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## Catholics and the Death Penalty: Religion as a Filter for Political Beliefs

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## Abstract

Research has shown that public opinion about the death penalty can be largely attributed to the tone of media stories and the number of murders that happen around the time the surveys are conducted. However, not all citizens react similarly to new information such as media stories. Political awareness can help people to filter out new information that might otherwise sway their opinions. Those who lack such awareness are more easily persuaded by new information, resulting in rather unstable, easily changed opinions. We hypothesize that strongly held religious beliefs also serve as such a filter, creating stability in opinions regardless of political awareness. Using the issue of capital punishment, we examine how strongly held Catholic beliefs might affect opinions on the death penalty. We show that Catholics with a strong religious attachment are less likely to be persuaded by current events and political discussion than is the norm. Strongly religious Catholics tend to filter out such information and seemingly ground their opinions in the social doctrine of their church.

While politicians, academics, and people who work in the criminal justice system have examined the use of capital punishment with reference to statistics along with arguments about deterrence, race and class bias, incapacitation, or cost, many Americans view capital punishment in terms of moral philosophy and religious conviction. Both sides—those who are for and against capital punishment—make arguments that are grounded in Judeo-Christian tradition (Richards 1980). However, debates about the death penalty are moving toward testing the social utility of the death penalty rather than examining the moral implications of this punishment. Most scholars have not focused on the impact of religion in shaping attitudes about capital punishment (Young 1992). For an issue with such immense moral implications, it is important to understand the value judgments that enter into determining attitudes on capital punishment. For this reason, religion cannot be ignored (Medhurst 2009).

Little is known about the influence that religion has on shaping views about capital punishment. Although few studies have linked the power of religion to the way in which attitudes about capital punishment are determined, some studies have attempted to determine religion's effects on other social issues. The results have largely been inconclusive. Studying intrinsic and extrinsic factors has created more debate about the methods and theories behind the studies than it has solved. Studies that have looked at the relationship between fundamentalism and prejudice have also been inconclusive (Young 1992). What we do know is that religious groups are at odds with each other over several political issues, including abortion and the death penalty (Evans 2002), and that determining the effects of religion on attitude and behavior is complicated (Young 1992).

Many religious groups do not have an official stance on moral issues, especially capital punishment. That makes the impact of religion on adherents' political opinions hard to measure. One group that does have official doctrine, which is easily accessible and simple to examine, is the Catholic Church. Therefore Catholics can be used as a small pilot study to determine what, if any, impact religion has on public opinion about the death penalty. Because the Catholic Church is the largest religious denomination in the United States, it is possible to obtain a representative sample for study.

### *CONSISTENT LIFE ETHIC*

Support for the death penalty among Catholics was higher than that among non-Catholics in the 1970s (Bjarnason and Welch 2004). Jelen (1990) found that there was little evidence of attitude consistency in regard to religious membership. When the article was written in 1990, Jelen found no consistent Catholic belief around the issue of life. In fact, evangelical Protestants opposed abortion and other "life issues" more than Catholics did. In 1995, the recently completed

Catechism of the Catholic Church (John Paul II 1994) strongly opposed the use of capital punishment. The Catechism stated that modern nations were in a position to defend life in a manner that did not deprive the offender of redemption and was consistent with the common good and the dignity of all people (Bjarnason and Welch 2004). Also in 1995, Pope John Paul II issued a papal encyclical entitled “*Evangelium Vitae*,” which discouraged the use of the death penalty in modern society and questioned its usefulness in protecting society. “*Evangelium Vitae*” takes the stance that “[a]bortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection.” The Catholic Church’s position, as articulated in “*Evangelium Vitae*,” encourages individual Catholics to engage government leaders in a civic debate about the morality of these issues (John Paul II 1995). Therefore, we could expect to see a shift in beliefs of parishioners after the Catholic Church began to articulate its position more vocally and frequently in the mid-1990s.

