Social Attitudes in Regional America: How Religiosity and Race Shapes Death Penalty Support

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**Abstract**

The issue of the impact of race and religiosity on capital punishment has been greatly debated over decades; scholars have found that there is a significant relationship between these characteristics (Eisenberg, Garvey, and Wells, 2001; Bjarnason and Welch, 2004; Malka, Lelkes, Srivastava, Cohen and Miller, 2012, Very little research, however, has been conducted on the differences between regions of the United States; studies either look at the nation as a whole or a single region. This leaves a gap in the literature concerning comparisons of broad areas of the United States; comparisons of regions would allow scholars to determine if cultural characteristics play a role in this relationship as well. This study analyzed four regions in regards to the effect of race and religiosity on opinions about the use of the death penalty. Results show that region does not have an effect, but race and religiosity do.

The use of capital punishment in the United States has been declining since 1999 from 98 executions to 28 in 2015 (Death Penalty Information Center 2015). However, capital punishment cases have become more prevalent in the media. This has brought issues of capital punishment to the attention of many Americans and has risen questions about whether individuals support its use throughout the nation. Today, there is a debate as to whether sentencing criminals to death is an appropriate punishment rather than life without parole. There are many reasons people use to justify their stance on the subject, which has led researchers to analyze a variety of factors including race and religion. Very few studies have considered the interaction of region of residency with race and religion regarding support for the death penalty. This study seeks to answer the question “Does race and religiosity of an individual affect support of capital punishment equally across regions of the United States?” By understanding the reasons why individuals support capital punishment, researchers will be able to determine whether there are pockets of support within the United States and expand analysis to other factors for a fuller picture or to aid policymakers in their legislative duties.

Research varies in the definition of support for the death penalty. When asking respondents about their support some may ask them whether they favor or oppose the death penalty in cases of murder. Others will ask whether respondents favor or oppose capital punishment in general. These questions may lead to different responses due to individual differences in terms of interpretation.

There are similar differences in research on religiosity since it can be defined in many ways from the intensity of a person’s religion to how often someone attends religious services. However, race and region are somewhat easier to classify because they tend to be the same across different studies given there is a consistent definition that the public is aware of.

It is clear in the literature on this topic that race and religion contribute to an individual’s support for the death penalty, but research is not clear as to how this varies across regions. Scholars have analyzed the effect of these factors along with gender, age, and political ideology, but have mainly done so on a national level using data from the General Social Survey or National Elections Survey. This leaves room for future research to consider the variation in regional support for the use of the death penalty. To test the support of the death penalty by region, this study will rely on the 2010 General Social Survey, a survey of demographic characteristics and attitudes of United States residents. A cross tabulation analysis will be conducted to measure the effect of race and religiosity while controlling for common predictors of death penalty support as well. It will show how support varies across the nation by region.

In what follows, I will look at the effect of race and religiosity on support of capital punishment in four regions of the United States: West, Midwest, South, and Northeast. Previous studies have looked at race and religiosity separately. In these studies they found conflicting results as to whether race effects support of the death penalty (Kalbeitzer and Goldstein 2006; Unnever and Cullen 2007). A majority of the research however found that African Americans have lower support of the death penalty than Caucasians (Unnever and Cullen 2007; Wozniak 2009). Regarding religiosity, researchers have found that Catholics are more likely to oppose the death penalty (Wozniak 2009; Mulligan 2006). Other research focusing on Protestants found that they were likely to favor capital punishment (Miller and Hayward 2008). These studies have used data from universities, the General Social Survey, National Survey of Religion and Politics, and other national opinion surveys. This study used cross tabulations and OLS regression using data from the 2010 General Social Survey. Based on this analysis, the paper will conclude with a discussion of the implications.

**Previous Research**

*Race & Favorability of the Death Penalty*

Previous studies have looked at the relationship between race and favorability of the death penalty. In these studies scholars found conflicting results as to whether race affects support of the death penalty (Kalbeitzer and Goldstein 2006; Unnever and Cullen 2007). Kalbeitzer and Goldstein found that race did not affect support of the death penalty (2006). A majority of the research, however, found that African Americans have lower support of the death penalty than Caucasians (Unnever and Cullen 2007; Wozniak 2009; Bjarnason and Welch 2004).

