Reexamining the effect of christian denominational affiliation on death penalty support

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that numerous Christian denominations in America condemn or condone the death penalty, extant research on the effects of religiosity on citizens' support for capital punishment has generated ambiguous results of denominational affiliation. This empirical ambiguity may be the result of measurement error. Testing data from the General Social Survey, this study employs a historically and theologically grounded measure of religious tradition affiliation to contrast to past research. Controlling for religious beliefs, religious behaviors, and race, the results indicate that affiliation with any Christian denomination increases the likelihood that an individual will support the death penalty compared to nonreligious individuals. In contrast, members of different Christian religious traditions are no more or less likely to favor capital punishment than other Christian affiliates.

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Of all the factors that affect the contentious death penalty debate in the United States, few are as notable as religion. Some of the earliest abolitionists viewed the crusade to eliminate capital punishment as a Christian imperative, while many of their pro-death penalty opponents cited the Bible to argue that capital punishment was an acceptable exercise of state power under God's law (Davis, 1957). This debate within the Christian community remains unresolved today. Numerous Christian denominations in America take positions on both sides of the issue at the aggregate level (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life), and scholars have observed individual citizens citing religion to justify their pro- or anti-death penalty attitudes (Cook & Powell, 2003; Vandiver, Giacopassi, & Gathje, 2002), leading penologists to recognize that the precepts of Christian religion hold theoretical implications for individuals' attitudes toward criminal punishment (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Garland, 1990; Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Unnever, Cullen, & Bartkowski, 2006).

The empirical literature on the relationships among Christians' religious beliefs, religious behaviors, and opinions about punishment has been extensively reviewed in past work and will not be reiterated here (see Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005; Unnever, Cullen, & Bartkowski, 2006). A notable characteristic of this literature is that it has generated results indicating relationships between religious beliefs (e.g., Biblical literalism, forgiveness) and behaviors (e.g., church attendance, prayer frequency) that are generally in theoretically-expected directions (i.e., increasing or decreasing punitiveness), although the statistical support is somewhat mixed.

In contrast to the evidence regarding religious beliefs and behaviors, the evidence regarding the relationships among religious beliefs, denominational affiliation, and attitudes toward punishment is less clear. Indeed, some scholars ponder whether denominational affiliation exerts any independent effect on attitudes toward punishment except *through* religious beliefs (Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Young, 2000). Scholars should test for an independent effect of affiliation above and beyond the effects of religious beliefs and behaviors for both theoretical and empirical reasons. First, several major American denominations have adopted official stances toward the death penalty. The opposition of the Catholic Church to capital punishment is well known, and the Catholic Church is joined in opposition by several major mainline Protestant denominations, including the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. In contrast, major evangelical denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Church, support retention of the death penalty for heinous crimes.[1] Indeed, the leadership bodies of each of the abolitionist denominations listed here used their official public statements to explicitly urge their congregants to work toward the abolition of capital punishment, indicating that the denominations expect their statements to guide the beliefs of their congregants.

Second, the variety of Biblical interpretations in regard to matters of punishment means that beliefs alone would not necessarily be enough to shape death penalty opinions. After all, even if one believes that the Bible should be interpreted literally, one is then faced with the challenge of literally interpreting "…you will award life for life, eye for eye…" (Exodus 21: 23-24) against "Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). It is expected

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that the teachings of the denomination to which the individual belongs will shape how he or she interprets the Bible and its teachings on punishment, which means that the cultural effect of denominational affiliation should be significant alongside religious beliefs. For example, evangelical denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod emphasize Genesis 9:6 and Romans 13:4, which provide support for the argument that God allows and even authorizes civil rulers to employ capital punishment for capital crimes.[2] In contrast, many mainline Protestant churches emphasize Christian forgiveness taught by Jesus. The United Methodist Church appeals to Jesus' declaration in Matthew 5:38-39 to turn the other cheek and not take "an eye for an eye," while the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops emphasizes the fact that Jesus "pardoned" the woman caught in adultery (John 8:7; USCCB, 2005).

Third, in addition to influencing Biblical interpretation, numerous political scientists have also found that denominational affiliation affects attitudes toward social policies like civil rights, abortion, gay marriage, and environmental policy (Guth, Green, Kellstedt, & Smidt, 1995; Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006; Wald, Kellstedt, & Leege, 1993; Wald, Owen, & Hill, 1988); party identification and presidential vote (Brooks & Manza, 2004; Layman, 1997; Leege, Wald, & Kellstedt, 1993); and presidential approval (Olson & Warber, 2008) even while controlling for religious beliefs and/or behaviors. This effect may be caused by churches functioning as "political communities" (Wald, Owen, & Hill, 1988) whose elites (i.e., clergy) provide opinion leadership on policy issues (Guth et al., 1997; Crawford & Olson, 2001; Djupe & Gilbert, 2003;). The question now is whether or not support for the death penalty is one such outcome that can evoke an independent denominational influence.

