

# Lightning Strikes Twice: An Examination of the Political Factors Associated with State-Level Death Sentences and Executions in the United States, 1930-2012

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Abstract

Over the course of the last 50 years, scholars have emphasized the role that political processes play in shaping the nature of capital punishment practices. Empirical studies that have examined the relationship between political factors and capital punishment have attributed variation in the imposition of death sentences and the execution of offenders across jurisdictions in the United States to the politicization of criminal justice policies and practices and the shift in public sentiment towards more punitive ideologies that began in the 1970s. Even though historians have argued that capital punishment practices have always been shaped by political considerations, empirical research on the social determinants of the death penalty has restricted its focus to the period following the Supreme Court's 1972 decision in *Furman v. Georgia*. Due to the restricted temporal scope used in prior empirical studies, it is unknown whether these political theories have captured historically specific factors associated only with post-*Furman* capital punishment practices (*proximate causes*) or whether they can explain the occurrence of these practices over the course of long historical periods (*ultimate causes*). In addition, it is not known whether the politicization of capital punishment practices in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century changed the nature of the relationship between state-level political factors and capital punishment practices across the pre- and post-*Furman* time periods.

In order to address these gaps in the literature, this study examined whether three post-*Furman* political perspectives were able to account for the imposition of death sentences and the execution of offenders in U.S. states from 1930 to 2012. The study also examined whether factors specific to the pre- and post-*Furman* eras moderated the relationship between state-level political factors and death penalty practices. The findings indicate that the predictive power of post-*Furman* political variables was not restricted to the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The social and political factors identified in post-*Furman* empirical studies, therefore, are not proximate manifestations particular to the time period following the politicization of criminal justice policies and practices in the 1970s. The reconfiguration of political party lines and the adoption of new ideologies regarding correctional practices in the 1970s did not significantly alter the drivers long associated with capital punishment practices in the United States.