*Religiosity & Favorability of the Death Penalty*

Throughout the decades, scholars have researched and studied the impact of religion on support for the death penalty (Mulligan 2006; Wozniak 2009; Mulligan, Grant, and Bennett 2012). Much of the research has compared two groupings of religion: Catholic vs. non-Catholic. Mulligan studied Catholic doctrine and the influence of authority figures; he determined that bishops have little influence, but that the pope and priests have an extremely strong influence on parishioners (2006). Catholic doctrine is explicitly against the death penalty and as long as religious authority figures continue to promote the doctrine, parishioners will incorporate it into their daily lives. When asked, Catholics were more likely to choose life without parole over the death penalty (Wozniak 2009). In addition to this, researchers have found that Catholics are more likely to oppose the death penalty (Wozniak 2009; Mulligan 2006). Other research focusing on Protestants found that they were likely to favor capital punishment (Miller and Hayward 2008).

*Race & Religiosity*

A majority of research in the area of death penalty has focused on race as white and black who identify as Christian in relation to support of the death penalty (Eisenberg, Garvey, and Wells 2001; Malka, Lelkes, Srivastava, Cohen, and Miller 2012). The results of a study in 2004 demonstrated that when asked whether an individual favored or opposed the death penalty for murder, African American Catholics were more in favor than non-Catholic respondents, however frequent church attendance also increases support for the death penalty (Bjarnason and Welch 2004). Malka, Lelkes, Srivastava, Cohen, and Miller determined that when comparing religions, white Protestants and Catholics tend to be more conservative than black Protestants who tend to be liberal relative to their political affiliation (2012).

*Geography & Death Penalty Favorability*

Within the literature on capital punishment, there are a few studies that take a regional perspective opposed to a national one. Earlier findings demonstrated that there are no differences between regions (Young 1992). Later on, however, researchers found that there are regional differences in support of the death penalty (Bjarnason and Welch 2004). Bjarnason and Welch determined that the northeast is less supportive of capital punishment compared to other regions (2004). One other study looked to a territory or region of the United States as a case study and found that in Puerto Rico, over 50% of respondents were against the death penalty (Cámara-Fuertes, Colón-Morera, and Martínez-Ramírez 2006).

*Other Factors*

Historically there have been ebbs and flows in the support of the death penalty in the United States, but research has found that since 1995 support for the death penalty has deteriorated (Mulligan 2006). Researchers hypothesize that there are factors such as information and sentiments that contribute to changes (Sarat and Vidmar 1976; Garland and Sparks 2000). The decrease in support of capital punishment is also connected to the issue of political ideology (Jacobs and Carmichael 2002). Stack found that public attitudes have policy implications and that those who have a greater desire to punish, have greater support for the death penalty (2004). Another factor that affects favorability of the death penalty is age. Kalbeitzer and Goldstein reported that most of the respondents in their study chose to punish juveniles with a life sentence instead of execution; they believed this was because they were closely related in age (2006). Cochran and Sanders looked into gender as an explanation for support of the death penalty and found that there is a gender gap in support, such that men are more supportive (2009).

Singh looked at the constitutionality of capital punishment; support and belief that the death penalty is constitutional is fairly high, but there is dissent over the method of execution (2000). Supreme Court decisions reflect the change in public opinion as in court cases like Furman v. Georgia where the Supreme Court of the United States held that the death penalty was cruel and unusual punishment (408 U.S. 238).

*Current Study*

The relationship between race, religion, and support of capital punishment has been intensely researched, but only on the national level. One way to expand upon the research in this area is to look at the United States by region because it demonstrates the differences within a single nation. The current study attempts to take this into account and develop a better understanding of regional differences that affect individual attitudes toward the death penalty. This is an issue that is becoming more and more prevalent in today’s society given recent news stories that reveal the dangers and problems with executions in the United States. It is becoming an increasingly important safety issue that necessitates a greater knowledge of not only the process, but also of how people throughout the nation feel towards it. The more information that is available on these topics, the better the political science field will be able to understand what influences people to make their decisions and the more informed citizens will be in regards to capital punishment.