The extant penological literature, however, offers mixed results of denominational affiliation on attitudes toward punishment. In almost all studies, penologists contrasted the attitudes of Christian fundamentalists against members of more moderate or liberal denominations using the denominational coding scheme created by Tom Smith (1990) and included in the General Social Survey dataset under the variable, "FUND". While some studies found relationships that link fundamentalism to variables of increased punitiveness, such as support for the death penalty (Britt, 1998; Grasmick, Cochran, Bursik, & Kimpel, 1993; Unnever, Cullen, & Bartkowski, 2006; Young, 1992), support for harsher courts (Grasmick, Cochran, et al., 1993), retributive ideology (Evans & Adams, 2003; Grasmick, Davenport, Chamlin, & Bursik, 1992), and a perception that crimes are sinful and deserve to be punished (Curry, 1996), other studies found that fundamentalism predicts *decreased* support for punitive variables, such as support for harsher sentencing by courts (Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005).

Additionally, several scholars found that the effects of fundamentalism are contingent upon interactions with other factors, such as regional identity (Borg, 1997) and race (Borg, 1998; Britt, 1998; Unnever & Cullen, 2007a; Young, 1992; Young & Thompson, 1995). In contrast, other scholars failed to find any significant relationship between fundamentalism and support for the death penalty (Applegate et al., 2000; Baumer, Messner, & Rosenfeld, 2003; Cochran, Boots, & Heide, 2003; Messner, Baumer, & Rosenfeld, 2006; Sandys & McGarrell, 1997; Soss, Langbein, & Metelko, 2003; Unnever & Cullen, 2005, 2006; Unnever, Cullen, & Fisher, 2007). Thus, the extant penological literature offers no single, clear picture of the relationship between denominational affiliation and support for the death penalty despite strong theoretical reasons to expect such a relationship to exist.

This empirical inconsistency may be due to measurement error. Despite the fact that penologists almost unanimously used FUND (e.g., Britt, 1998; Grasmick et al., 1992; Sandys & McGarrell, 1997; Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005; Young, 1992; Young & Thompson, 1995), numerous scholars have argued that it is a poor measure (Steensland, Park, Regnerus, Robinson, Wilcox, & Woodberry, 2000; Smidt, Kellstedt, & Guth, 2009; Woodberry & Smith,

1998). First and foremost, Smidt, Kellstedt and Guth (2009) argued that there is neither historical precedent nor a clear theological rationale for organizing religious affiliation into FUND's fundamentalist/moderate/liberal categories. Notably, Smith's scheme categorizes about 30 percent of all Americans as "fundamentalists" when the term generally refers to a more specific and much smaller subpopulation of evangelical Christians (Kellstedt & Smidt, 1996; Marsden, 1991).

Second, the FUND categorization conflates religious tradition, religious beliefs, and political ideology by assuming that all religious traditions can be arrayed on a liberal-conservative continuum based on the fundamentalist/modernist split of the 1920s (Kellstedt, Green, Guth, & Smidt, 1996; Smidt, Kellstedt, & Guth, 2009; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). This categorization implies an ordinal ranking of religious affiliation when a nominal categorization is most appropriate (Steensland et al., 2000). Finally, the FUND classification obscures the differences between historically and culturally distinct religious traditions. For example, Smith (1990) places Roman Catholics in the moderate category with mainline Protestant denominations despite significant theological differences between the two traditions. Additionally, FUND contains no distinction for Black Protestants despite the unique cultural and political characteristics of historically-Black denominations (Kellstedt et al., 1996; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Smidt, Kellstedt, & Guth, 2009; Steensland et al., 2000).

Young's (1992) work bears mentioning as one of the most nuanced and insightful discussions of denominational affiliation and attitudes toward punishment within the penological literature. He recognized the complexity of the Christian religious landscape and provided a theoretical explanation as to why penologists should expect Christians who adhere to fundamentalist vs. evangelical religious traditions to hold different attitudes toward capital punishment. Importantly, he also argued that the nature of this relationship should differ for Black and White affiliates. While his theory was superior to most of the writing on the topic, his operational definitions failed to match the theory. He employed FUND to measure fundamentalist affiliation, and he operationalized evangelism as the practice of trying to convince another person to believe in Jesus; the weaknesses of the former measure have been discussed, and the latter measure captures a religious *behavior*, not affiliation with an evangelical denomination. Thus, even the most theoretically nuanced treatment of denominational affiliation and support for the death penalty within the literature failed to provide an appropriate empirical test.

