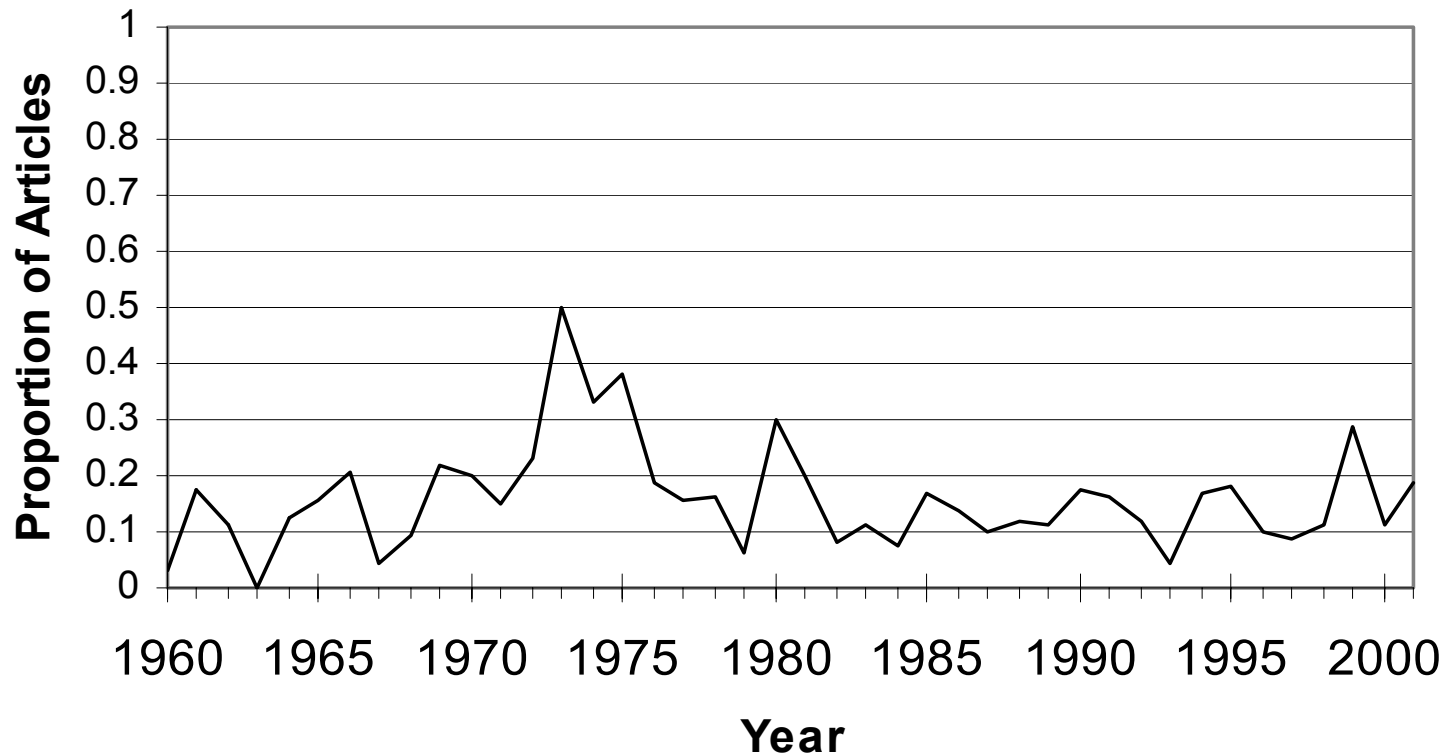
The Tone Is Related to the Topic

Major Argument Categories	Pro-Death Penalty (# of articles)	Anti-Death Penalty (# of articles)	Difference
Moral	56% (265)	44% (205)	-13%
Mode	49% (83)	51% (87)	2%
Constitutional/ Judiciary	44% (436)	56% (563)	13%
Efficacy	33% (52)	67% (104)	33%
Cost	30% (3)	70% (7)	40%
New Issues (Evidence/Innocence)	22% (100)	78% (359)	56%
Fairness	20% (144)	80% (566)	59%
International	16% (10)	84% (54)	69%