The literature answers many questions about the factors that influence support of capital punishment on the national level, but fails to consider the regional level. I hypothesize that across a population of individuals, those who have a low religiosity score will be less likely to support the death penalty than those who have a high score due to a lower exposure to religious doctrine, which emphasizes law of retaliation, such as “an eye for an eye”. I also hypothesize that black individuals will be less likely to support the death penalty than white individuals as a majority of individuals on death row are considered a minority and most of those individuals are black. In comparison of regions of the United States, I hypothesize the Northeast and West will be less likely to support the death penalty than the South and Midwest, as the South and Midwest have a culture that strongly supports the use of violence and firearms, which is supported by statistics that show the South and Midwest have executed the most inmates since 1976 (Death Penalty Information Center, 2015). In order to test this hypothesis, the study will use the NORC General Social Survey from 2010 to conduct a cross tabulation analysis and OLS regression.

**Data**

This data from the 2010 General Social Survey is a public opinion survey involving American attitudes toward specific social issues and family demographics, collected by the National Opinion Research Center through in-person and phone interviews.[[1]](#footnote-1) The data can be generalized to the entire region of the United States and serve as a starting point to generalize about other nations that show similar regional differences. The results may also be generalized to factors like racial intolerance or party ideology, which scholars hypothesize as having regional differences as well. It uses individuals as the unit of analysis. There is a total of 2,044 cases, but due to collapsing and excluding categories there are 1,917 cases.

The survey includes questions on all variables used in the current study: race, religiosity, capital punishment, and region. In regards to race, the respondents were asked what race they identified themselves as.[[2]](#footnote-2) The categories were not collapsed, such that respondents who identified as white or black were included in the analysis and all other responses were dropped from analysis. Religiosity, in this study, is operationalized as how often the respondent attends religious services.[[3]](#footnote-3) This variable was collapsed into three levels: low, medium, and high. The low category includes never, less than once a year, and once a year. Respondents in the medium category stated they attend religious services several times a year, once a month, or 2-3 times a month. Those in the high level responded that they attended religious services nearly every week, every week, or more than once a week. All other responses were dropped. Region is the location of the interview. It was not a question asked of the respondent, but something that the interviewer recorded. This variable was collapsed as well into four groups to better reflect the regional United States: West, Northeast, South, and Midwest . Those who were not assigned to a specific region were dropped from analysis. The dependent variable of support for the death penalty was operationalized as support for the death penalty in cases of murder, such that only those who favored or opposed the policy were included in analysis.[[4]](#footnote-4) There were no other factors controlled for in the cross tabulation analysis, but gender, liberal considerations, conservative considerations, and the interaction of region with religiosity are considered in the regression analysis.

**Analysis**

In order to test whether race and religiosity affect support of the death penalty by region of the United States, I conducted a cross tabulation. The results show that there is a relationship between religiosity, race, and death penalty support on the national level; as religiosity increases, support of the death penalty decreases for both races, such that the null hypothesis can be safely rejected (see Table 1).In a comparison of race by region, respondents’ results show that there is a non-significant relationship between race, religiosity, region, and favorability of the death penalty, such that the null hypothesis cannot be safely rejected for both white and black respondents (see Figure 1) (see Figure 2).

In the Northeast, white respondents have higher support for the death penalty than black respondents across levels of religiosity, but the results are non-significant, making it possible to safely accept the null hypothesis (see Table 2). A similar situation occurred when looking at respondents in the Midwest, results show that white respondents were more likely to support the death penalty for all levels of religiosity, however, the *p* value demonstrates non-significant results, meaning the null hypothesis cannot be safely rejected (see Table 3). The results for individuals living in the West show a non-significant relationship as well, such that the null hypothesis cannot be safely rejected (see Table 4). Unlike the results for the other regions of the United States, for Southern respondents, there is a significant difference between white and black respondents, such that the null hypothesis can be safely rejected (see Table 5). The finding that there is a significant difference by race and religiosity for those individuals living in the South, but nowhere else in the United States warrants further analysis in order to understand what is driving the relationship.

To further analyze this relationship, I conducted an OLS regression to determine if there were other factors, specifically gender and political ideology driving the relationship between favorability of the death penalty and region that were not accounted for in the cross tabulation analysis. Prior research has found both gender and political ideology to be significant in understanding support of the death penalty in the United States (Jacobs and Carmichael, 2002; Cochran and Sanders, 2009; Mulligan, Grant, and Bennett, 2012). Including these factors in the logit regression would help to account for alternative explanations. The logit regression model determined whether attitudes towards the death penalty could be predicted from region controlling for; religiosity scores, race, gender, political ideology, and the interaction of region with religiosity.