In order to properly test for a relationship between affiliation and death penalty support, the measurement of denominational affiliation within the penological literature must be improved. To overcome the weaknesses of FUND, this study employs the RELTRAD (i.e., "religious tradition") measure created by Steensland and his colleagues (2000). Their measure categorizes respondents into one of six nominal categories that reflect the major religious denominational traditions that evolved throughout the history of the United States. It places respondents into religious communities or families that share history, theology, and worldview (see also Kellstedt et al., 1996). These categories are mainline Protestants, evangelical Protestants, Black Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, and a category for other religions (i.e., Muslims, Hindus, Unitarians, etc.). Steensland et al. (2000) empirically demonstrated the superiority of RELTRAD over FUND across a number of dependent variables, such as economic attitudes and political party identification. Most importantly, the RELTRAD measure reveals significant effects of membership in a historically-Black denomination that are different from the effects of membership in a mainline or evangelical Protestant denomination.

Table 1 presents the results of a cross-tab analysis of the FUND vs. RELTRAD coding schemes using 1998 General Social Survey data. This basic analysis displays many of the problems discussed above. The major historical Christian religious traditions within America are splintered across the FUND categories. Individuals who do not affiliate with a religious tradition are categorized as "liberal" affiliates

Table 1
Cross-tab analysis of FUND vs. RELTRAD categories (1998 GSS)

	Evangelical	Mainline Protestant	Black Protestant	Catholic	Unaffiliated
Fundamentalist	576	2	189	0	0
Moderate	92	130	35	705	0
Liberal	0	351	6	0	396

alongside most mainline Protestants despite the fact that they are obviously theoretically distinct. Most Black Protestants are categorized as "fundamentalist" alongside the majority of evangelicals. The latter misclassification bears implications for the current analysis given that several major evangelical denominations officially condone capital punishment, while most historically-Black churches affiliate with the anti-death penalty National Council of Churches (NCC, 1968). In total, a chi-square analysis indicates that FUND and RELTRAD are significantly different from each other (Pearson χ^2 [8 df] = 3.7e^{+03}, $p < 0.001$). As such, an empirical test is needed to determine if they predict different outcomes of opinion about capital punishment.

Method

Data

The data analyzed in this study are from the 1998 General Social Survey, a repeated cross-sectional survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center that employs a nationally-representative probability sample of adults living within the United States. Though the 1998 data is becoming dated, it is the only year of the GSS data that includes the full spectrum of religious items necessary to replicate the measures employed in this line of inquiry. This study uses the 1998 data in order to make the results as comparable to past findings as possible. The total sample size of the 1998 GSS is 2,832, though listwise deletion of missing cases yields models with much lower samples.[3]

Dependent variable

The dependent variable, *support for the death penalty*, is measured by the question, "Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?" The response options are "favor, "oppose," and "don't know." The responses are recoded so as to make the variable dichotomous, where 1 equals "favor" and 0 equals "oppose" and "don't know."[4] About 67 percent of respondents in the total sample favor the death penalty, about 24 percent oppose it, and about 8 percent replied, "don't know."

Independent variables – religious measures

Model 1 employs the coding scheme of Smith (1990) to operationalize *denominational affiliation*. The FUND variable in the GSS is used to create dummy variables that identify members of fundamentalist and moderate denominations, according to Smith; liberal denominations are the omitted reference category. This coding scheme categorizes about 31 percent of respondents as members of fundamentalist denominations, about 39 percent as moderate, and about 30 percent as liberal. Models 2 and 3 operationalize *denominational affiliation* according to the coding scheme of Steensland et al. (2000). The RELIG, DENOM, and OTHER variables from the GSS are used to create dummy variables for members of evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, and Catholic denominations.[5] This coding scheme categorizes about 27 percent of respondents as evangelicals, about 19 percent as mainline Protestants, about 9 percent as members of Black Protestant denominations, about 28 percent as Catholics, and about 16 percent as unaffiliated. In both RELTRAD models, non-Christians (i.e., Jews, Muslims, Hindus) are

dropped from the sample because the current study is premised upon Christian theory; it is inappropriate to assume a relationship between Jewish, Muslim, or Hindu affiliation and support for the death penalty without a thorough analysis of those traditions' scripture and teachings. Respondents who do not affiliate with a religion serve as the omitted reference category in Model 2. In Model 3, unaffiliated respondents are dropped from the sample, and Catholics serve as the omitted reference category.

Because several studies found significant relationships between church attendance (Bader & Johnson, 2007; Messner, Baumer, & Rosenfeld, 2006; Unnever & Cullen, 2007a), Biblical literalism (Britt, 1998; Grasmick et al., 1992; Unnever, Cullen, & Fisher, 2005; Young, 1992), and support for the death penalty, measures of these constructs are included in the present analysis. *Church attendance* is a categorical variable with nine responses ranging from "never" to "more than once a week;" higher values indicate more frequent attendance. *Biblical literalism* is a dummy variable coded 1 for respondents who say that the Bible is "the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word" and 0 for those who say that it "is inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word" or "an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men."