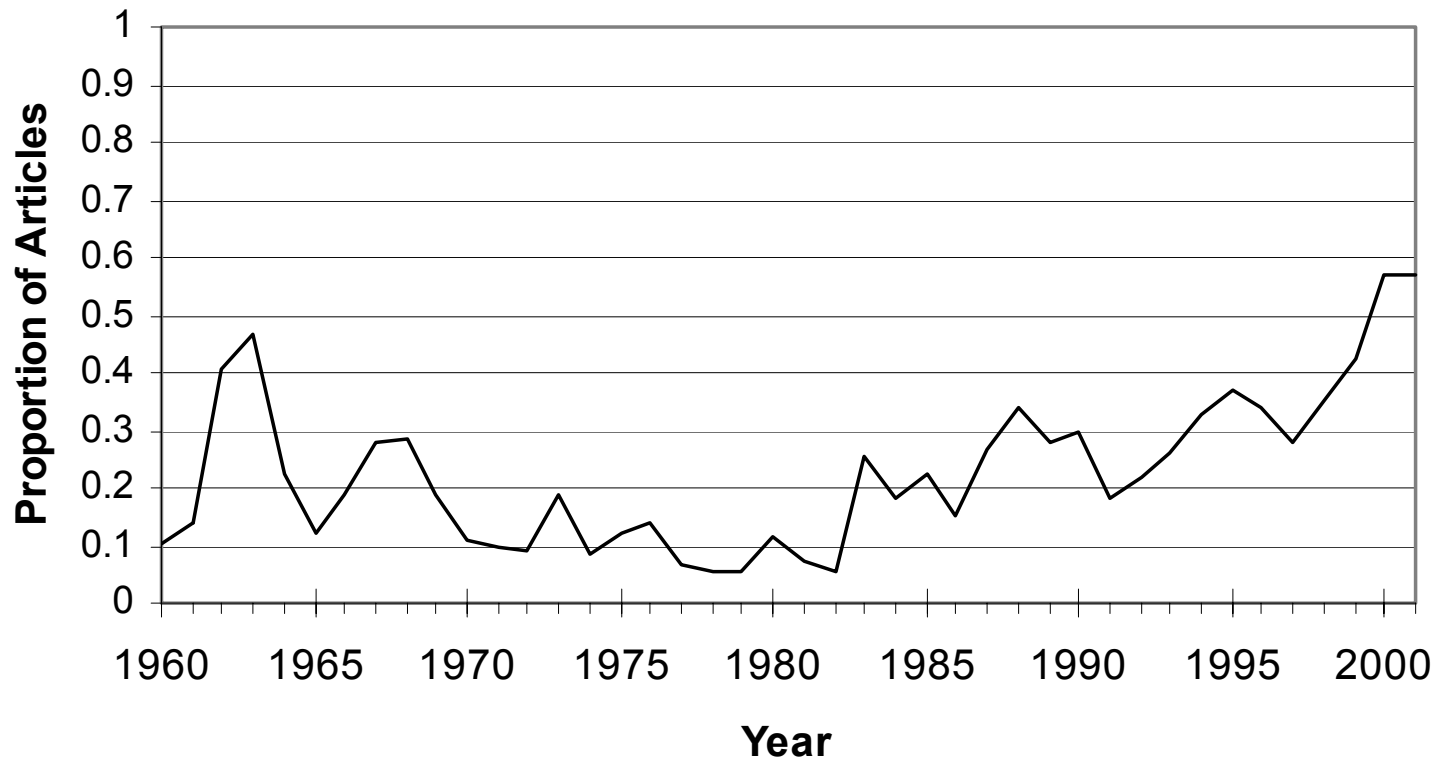
Efficacy Arguments, 1960-2001



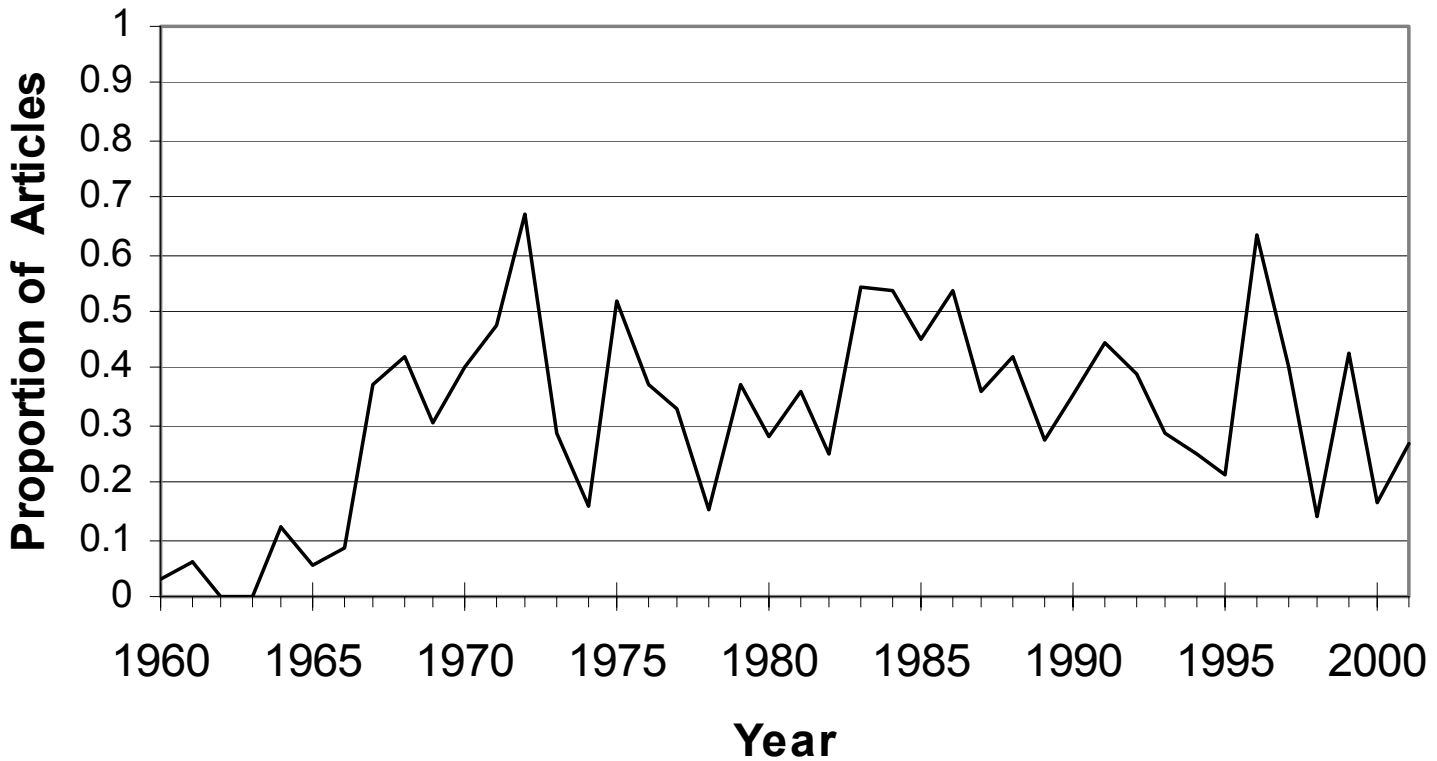