If the null hypothesis were correct, region, alone, would not explain much of the favorability toward the death penalty. The results show that region is non-significant, such that there is no significant difference between an individual’s favorability towards the death penalty based on where they live. Specifically, for individuals living in the West, there is no significant difference *β* = -.040*, p* = *.*625.There is also no significant difference for those living in the Midwest*, β* = .114*, p* = .498. For those living in the Northeast, there is no significant difference as well *β* = -.483*, p* = .180.

Regarding race, results show that black individuals are significantly less supportive of the death penalty *β* = -.468, *p* < .001 and those who attend religious services more often are less likely to support the death penalty *β =* -.222 *p* < .05*.* In terms of gender, women are significantly less likely to favor the death penalty *β* = -.144, *p* < .05*.* Those who identify as liberal are significantly less likely to favor the death penalty *β* = -.713, *p* < .001*,* while those who identify as conservative are more likely to favor the death penalty, *β* = .069, *p* < .*05 (*see Table 6*).* R2 = .076, such that approximately 7.6% of the variation in attitudes toward the death penalty can be predicted by modeling individuals’ religiosity, race, gender, region, and political ideology. This suggests that the model does not account for much of the variation in attitudes toward the death penalty; it is not a strong model of the relationship even when including control variables. This means that there are no differences between the groups studied. There are other variables out there that may account for more, which research has yet to analyze.

**Implications**

There were no differences between regions of the United States, however, there were significant differences in terms of race. Black individuals were less favorable towards the death penalty is supported. The hypothesis that those individuals who identify as highly religious would be more likely to support the death penalty is incorrect. The results show that individuals who are highly religious are less likely to support the death penalty. These findings are important because they demonstrate the effect of race and religiosity on favorability of the death penalty in the United States; it may help policy makers and researchers understand what factors contribute to individual attitudes toward debated issues.

In regards to race, the results showing that black respondents would favor the death penalty less than white respondents were expected because researchers found that race contributed to an individual’s attitude toward capital punishment (Unnever and Cullen 2007; Wozniak 2009). The results of this study support the findings of previous theories and narrow it to the regional level. The results of this study show that religiosity is a significant factor in an individual’s attitude toward capital punishment, which contradicts findings that there is no difference between frequency of religious activity and attitude toward the death penalty (Miller and Hayward 2008). It does support other researchers who found that religion is a key factor (Eisenberg, Garvey, and Wells 2001; Bjarnason and Welch 2004). The findings of this study were unexpected and add a caveat based on the previous literature because most scholars found that as religiosity increases, support of the death penalty would increase as well. The results of this study show the opposite, the respondents in the high and medium religiosity groups were often less likely to support the death penalty. This may be due to shifting doctrines in various religions or the influence of policy.

Regarding the hypothesis that the Northeast and West would be less supportive of the death penalty than the South and Midwest, the results suggest that this hypothesis is incorrect. The region an individual resides in does not appear to have an effect on their attitude, such that race and religiosity are more important factors. This supports research that found no difference across regions (Young 1992). It does, however, contradict research that found that the Northeast is less supportive of the death penalty (Bjarnason and Welch 2004). This is a cleavage in the literature that may be explained by the level of racial intolerance or religiosity of the individuals in the region. These findings show that determining the factors that influence an individual’s attitude towards capital punishment is much more complex; an individual’s attitude depends on multiple factors that interact with each other. The variables within the analysis demonstrated that region does not matter as much as other factors like race, religiosity, gender, and political ideology. This may be because the other factors are often dispersed throughout the United States, such that region would not have an effect while the other factors do or the other factors are more salient to individuals when considering their attitudes toward the death penalty. This study was limited by the data itself, given that the sample used was from 2010 and does not accurately reflect current attitudes nor was it complete for all individuals interviewed. In addition to this, the research did not account for any events at the time of data collection that would have influenced responses. Future research will need to continue to look at other factors like gender and socioeconomic status to determine whether or not there is another factor driving the relationship or obfuscating the true relationship between favorability of the death penalty, region of residency, race, and religiosity since very little variation was explained by the model used. It would also be helpful to consider how global events like changes in the economy influence an individual’s response to domestic issues including death penalty favorability.