The respondents' *image of God* is included because this variable, too, has been shown to significantly impact attitudes toward punishment (Bader & Johnson, 2007; Evans & Adams, 2003; Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Unnever, Bartkowski, & Cullen, 2010). This construct is operationalized with Greeley's (1993, 1995) "gracious image of God" scale by summing across four questions that ask respondents to place their image of God on a seven-point scale between two contrasting images: a) mother vs. father, b) master vs. spouse, c) judge vs. lover, d) king vs. friend. Responses to the original items were recoded so that higher values indicate a harsh, judgmental image of God.

Additionally, *forgiveness* and *compassion* have been shown to reduce punitiveness (Applegate et al., 2000; Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005; Unnever, Cullen, & Bartkowski, 2006). The forgiveness variable is an additive composite scale of three items from the GSS: 1) "I have forgiven myself for things that I have done wrong," 2) "I have forgiven those who hurt me," and 3) "I know that God forgives me." Higher values on the composite scale indicate more forgiving beliefs. Compassion can only be measured by a single item on the GSS; it is operationalized by agreement with the statement, "I feel a deep sense of responsibility for reducing pain and suffering in the world," with higher response values indicating greater compassion.

Control variables

Seven ideological and demographic characteristics that have been shown to affect attitudes toward punishment are controlled in each model. First, several studies have demonstrated relationships between *conservative political ideology* and punitiveness (Messner, Baumer, & Rosenfeld, 2006; Payne, Gainey, Triplett, & Danner, 2004; Sandys & McGarrell, 1997; Unnever & Cullen, 2006); this variable is operationalized according to respondents' self-placement on a scale that ranges from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative." The respondent's *gender* (male = 1, female = 0) is included because past research suggests that males are more likely to support punitive crime control policies than women (Applegate et al., 2000). *Race* (Black = 1, White = 0) is measured because extant studies found that Black individuals are less likely to support punitive punishments than White individuals (Bobo & Johnson, 2004; Young, 1992). Some data suggest that *age* (Evans & Adams, 2003) and *level of education* (Payne et al., 2004; Soss, Langbein, & Metelko, 2003) are negatively related to punitive beliefs, while *income* may be positively related to punitiveness (Borg, 1997; Unnever & Cullen, 2007a; Unnever et al., 2006). Finally, Borg (1997) demonstrated that support for the death penalty

is contingent upon southern identity, so residence in *southern states* is controlled.

Analytic strategy

The article begins with a series of chi-square analyses, followed by statistical regression. Due to the fact that the dichotomous dependent variable violates the underlying assumptions of OLS regression, logistic regression is used to analyze the data (Long, 1997). Model 1 is designed to establish the baseline performance of FUND following the work of past studies. Model 2 uses RELTRAD to contrast the effect of affiliation with any Christian religious tradition against individuals who do not affiliate with a religion. Model 3 contrasts evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Black Protestants against Catholics to determine whether a significant difference in death penalty opinion exists between affiliates of different Christian denominations once religious beliefs and behaviors are controlled. All analyses are run in Stata version 9 using robust standard errors to correct for heteroskedasticity (Long & Freese, 2006).

Results

Cross-tab analyses

To begin, Table 2 presents the results of basic cross-tab analyses of the relationship between denominational affiliation and opinion about the death penalty according to the FUND vs. RELTRAD coding schemes. This analysis highlights several of the problems caused by using FUND to test this relationship. First, virtually identical proportions of respondents across each of the FUND categories favor or oppose the death penalty; indeed, a chi-square analysis indicates that there are no significant differences in death penalty support across the FUND categories (Pearson χ^2 [2 *df*] = 0.956, *p* = 0.620). Second, the distribution of death penalty support amongst African Americans is notably different than the total FUND category distributions, indicating that the failure of FUND to separately classify Black Protestants obscures real differences in opinion across race.

Third, RELTRAD reveals that evangelicals are notably more supportive of the death penalty than Black Protestants (74 vs. 47 percent); however, because over 80 percent of evangelical and Black Protestant respondents are grouped together as "fundamentalists" by FUND (see Table 1), the fundamentalist variable overstates death penalty support for some respondents in the category and understates it for others. Furthermore, mainline Protestants are more supportive of the death penalty than respondents who do not affiliate with any religious tradition (72 vs. 64 percent), even though 73 percent of mainline Protestants are classified alongside *all* unaffiliated

respondents within FUND's liberal category. Thus, RELTRAD not only provides a more valid classification of respondents by religious tradition, it also reveals significant death penalty opinion differences across traditions (Pearson χ^2 [3 *df*] = 60.0185, *p* < 0.001), in contrast to FUND.