The evidence that the Church’s dedication to teaching a position on capital punishment has led to a decline in Catholics’ support for the death penalty has been mixed. Previous studies have found that Catholics who attend services more frequently are more likely to hold beliefs consistent with the Catholic Church’s position on abortion and capital punishment. In a study conducted by Bjarnason and Welch (2004), the strength of Catholic religious doctrine and teaching was tested against parishioners’ and priests’ attitudes toward the use of capital punishment. Religious affiliation was expected to be highly influential in determining individual value judgments. Among members of the Catholic Church, women, African-Americans, and unmarried individuals were less supportive of the death penalty than were their male, white, married Catholic counterparts. Support for the death penalty was also lower among Catholics who were older and those with more education. Members of the Catholic Church who were integrated into the social life of the parish and attended services more frequently were also less likely to support the death penalty. While support was higher among members of the Catholic Church who responded that they were Republican and supported traditional family values, Catholics overall were more likely than non-Catholics to oppose the use of capital punishment.

According to Perl and McClintock (2001), previous research concluded that the “consistent life ethic” of the Catholic Church, the belief that all human life begins at conception and continues through a natural death and deserves special legal protection at all stages (cf. Bernardin 1988), was not influential in changing attitudes. This consistent life ethic is unique because it combines a traditionally conservative position on abortion with a traditionally liberal position on the death penalty. Perl and McClintock (2001) found that evangelicals who were pro-life on abortion were more inclined to support the death penalty, while Catholics’ beliefs

were in accord with the consistent life ethic. These findings of an overall change in Catholic support for the death penalty over time provide additional evidence of the impact of the Catechism and *Evangelium Vitae*. Mainline Protestants who opposed abortion were also more likely to oppose the death penalty. This result was unexpected, but Perl and McClintock (2001) assumed that mainline Protestants have a broader concern for human life and are also sympathetic toward other “liberal” issues, such as increased government aid for the poor.

### *PUBLIC OPINION*

Public opinion is affected by many different variables. No person exists in a vacuum, and these variables come into play in shaping attitudes on many issues, including capital punishment. The goal of research in this area is to determine which factors matter. Many studies have attempted to look at the factors that influence an individual’s opinion about capital punishment. Some factors that researchers have considered important are race, gender, education, age, income, and other socioeconomic factors. Being African-American, being female, having more education, and having a lower income are suggestive of an anti-death penalty stance. Political variables such as party affiliation and ideological self-rating have also been found to be significant. Self-identifying as Republican or conservative is an indicator that an individual is more likely to support capital punishment, while individuals who associate with the Democratic Party or identify themselves as liberal are less likely to support the death penalty. Although certain demographic aspects have been determined to be clues to an individual’s stance on capital punishment, the effect religion has on these attitudes is relatively unknown (Jacobs and Carmichael 2004; Young 1992),

Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston (2008) detailed many aspects of the death penalty and included a chapter about how to predict public opinion on the issue. They demonstrate that aggregate public attitudes toward the death penalty can be largely explained by two key variables: the number of murders in the United States during a given period of time (they use quarterly data) and the net tone of news stories about capital punishment. They also assert that catastrophic events, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks or the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, can affect public opinion. Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston (2008) present a durable, successful, and simple model of public opinion even without focusing on demographic and cultural differences that have been shown to be important in shaping individuals’ opinions about the death penalty.

Traditional literature on mass opinion can help to explain why the murder rate and the extent and tone of news coverage of capital punishment between 1976 and 2008 affected attitudes toward capital punishment in the general population, but we believe that Catholics’ opinions may be shaped differently. In his classic study

on the formation of mass opinion, Zaller (1992: 22) argues that attitudes are regulated by political predispositions, that is, “stable, individual level traits that regulate the acceptance or non-acceptance of the political communications the person receives.” People who are predisposed to have a certain attitude—whether due to ideology, socialization, or any other number of reason—toward capital punishment are not likely to be as affected by current events or political discussions of the murder rate and media coverage. Conversely, people without such predispositions are perhaps more easily swayed by events and political communications through the media. We theorize that a religion with a strong social doctrine can assist in the formation of a political predisposition and serve to filter out factors that would normally affect opinions.

Zaller (1992) argues that people resist messages that run counter to their predispositions “*only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions*” (p. 44; italic in the original). This implies that a level of political awareness is required to resist messages that are antithetical to predispositions. Our model tests what effect attendance at religious services (excluding wedding and funeral masses) has on opinions among Catholics toward capital punishment.