Moral Arguments, 1960-2001



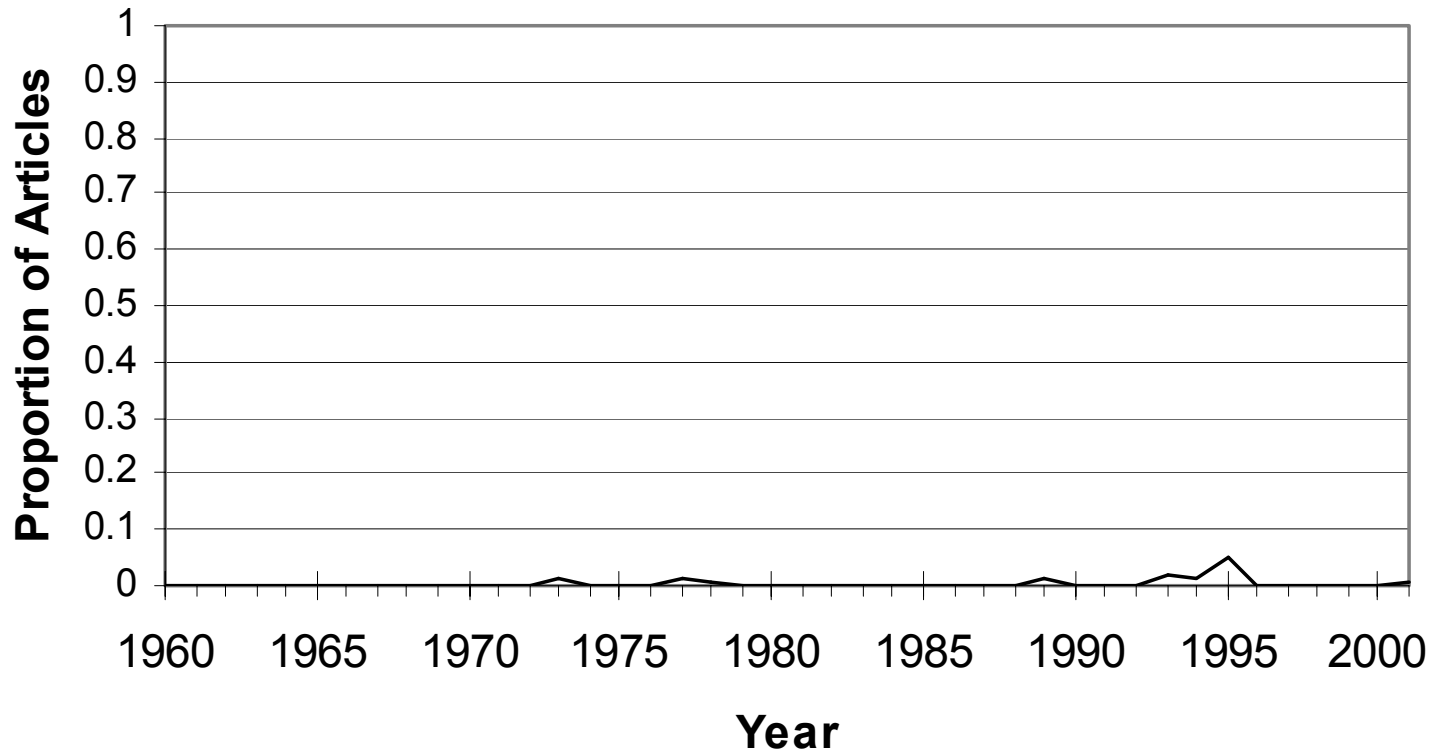
Fairness Arguments, 1960-2001