Regression analyses

While the cross-tab analyses are informative, they cannot rule out the possibility of confounding factors; for that, regression analysis is needed. Table 3 reports the results of logit regressions of the denominational affiliation, religious belief, religious behavior, and control variables on support for the death penalty. These results qualify the earlier results of the chi-square analyses in important ways. First, Model 1 does suggest that respondents coded as fundamentalist in Smith's (1990) scheme are significantly more likely to favor the death penalty than members of liberal denominations

Table 2
Cross-tab analyses of denominational affiliation and death penalty support

	Oppose Death Penalty	Favor Death Penalty
FUND Categories		
Fundamentalist	239 (31.4%)	523 (68.6%)
Moderate	304 (31.7%)	656 (68.3%)
Liberal	109 (30.5%)	248 (69.5%)
FUND x Race Interaction		
Black Fundamentalist	116 (55.0%)	95 (45.0%)
Black Moderate	39 (54.2%)	33 (45.8%)
Black Liberal	44 (62.0%)	27 (38.0%)
RELTRAD Categories		
Evangelical	175 (26.0%)	498 (74.0%)
Mainline Protestant	137 (28.4%)	346 (71.6%)
Black Protestant	121 (52.8%)	108 (47.2%)
Catholic	225 (32.0%)	478 (68.0%)
Unaffiliated	143 (36.2%)	252 (63.8%)

Table 3
Results of logit analyses of support for the death penalty (odds ratios with robust standard errors in parentheses)

Variables	FUND (Liberal Omitted)	RELTRAD (Unaffiliated Omitted)	RELTRAD (Catholic Omitted)
FUND Denominations			
Fundamentalist	1.49†	--[a]	--
	(0.33)		
Moderate	1.27	--	--
	(0.25)		
RELTRAD Traditions			
Evangelical	--	2.24**	1.39
		(0.67)	(0.30)
Mainline Protestant	--	1.75†	1.08
		(0.52)	(0.25)
Black Protestant	--	2.40*	1.58
		(1.05)	(0.70)
Catholic	--	1.60†	(omitted)
		(0.45)	
Religious Beliefs/Behaviors			
Biblical literalism	0.80	0.77	0.81
	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.15)
Church attendance	0.95	0.94†	0.93†
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)
Harsher Image of God	1.05**	1.05**	1.06**
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Forgiveness	0.94	0.94	0.96
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Compassion	0.76**	0.76**	0.73**
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Control Variables			
Political Ideology	1.12†	1.12†	1.09
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
African-American	0.32**	0.28**	0.26**
	(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Male	1.52**	1.57**	1.51*
	(0.24)	(0.25)	(0.26)
Southerner	1.02	1.00	0.98
	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.20)
Age	1.00	1.00	1.00
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.01)
Income	1.01	1.00	1.00
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Education	1.02	1.02	1.04
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Log Pseudolikelihood	- 513.74	- 512.93	- 443.57
Adjusted Count R^2	0.068	0.064	0.062
% Correctly Predicted	0.708	0.706	0.711
Sample Size	898	901	788

Notes: [a] -- indicates that variable is not included in present model; † *p* < 0.10, * *p* < 0.05, ** *p* < 0.01.

(and unaffiliated respondents), but this result only attains marginal significance ($p = 0.07$). Furthermore, the results of Models 2 and 3 suggest that the presence of the *unaffiliated* individuals in the omitted category may be driving this finding, rather than the affiliates of "liberal" denominations.

Model 2 indicates that affiliates of *any* Christian religious tradition are significantly more likely to favor the death penalty than individuals who do not affiliate with a religious tradition, with evangelicals and Black Protestants having the largest odds ratios (2.24 and 2.40 respectively) and being statistically significant at the .05 level. These denominational variables achieve higher levels of statistical significance than the fundamentalist variable in Model 1, which was only marginally statistically significant. In Model 3, however, when unaffiliated individuals are dropped from the analysis and evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Black Protestants are contrasted against Catholics (arguably the group most expected to oppose the death penalty due to the Catholic Church's vocal anti-death penalty stance), there are no significant differences among Christian affiliates. These findings suggest that prior discussions of death penalty cleavages between Christian denominations were misplaced.

The regressions thus indicate that the earlier significant RELTRAD chi-square results were driven by the inclusion of unaffiliated individuals, as well as a lack of a race control to disentangle Black Protestant affiliation from the influence of race alone. To test this latter conjecture, Model 3 was replicated without the control for African American race. In this revised model (not shown), the Black Protestant variable becomes significant (Odds ratio = 0.51, $p = 0.016$), providing evidence that the relationship between death penalty attitudes and Black Protestant affiliation in the coding scheme of Steensland et al. (2000) is confounded with the effect of race itself.[6] Thus, in contrast to past studies, the present results indicate that the cleavage in death penalty opinions exists not between affiliates of different Christian traditions, but rather between all Christian affiliates and individuals who do not affiliate with a religious tradition. Prior studies that used FUND to operationalize denominational affiliation failed to detect this facet of the relationship between denominational affiliation and support for the death penalty.