#### *METHODS*

To examine the impact of Catholic beliefs on adherents, we used data from the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Data Program for the Sciences. Between 1972 and 2006, the GSS consistently asked respondents: “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?” and allowed the responses “yes” and “no” (along with “don’t know,” which we excluded from this study in order to perform binomial logistic regression). In addition, the GSS provided the socioeconomic and political identification variables for each respondent and measures of the respondents’ religious affiliation and attendance. Because Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston (2008) showed the importance of the number of murders and tone of news stories about capital punishment, we included their measures, which we aggregated into a yearly total. A list of the variables that we created and used and their coding can be found in Appendix A.

We chose to pool all the respondents into a logistic regression model to determine the indicators of death penalty support among Catholics. The GSS was conducted annually from 1972 to 1991, excluding 1979 and 1981. Beginning in 1993, the survey was conducted every two years. The data from Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston (2008) provided us with the number of murders and a “net tone” index of capital punishment news stories from 1976 to 2005. Thus the years represented in our model are 1976–2005, excluding the years when the GSS was

not conducted. We created the following model to determine what variables had a significant influence on the public opinion of Catholic individuals:

$$\text{income} + \text{black} + \text{ideology} + \text{attend} + \text{age} + \text{vitae} + \text{education} + \text{southern} \\ + \text{murders} + \text{nettone} = \text{cappun}$$

## FINDINGS

Table 1 reports our findings for the Catholic logistic regression model.

**Table 1: Predictors of Catholics' Views on Capital Punishment**

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	Z	p-Value
Income	-0.071	0.011	-6.27	0.00**
Black	0.642	0.131	4.90	0.00**
Ideology	-0.196	0.022	-8.92	0.00**
Attend	0.138	0.012	11.51	0.00**
Age	-0.003	0.002	-1.79	0.07
Vitae	0.181	0.088	2.05	0.04*
Education	0.035	0.010	3.33	0.00**
Southern	-0.119	0.072	-1.65	0.10
Murders	-0.000	0.000	-1.39	0.17
Nettone	-0.001	0.001	-1.17	0.24
Constant	-0.104	0.402	-0.26	0.80

$N = 7344$ .

\* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ .

For Catholics, we find the variables income, black, ideology, attend, vitae, and education all significant and in the expected direction. Higher-income individuals and conservatives tend to favor capital punishment. African-American Catholics, Catholics who attend services more frequently, and those who responded to the survey after the introduction of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and “Evan-gelium Vitae” are more likely to oppose capital punishment. Interestingly, being southern, the number of murders, and the net tone of news articles about the death

penalty are found to be insignificant among Catholics.<sup>1</sup> This supports our hypothesis that the religious will have well-grounded opinions, based on the teaching of their faith, and are less likely to be affected by political and current events.

Catholics who are more involved in the church are more likely to report opposition to the death penalty. We assume that this is because Catholics who are more active are also more likely to be aware of the relationship between their predisposition and external events and media coverage. Catholics who are less active in the church are perhaps less equipped to understand the relationship between external events and their predispositions and are therefore more likely to be affected by media messages.

We believe that Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston (2008) are correct in their analysis that the general public is influenced by the media and crime rates, but their study does not explore the role of religion on public opinion. Our work tends to support Zaller's (1992) argument that having well-grounded beliefs helps a person to filter out influences, as we see that Catholics are less likely to be swayed by external events and the tone of news coverage. Our model clearly helps to confirm Zaller's research, the work of Bjarnason and Welch (2004) that examined what variables made Catholics support or oppose the death penalty, and the work of other capital punishment scholars who have studied the importance of socioeconomic variables (see Baumgartner, de Boef, and Boydston, 2008; Bjarnason and Welch 2004; Jacobs and Carmichael 2004).