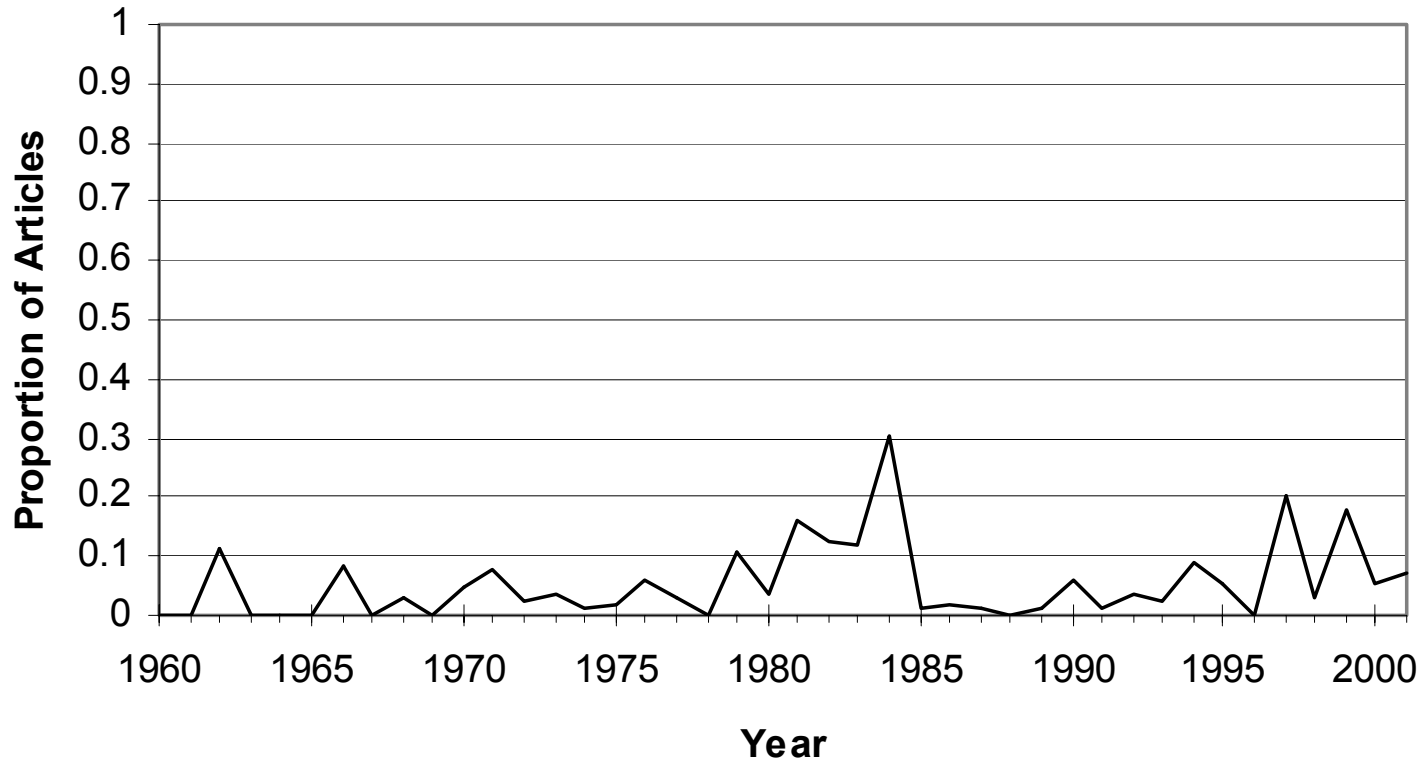
Constitutional/Judiciary Arguments, 1960-2001