Sensitivity and goodness-of-fit tests

Before concluding that there are no significant differences in death penalty support among Christian affiliates, additional hypotheses must be ruled out. Layman (2001), for example, posited that cleavages in socio-political opinions exist not *between* religious traditions, but rather *within* them. He argued that the greatest differences in opinion are likely to exist between more orthodox, traditional affiliates vs. more liberal, modernist affiliates. Other scholars argued that the effects of denominational affiliation on support for the death penalty may be *indirect* through affiliates' religious beliefs and behaviors (Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Young, 2000), while Young (1992) argued that the relationship between affiliation and death penalty attitudes will differ between Black and White affiliates.

To test these hypotheses, a series of logit regressions replicated Model 3 with the addition of interaction terms between each of the religious tradition variables (except for Catholic, which is still omitted) and A) each of the religious belief and behavior variables and B) African American race (results not shown). Church attendance, image of God, forgiveness, compassion, and race all failed to generate statistically significant interactions. Only Biblical literalism significantly interacted with denominational affiliation, and the interaction was only significant for evangelicals ($p = 0.002$). Predicted probabilities that literalist vs. non-literalist evangelicals will favor the death penalty clarify this interaction effect by showing that evangelicals who believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible are about 65 percent likely to favor the death penalty, while evangelicals who do not

literally interpret the Bible are about 83 percent likely to favor the death penalty. Thus, these results suggest that Biblical literalism makes evangelical affiliates *less* punitive. This result runs contrary to the relationship between Biblical literalism and punitiveness typically found in empirical studies, but is not without precedent (e.g., Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005a; Unnever et al., 2006). Exempting this one significant finding, the bulk of the results further support the finding that Christian affiliates largely do not differ *among themselves* in regard to overall support for the death penalty, regardless of differences in religious beliefs, religious behaviors, and race. Opinion about the death penalty does not appear to be a source of cleavage within the Christian community (at least at the level of mass affiliates).

Finally, the present argument that RELTRAD is a more valid measure of religious denominational affiliation than FUND merits a goodness-of-fit test between the FUND and RELTRAD models. Due to the fact that the models are not nested within each other, it is inappropriate to use a likelihood ratio test. Instead, the Hosmer-Lemeshow (1980) test is used to contrast the models.[7] The results show that the FUND model generates a HL χ^2 statistic of 7.75 ($p = 0.46$), the first RELTRAD model (unaffiliated omitted) generates a HL χ^2 statistic of 11.45 ($p = 0.18$), and the second RELTRAD model (Catholics omitted) generates a HL χ^2 statistic of 8.35 ($p = 0.40$). Because the HL χ^2 statistics of the RELTRAD models are larger than the HL χ^2 statistic of the FUND model, the Hosmer-Lemeshow test favors the RELTRAD models over the FUND model (see also Long & Freese, 2006). However, none of these tests achieve standard levels of statistical significance, indicating that none of the models are a particularly great fit to the data. This weakness is likely due to the inherent difficulty of modeling individual level-opinion data. As Long and Freese (2006) emphasized, no goodness-of-fit test provides irrefutable evidence that any one model is superior to another, so these results are one small piece of evidence in the larger argument of this article.

Discussion

This article advances the literature on the relationship between Christian religiosity and attitudes toward capital punishment by overcoming measurement error in past work and directly testing the effect of denominational affiliation on death penalty opinion with a theoretically-robust operational definition of affiliation. The results have both methodological and substantive implications for the study of religion and punitiveness.

Methodological implications

The results of this study reveal that the RELTRAD measure of Steensland and his colleagues (2000) more accurately captures the socio-theological distinctions across religious traditions in America than Smith's (1990) FUND measure, and the proper classification of respondents reveals more nuanced distributions of death penalty attitudes within the Christian community than was identified by past studies. Nonetheless, a skeptical reader could counter that the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit tests were not statistically significant, and each of the models correctly predict about the same number of dependent variable outcomes. In other words, *statistical* evidence could lead the reader to conclude that RELTRAD is not an improvement over FUND, at least in regard to the study of opinions about the death penalty.