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**Tables**

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| *Table 1.* Cross Tabulation Analysis Effect of Race & Religiosity on Favorability Toward the Death Penalty in the United States | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | Low |  | Medium | |  | | High | | | |
| White | 75.6% |  | | 71.1% | |  | | 69.3% | | | |
| Black | 43.2% |  | | 49.5% | |  | | 47.2% | | | |
| Total | 72.2% |  | | 66.7% | |  | | 64.8% | | | |
| χ² = 8.925 n = 1747 *p* < .05 | | | | | | | | |  |  | |

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| *Table 2.* Cross Tabulation Analysis Effect of Race & Religiosity on Favorability Toward the Death Penalty in the Northeast | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | Low |  | Medium | |  | | High | | | |
| White | 69.4% |  | | 67.6% | |  | | 65.2% | | | | |
| Black | 36.4% |  | | 44.4% | |  | | 30.8% | | | | |
| Total | 66.7% |  | | 62.9% | |  | | 57.6% | | | | |
| χ² = 1.463 n = 280 *p* = .481 | | | | | | | | |  |  | | |

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| *Table 3.* Cross Tabulation Analysis Effect of Race & Religiosity on Favorability Toward the Death Penalty in the Midwest | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | Low |  | Medium | |  | | High | | | |
| White | 75.8% |  | | 75.8% | |  | | 67.7% | | | | |
| Black | 50.0% |  | | 72.7% | |  | | 26.7% | | | | |
| Total | 74.0% |  | | 75.5% | |  | | 63.3% | | | | |
| χ² = 5.794 n = 433 *p* = .055 | | | | | | | | |  |  | | |

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| *Table 5.* Cross Tabulation Analysis Effect of Race & Religiosity on Favorability Toward the Death Penalty in the South | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | Low |  | Medium | |  | | High | | | |
| White | 81.3% |  | | 69.4% | |  | | 69.9% | | | | |
| Black | 37.8% |  | | 47.2% | |  | | 56.2% | | | | |
| Total | 74.1% |  | | 62.7% | |  | | 65.9% | | | | |
| χ² = 7.384 n = 693 *p* < .05 | | | | | | | | |  |  | | |

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| *Table 4.* Cross Tabulation Analysis Effect of Race & Religiosity on Favorability Toward the Death Penalty in the West | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | Low |  | Medium | |  | | High | | | |
| White | 72.1% |  | | 71.8% | |  | | 73.2% | | | | |
| Black | 63.6% |  | | 45.5% | |  | | 20.0% | | | | |
| Total | 71.6% |  | | 68.3% | |  | | 69.7% | | | | |
| χ² = .314 n = 341 *p* = .855 | | | | | | | | |  |  | | |

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| *Table 6.*  Logit Regression Predicting Favorability Toward the Death Penalty Controlling for Region, Race, Religiosity, Liberal Identification, Conservative Identification & Gender | | | | | |
| Predictor | |  | Coefficient(SE) |  | Odds Ratio |
| West |  | | -.040(.083) |  | -.039 |
| Midwest |  | | .114(.169) |  | .120 |
| Northeast |  | | -.483(.360) |  | -.383 |
| Race |  | | -.468(.070)\*\* |  | -.373 |
| Religiosity (Attendance) |  | | -.222(.098)\* |  | -.199 |
| Gender |  | | -.144(.052)\* |  | -.134 |
| Liberal Identification |  | | -.713(.122)\*\* |  | -.509 |
| Conservative Identification |  | | .069(.025)\* |  | .071 |
| Midwest\*Religiosity |  | | -.061(.078) |  | -.059 |
| West\*Religiosity |  | | .012(.042) |  | .012 |
| Northeast\*Religiosity |  | | .085(.179) |  | .088 |
| y-intercept |  | | 1.652(.226)\*\* |  | 4.217 |
| *p* < .05\* *p* < .001\*\* n = 1917 adjusted R2 = .076 | | | | | |

**Figures**

*Figure 1.* Effect of region and religiosity on favorability toward the death penalty for black respondents. χ² = .690 n = 280 *p* = .708

*Figure 2. Effect of region and religiosity on favorability toward the death penalty for white respondents.* χ² = 5.712 n = 1467 *p* = .057

1. Smith, Tom W. Peter V. Marsden, and Michael Hout. General Social Survey, 1972-2010 [Cumulative File]. ICPSR31521-v1. Storrs, CT: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut/Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributors], 2011-08-05. http://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR31521.v1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. What race do you consider yourself? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. How often do you attend religious services? [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder? [↑](#footnote-ref-4)