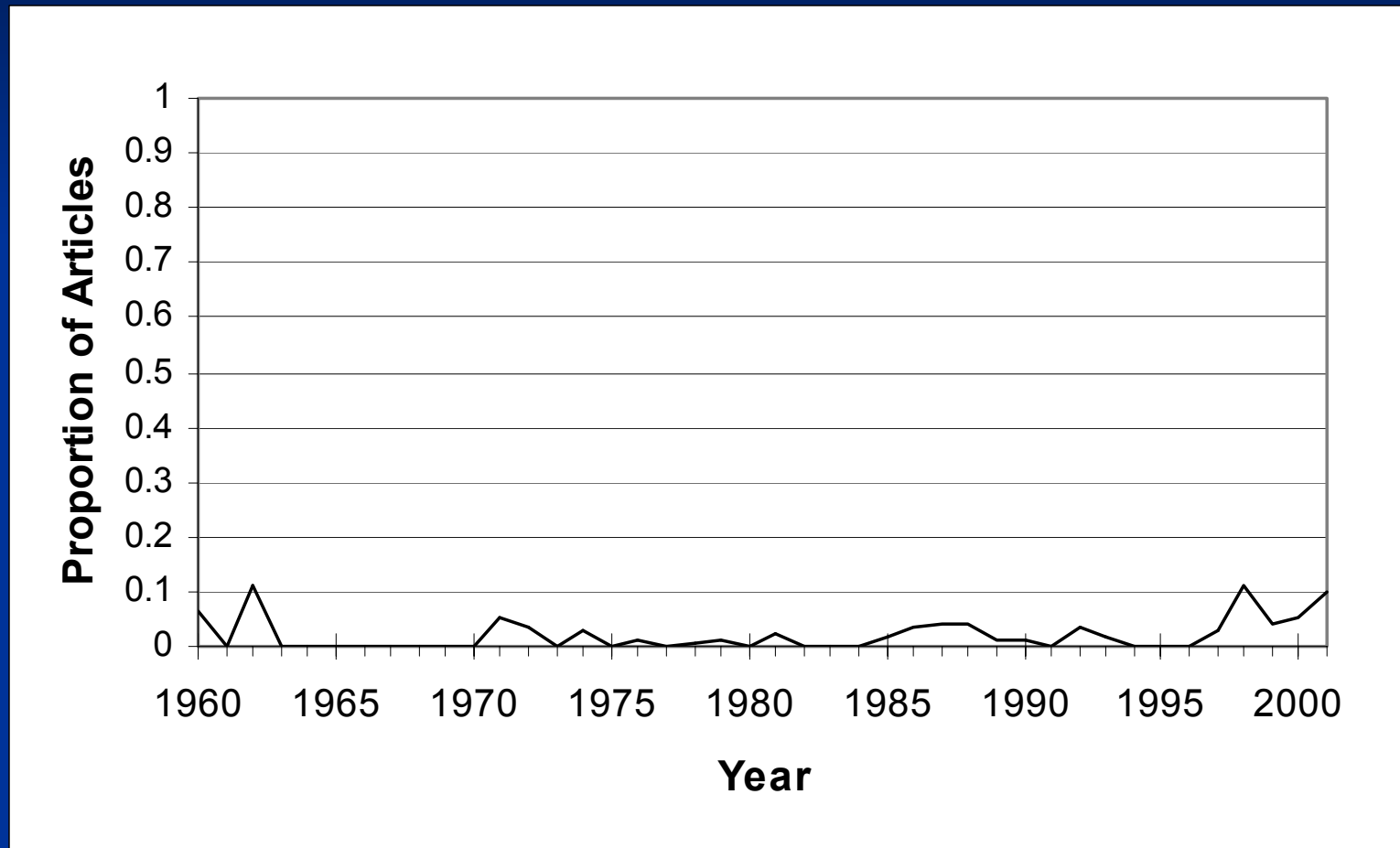
Cost Arguments, 1960-2001



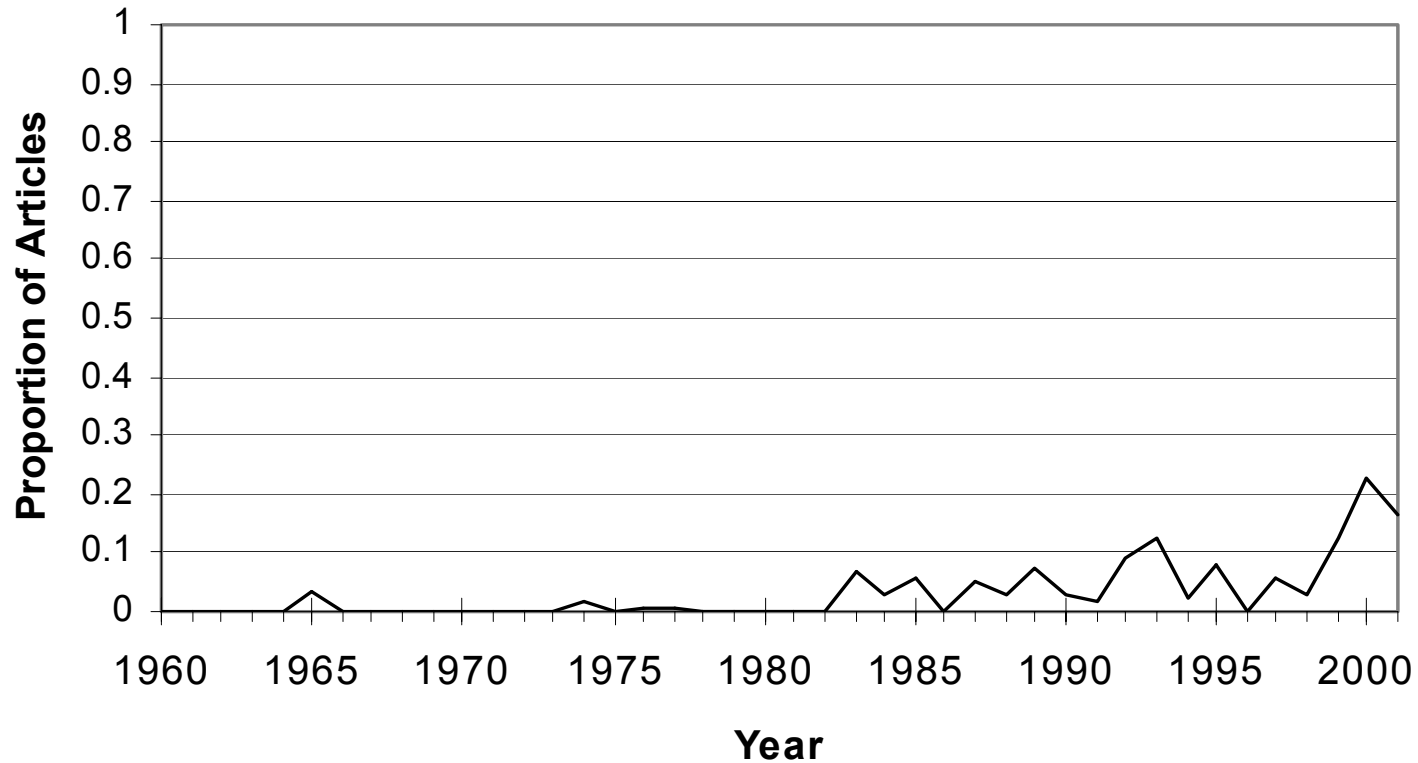
Mode of Execution Arguments, 1960-2001



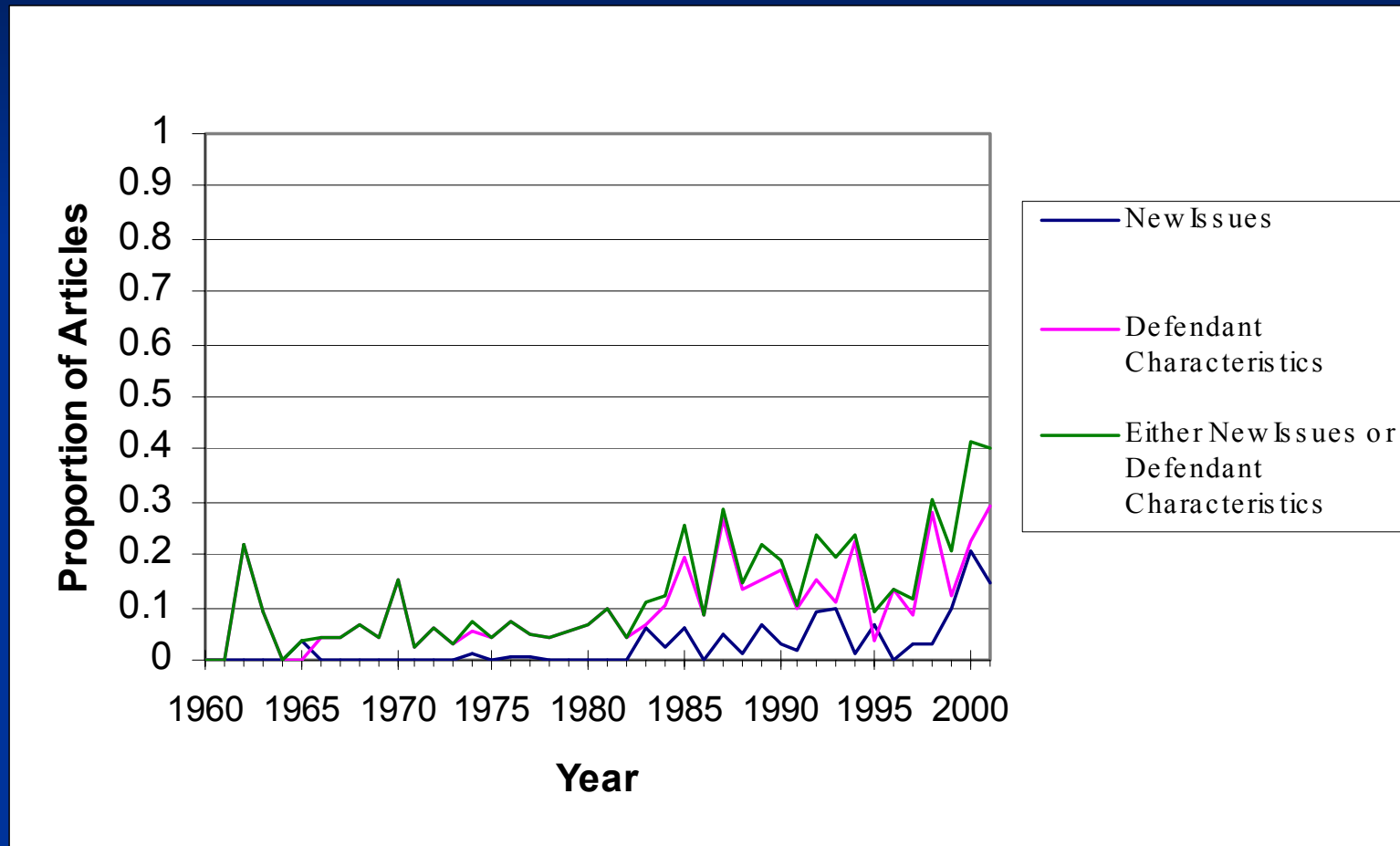
International Arguments, 1960-2001



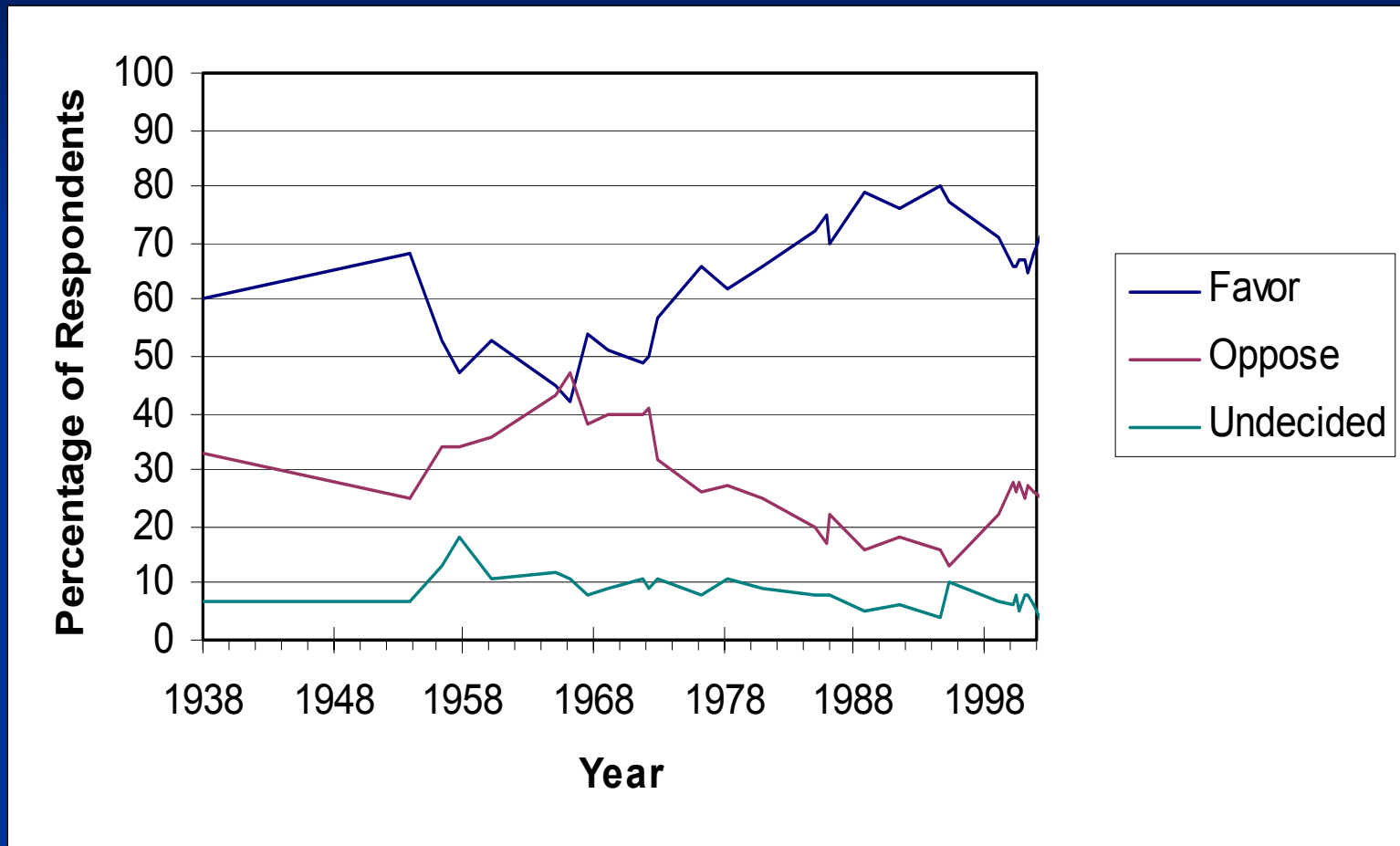
Innocence and Evidence Arguments, 1960-2001



Proportion of Articles Containing New Issues and Defendant Characteristics



Public Opinion on the Death Penalty



Source: Gallup Poll Data

Modeling Public Support for the Death Penalty

$$\text{Support} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{gender} + \beta_2 \text{race} + \beta_3 \text{racial attitudes} + \beta_4 \text{region} \\ + \beta_5 \text{education} + \beta_6 \text{partisanship} + \beta_7 \text{income} + \beta_8 \text{religion}$$

Value Labels

gender:	(0=female, 1=male)
race:	(0=black, 1=white)
racial attitudes:	(0=do not agree; 1=do agree) with the statement that “blacks should not push themselves where they don’t belong”
region:	(0=non-South, 1=South)
education:	(0=less than high school,... 4=graduate school)
partisanship:	(1=strong Democrat,... 5=strong Republican)
income:	(0=less than \$25,000/year; 1=more than \$25,000/year)
religion:	(0=non-Protestant; 1=Protestant)