Such a conclusion would be ill-advised. Even if FUND *captures* roughly the same amount of variance in death penalty attitudes as RELTRAD, FUND cannot *explain* the relationship between denominational affiliation and attitudes toward punishment because of its poor construct validity. When past scholars concluded that "fundamentalists" are more likely to favor the death penalty than affiliates of other religious denominations, they spun statistical fiction; Smith's (1990) code does not appropriately distinguish the small subpopulation of

fundamentalists from the much broader community of evangelicals and Black Protestants (Kellstedt & Smidt, 1996; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Marsden, 1991). Furthermore, the current results show that evangelicals and Black Protestants have notably different attitudes toward the death penalty, which means that they should not be grouped together in the same category. Measures of goodness-of-fit and explained variance are not the appropriate criteria by which to judge these measures of denominational affiliation. Rather, they should be judged by the degree to which they match theory and empirical reality. RELTRAD is theoretically superior to FUND, and in this case, it more appropriately explains the distribution of death penalty opinions amongst Christian affiliates and unaffiliated individuals.

Substantive implications

The most important finding from the present study is that significant differences in death penalty support exist between Christian affiliates and unaffiliated individuals, not between affiliates of different Christian religious traditions. Previously published studies that relied upon FUND never *accurately* tested the relationship between denominational affiliation and support for capital punishment, so this is a new finding. It is also theoretically surprising. As explained in the introduction, numerous prominent denominations within each of the Christian religious traditions take official positions on the death penalty, and the leadership of the anti-death penalty Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations teach that their affiliates should actively oppose capital punishment. Extant research indicates that denominational affiliation can affect political opinions and behavior even when controlling religious beliefs and behaviors (Brooks & Manza, 2004; Layman, 1997; Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006; Olson & Warber, 2008). As such, the present finding that affiliates do not mirror the divisions between their denominations on the death penalty defies theoretical expectations.

This "null" finding raises two possibilities. Either religious affiliates do not use cues from the leaders of their denominations to shape their opinions about capital punishment, or the present data is insufficient to appropriately test the present hypotheses. Political scientists have analyzed the relationship between denominational membership and political preferences, finding that church communities frequently influence congregants' political preferences by communicating certain political attitudes (Wald, Owen, & Hill, 1988; Crawford & Olson, 2001). That said, many studies have shown that the issue positions and advocacy of denomination leaders are often disconnected from the opinions of their mass congregants (Adams, 1970; Hero, 1973; Hertzke, 1988), and rank-and-file church members are mostly unaware of the political advocacy of their denominations (Djupe, Olson, & Gilbert, 2006). Yet, recent studies found that church members do pay attention to the preferences of denominational leaders (Djupe, Olson, & Gilbert, 2005; Olson, 2002), and clergy members, particularly, provide some opinion leadership for their congregants (Guth et al., 1997; Crawford & Olson, 2001; Djupe & Gilbert, 2003). Thus, past studies indicated that congregants may take policy cues from their parishes.

To the authors' knowledge, only one source of parish-level data containing the constructs necessary to study religion and public opinion about punishment currently exists. Bjarnason and Welch (2004) and G.A. Smith (2005) analyzed data from the 1984 Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life, which contains parish-, priest-, and congregant-level data. Both sets of scholars found a positive relationship between the strength of a parish priest's opposition to the death penalty and the strength of opposition voiced by his parishioners. These data suggest that the present "null" findings may be due to the inability of the current analysis to link congregants with their denominations *through* the opinions of pastors. More data like the Notre Dame Study should be collected in order to test whether or not Protestant pastors can similarly sway the opinions of their

congregants, especially for denominations that condone the death penalty.

The present results also call for clarification of past findings. Biblical literalism is often discussed as a factor that increases individuals' support for the death penalty and other punitive punishments (Grasmick, Bursik, & Blackwell, 1993; Grasmick et al., 1992; Unnever, Cullen, & Fisher, 2005; Young, 1992; Young & Thompson, 1995), but the present study finds that literalism only exerts a *negative* effect when interacting with evangelical affiliation. This finding may be surprising to many scholars, but the relationship between Biblical literalism and support for the death penalty fails to reach statistical significance as frequently as it is positive (Applegate et al., 2000; Bader & Johnson, 2007; Borg, 1998; Unnever & Cullen, 2006). Furthermore, several studies do find a negative relationship between literalism and death penalty support, even though the relationship fails to reach statistical significance (Britt, 1998; Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005a; Unnever, Bartkowski, & Cullen, 2010; Unnever, Cullen, & Bartkowski, 2006). The present results suggest that scholars should avoid casting Biblical literalism as a unidirectional, punitive force. In a rare qualitative study on this topic, Cook and Powell (2003) find that many proponents and opponents of capital punishment each cite different Biblical passages to support their beliefs. Future research should continue to explore factors that cause people to use merciful vs. judgmental passages to shape their death penalty attitudes.

