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Book Review: Baumgartner, F. R., De Boef, S. L., & Boydston, A. E. (2008). The Decline of the Death Penalty and the Discovery of Innocence. New York: Cambridge University Press

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Baumgartner, F. R., De Boef, S. L., & Boydston, A. E. (2008). *The Decline of the Death Penalty and the Discovery of Innocence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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The Decline of the Death Penalty and the Discovery of Innocence is a reminder of the important contributions that political scientists can make to criminal justice policy research. The book's authors, all affiliated with the political science department at The Pennsylvania State University, rigorously investigate recent trends in newspaper coverage and public opinion data regarding the use of the death penalty in contemporary America. While the book's breadth and clear presentation of data will appeal to nonspecialists, the innovative research methods employed by the authors will interest death penalty scholars and other seasoned researchers.

The authors begin by painting a detailed portrait of trends in executions and death sentences in the United States, focusing particularly on the post-Gregg era. Readers unfamiliar with the subject matter may be surprised to learn about the rarity of executions and the strong regional pattern in the imposition of death sentences. The death penalty's regional patterns and many of the other key findings of this chapter are illustrated with well-chosen tables and figures. Throughout the text, the authors display a good eye for producing clear and useful tables (of which there are 18 in the book) and figures (of which there are nearly 50) to convey information.

After providing a basic overview of the current state of the death penalty, the focus of the book shifts slightly to explore the recent increase in attention given to the issue of innocence in death penalty politics. The authors argue that, since the mid-1980s, media and public interest in cases of innocent individuals sentenced to death has risen. In support of this thesis, a detailed history of the activities of various innocence projects and a timeline of death row exonerations that took place during the past 25 years are presented. As the authors note, it is interesting to ponder why some exonerations from death row received significantly more media attention than others.

The true value of this book becomes clear once the authors begin to chart the emergence of the issue of innocence in the news media. The abstracts of all articles published in the *New York Times* between 1960 and 2005 and indexed under the heading "capital punishment" were coded according to the different arguments they presented about the death penalty. (Nearly 4,000 articles met these criteria.) Based on the results of their coding processes, the authors chart changes in the "net tone" of death penalty coverage in the newspaper over this 45 year time period (p. 117). During the late 1990s, the number of anti-death penalty stories in the newspaper increased markedly. At the same time, the number of articles addressing issues of innocence or exonerations also substantially rose. (The authors offer detailed information about the specifics of their coding process in Appendix A.)

To further explore media interest in innocence, the authors employ an innovative research method called evolutionary factor analysis (EFA). EFA assesses the extent to which different arguments about the death penalty appear in *New York Times* articles during the same time period. EFA allows the authors to demonstrate just how dominant the innocence argument has become in death penalty debates and how, in some cases, other frequently cited arguments against the death penalty—such as assertions of racial bias—appear alongside the innocence argument. Although the authors provide a relatively thorough accounting of this research method, a greater discussion of EFA's limitations would have been helpful, particularly as the authors' informative results may convince some readers to use EFA in their own research.

The next section of the book focuses on trends in public opinion about the death penalty. The authors examined the results of many dozens of polls about the death penalty that were conducted in the United States over the past several decades. (The full list of these polls is presented in Appendix B and represents a substantial research effort.) Although public opinion has generally remained in support of the death penalty, the authors illuminate several important changes that have taken place in the level of that support in different time periods.

The authors poignantly conclude their book by presenting photographs of some of the more than 120 individuals who have been exonerated from death row in the modern era. These photographs put a human face on the issue of innocence and remind readers that the academic issues that have been discussed throughout the text have serious real-world consequences.

The Decline of the Death Penalty and the Discovery of Innocence is a very ambitious book which aims to accomplish a great deal in fewer than 300 pages. Despite the book's numerous strengths, its presentation does suffer at times from the authors' enthusiasm for frequently summarizing the findings of previous chapters or sections. These summaries render the book somewhat repetitive in places, particularly for those readers who read it cover-to-cover. Readers who plan to peruse only one or two chapters, however, may find these summaries very helpful. Despite this minor weakness, the sheer wealth of information presented in these pages and the innovative research methods employed by the authors distinguish this book from other titles in the death penalty canon.

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