

## Support for Harsh Criminal Sanctions and Criminal Justice Beliefs: A Social Dominance Perspective

Jim Sidanius,<sup>1,3</sup> Michael Mitchell,<sup>2</sup> Hillary Haley,<sup>2</sup>  
and Carlos David Navarrete<sup>2</sup>

---

*Much of the criminal justice literature indicates that people's support for harsh criminal sanctions such as the death penalty is strongly related to their beliefs about deterrence and their beliefs about retribution. In this paper, using social dominance theory as our organizing framework, we expand upon this literature by showing that social dominance orientation (SDO) is also related to support for harsh criminal sanctions, as well as to deterrence and retribution beliefs. In addition, we show that the relationships between SDO, on the one hand, and support for various forms of severe criminal sanctions, on the other, are mediated by deterrence and retribution beliefs.*

---

**KEY WORDS:** death penalty attitudes; deterrence; retribution; social dominance orientation; torture.

### INTRODUCTION

How can we account for individual differences in people's support for harsh criminal sanctions such as the death penalty and torture of prisoners, which has recently re-entered the public debate? The standard criminal justice literature has discussed this issue in terms of at least two theoretical models: (1) the deterrence model, which suggests that people's support

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Harvard University, William James Hall, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.

<sup>2</sup>University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1531, USA.

<sup>3</sup>Address correspondence to: Jim Sidanius, Department of Psychology, Harvard University, William James Hall, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA., e-mail: sidanius@wjh.harvard.edu