#### *LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH*

Our study is limited by several factors. First, by looking only at Catholics, we do not get a clear look at how public opinion might shift from one religious denomination to another. Such differences should be analyzed to determine the importance of each variable on respondents. Our model is simple, and the idea should be explored with a more complex time series methodology that can incorporate more major events, both religious and political. This line of questioning

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<sup>1</sup> For comparison purposes, we created another model for non-Catholics (using all respondents except those who identified as Catholic). This model was the same except that we dropped the *vitae* variable because we could think of no theoretical reason why it would be significant, even though prior research has shown an effect of the Catechism on mainline Protestants (Perl and McClintock 2001). The major difference between the two models is that being southern, the number of murders, and the net tone of news stories are all significant in the non-Catholic model. Thus non-Catholics are seemingly more influenced by current events and news with regard to the death penalty issue. Further research needs to be conducted to determine the effects of Catholic religious doctrine on other religious groups and to tease out what might make Catholics less susceptible to media exposure and crime rates. From the models we have created, however, we believe that Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston (2008) have accurately described the variables affecting opinion on the death penalty among this group.



could be applied to determine the power of religion in other denominations and on attitudes toward other social issues. Finally, Hispanics, who are strong contributors to the growth of the Catholic Church in the United States, have been the focus of much research on Catholic beliefs. Hispanics were not examined separately in this study, but examining their support for the death penalty in light of Catholic teaching could yield important findings.

### *CONCLUSION*

These findings help to shed light on previous research into the demographic variables that influence perceptions about the death penalty. Our findings are somewhat consistent with previous research (Bjarnason and Welch 2004; Hayes 1995; Jacobs and Carmichael 2004; Perl and McClintock 2001), extending them to a study of the effect of religion on the attitudes of Catholics toward the death penalty. These findings also tell us that the efforts of the Catholic Church to present a consistent life ethic and have it accepted by practicing Catholics have been successful, corroborating Perl and McClintock's (2001) findings. There appears to have been a change in the opinions among Catholics from the time of the Jelen study in 1990 to the present, perhaps stemming from the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the encyclical "Evangelium Vitae" by Pope John Paul II. This change needs to be examined further.

The findings are also in accord with general public opinion literature. Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydstun's (2008) analysis asserting that views on capital punishment are heavily influenced by media and the number of murders in the country stands up as a legitimate effect on the majority of Americans. However, by demonstrating that the opinions of Catholics about capital punishment are not affected by media coverage and events, our findings support Zaller's (1992) argument that people with predispositions are more likely to filter out information that runs counter to their preestablished beliefs. Religions with a strong social doctrine provide a predisposition that may immunize followers from information that would otherwise affect their opinions. This raises questions about the role of religion in politics. Our findings suggest that the Catholic Church can influence the political sphere through Church doctrine by providing cues to parishioners.

Scholars have argued at length that the stability of mass opinion depends on factors such as education level and political involvement (Converse 1964), political values (Feldman 1988), and emotional state (Huddy, Feldman, and Cassese 2007). We suggest that political awareness is not an important foundation for opinions among Catholics in regard to their view on capital punishment. The social doctrine of Catholicism likely displaces some effect of short-term learning from current events and political awareness while encouraging a predisposition to consistency among opinions about the sanctity of life in different contexts.

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### Appendix A: Variables and Coding

- Cappun: dichotomous variable with a 1 indicating opposition to capital punishment and a 0 indicating support for capital punishment.
- Income: ranked in categories from 1 to 12 with higher numbers representing higher household income
- Black: dichotomous variable with a 1 indicating that the respondent self-identified as African-American or black and a 0 indicating otherwise.
- Ideology: ranked from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative).
- Attendance: how often the respondent says he or she attends a religious service, ranked from 0 (never) to 8 (more than once a week).
- Age: actual age coded from 18 to 89 with 89 being all individuals 89 years of age or older.
- Education: number of years completed in school, ranging from 0 to 20.
- Southern: coded a 1 if the respondent is currently living in a state classified by the census bureau as “South”; otherwise, coded as 0.
- Murders: number of murders in the United States in the year the respondent was interviewed.
- Nettone: index of the net tone of stories about capital punishment in the *New York Times* created by Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston (2008) transformed from quarterly to yearly data
- Vitae: indicates whether the respondent was interviewed in the years after “*Evangelium Vitae*” and the Catechism of the Catholic Church were published and coded as 1 if so; otherwise, coded as 0.