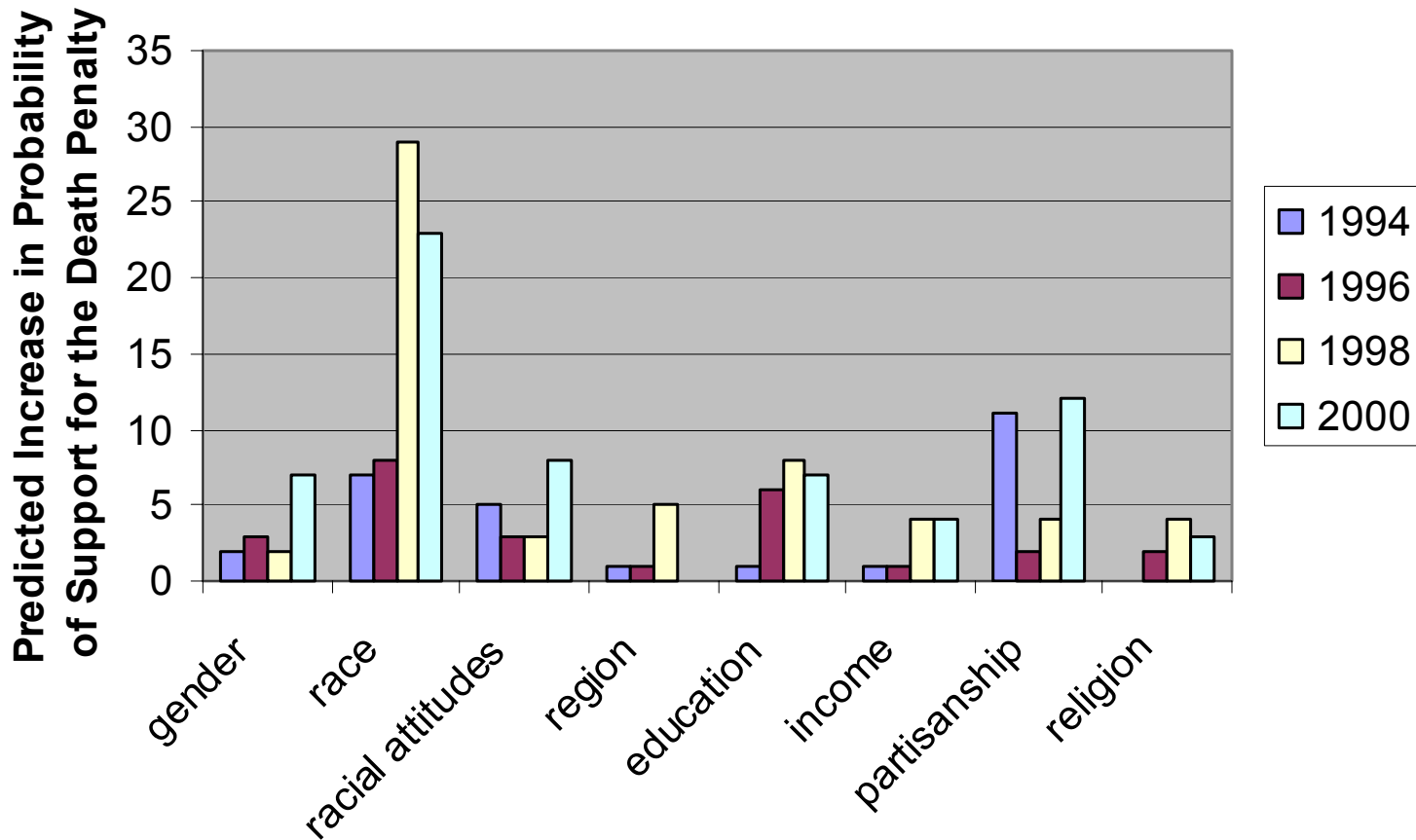
Predictors of Public Support for the Death Penalty

<u>Explanatory Variables</u>	<u>1994</u> <u>Coefficient</u>	<u>1996</u> <u>Coefficient</u>	<u>1998</u> <u>Coefficient</u>	<u>2000</u> <u>Coefficient</u>
gender	0.32 ** (0.16)	0.36 ** (0.14)	0.17 (0.14)	0.53 **** (0.14)
race	0.79 **** (0.21)	0.71 **** (0.19)	1.48 *** (0.18)	1.31 **** (0.19)
racial attitudes	0.64 **** (0.18)	0.33 ** (0.15)	0.22 (0.14)	0.59 **** (0.15)
region	0.12 (0.17)	0.13 (0.15)	0.32 ** (0.15)	0.01 (0.14)
education	-0.06 (0.07)	-0.24 **** (0.06)	-0.16 ** (0.06)	-0.16 *** (0.06)
partisanship	0.18 **** (0.04)	0.24 **** (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.14 **** (0.04)
income	0.17 (0.17)	0.20 (0.15)	0.33 ** (0.15)	0.38 ** (0.15)
religion	0.03 (0.17)	0.17 (0.15)	0.26 * (0.14)	0.22 (0.14)
(constant)	-0.16 (0.27)	-0.08 (0.23)	-0.58 (0.22)	-1.12 (0.22)
	n = 1132 X ² = 79.46 *****	n = 1437 X ² = 127.65 *****	n = 1333 X ² = 108.06 *****	n = 1260 X ² = 155.77 ****

* p < .10; ** p < .05; *** p < .01; **** p < .001; ***** p < .0001

logit estimates (standard errors listed in parentheses)

Predicted Impacts on Support for the Death Penalty



Predicted Probability of Support for the Death Penalty

	1994	1996	1998	2000
Person "A"*	95%	96%	92%	94%
Mean	82%	81%	77%	73%
Person "B"**	40%	26%	23%	15%
Difference between "A" and "B"	55%	70%	69%	79%

* **Person "A"**: white; male; believes "blacks should not push themselves where they don't belong"; Southern, less than high school level of education; strong Republican; earns > \$25,000 a year; Protestant

** **Person "B"**: black; female; disagrees with the statement that "blacks should not push themselves where they don't belong"; non-Southern, graduate school level of education; strong Democrat; earns < \$25,000 a year; non-Protestant

Future Work

- More complete public opinion model
- Dynamic model of public opinion over time
 - 150 polls from 1957 to present
 - Objective indicators (crime statistics, etc.)
 - Amount and tone of news coverage
- Full test of the impact of changing issue definition on public attitudes

Preliminary Findings

- Significant decline in support for the death penalty
- This decline appears to be related to the changing nature of the public debate surrounding the death penalty issue

Some Remaining Puzzles

- The impact of race
- The effects of partisanship
- Is the decline in public support shared across segments of the population, or are some groups immune to changing issue definitions?