The findings presented here also suggest that the racial cleavages in death penalty support are *not* intertwined with denominational affiliation, contrary to the findings of Britt (1998), Unnever and Cullen (2007), and Young (1992). The empirical differences are likely due to the fact that a race interaction is essentially built into the RELTRAD code; African American affiliates of most Christian denominations are coded as Black Protestants. As Table 1 shows, 82 percent of the respondents classified as Black Protestants are coded as "fundamentalists" under FUND. Thus, past race-affiliation interactions essentially isolated the Black Protestant respondents. By measuring both African American race and Black Protestant affiliation, however, this study finds that differences in death penalty support between Black Protestants and other Americans are due simply to the respondents' race, not their denominational affiliation. Future work should resolve the discrepancy between these findings.

Limitations

First and foremost, the dichotomous operational definition of death penalty support in this data set is problematic. Much research indicates that the proportion of respondents who favor the death penalty drops significantly if they are offered other response options, such as "don't know" (Jones, 1994) or "prefer life in prison without the possibility of parole" (Bohm, 1991; Bohm, Flanagan, & Harris, 1989; Bowers, 1993; McGarrell & Sandys, 1996; Sandys & McGarrell, 1995). To the authors' knowledge, only two studies have examined the effects of religion variables on a more nuanced death penalty question. Measuring respondents' preference for death penalty vs. life without parole for convicted murderers, Unnever and Cullen (2005) found that fundamentalism, church attendance, and religiosity do not significantly affect respondents' punishment preference, while Catholic affiliation decreases their preference for the death penalty over life in prison without parole. In contrast, an unpublished conference paper by Bader and Johnson (2007) found that Black Protestant, mainline Protestant, and Jewish affiliation, as well as church attendance, significantly affect preference for abolition of the death penalty. Given the different dependent and independent variables employed in these two studies, more research is needed to understand why denominational affiliation appears to affect attitudes toward some facets of penal policy but not others.

Though the present study finds no significant differences within denominations across traditional/orthodox vs. modernist/liberal

religious beliefs and behaviors (with the exception of the Biblical literalism divide amongst evangelicals), a significant variable may be omitted. Cook (1998) found that numerous religious variables ceased to significantly affect pro-death penalty/anti-abortion attitudes once a variable to measure respondents' belief in God's punishment for sinners was introduced into the model. Her results suggested that any religious characteristics that increase support for punitiveness may be due to this belief in divine punishment rather than the intrinsic influence of, say, Biblical literalism or Church attendance. Unfortunately, this variable is not present in the 1998 data set.

Finally, this study should be replicated with other data for generalizability. The present study is based upon cross-sectional data from a single year. Emerging research using other data sets both supports and challenges the present findings. As mentioned above, Bader and Johnson (2007) used RELTRAD to analyze support for abolition of the death penalty in the 2005 Baylor Religion Survey, and they found significant effects of denominational affiliation. In contrast, Unnever, Bartkowski, and Cullen (in press) used RELTRAD to analyze a standard, favor/oppose death penalty question in the 2004 GSS. Consistent with the present study, they found that the only significant difference exists between mainline Protestants (the omitted variable) and unaffiliated individuals. Given that these results are inconsistent, more research on the relationship between religion and attitudes toward punishment should be conducted using the appropriate RELTRAD measure. Only further replication will determine whether the current results are robust or idiosyncratic to the data set and/or wording of the dependent variable.

Conclusion

Noting the fact that numerous Christian denominations take strong stances condemning or condoning capital punishment, this article tested the theoretical expectation that a Christian's denominational affiliation will affect her support for the death penalty. Overcoming measurement error in past studies by using RELTRAD rather than FUND to operationalize denominational affiliation, this article finds that numerous past studies incorrectly concluded that significant differences in death penalty opinions exist between affiliates of different denominations when, in fact, the major opinion cleavage exists between all Christian affiliates and individuals who do not affiliate with a religion.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. For more information, consult the websites of the Death Penalty Information Center (http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/religion-and-death-penalty#state) and the Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life (http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=274).

2. Genesis 9:6 – "He who sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God was man created." Romans 13:4 – "But if you do wrong, then you may well be afraid; because it is not for nothing that the symbol of authority is the sword: it is there to serve God, too, as his avenger, to bring retribution to wrongdoers."

3. The significant loss of cases due to listwise deletion is an unavoidable limitation of GSS data, caused by the survey's split ballot interview design in which several blocks of questions are only asked of randomly-selected subsets of respondents, not the total sample. The random assignment eliminates potential selection bias within the sample, ensuring the data set's representativeness (see Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005).

4. Although it would be possible to analyze the dependent variable in its original form using ordered or multinomial logit, the dichotomous form was chosen for several reasons. First, explaining punitive attitudes is the core goal of this work, so the focus on death penalty *support* is appropriate. Second, the responses are highly skewed. Variation amongst the respondents who said "oppose" or "don't know" is not truly

adequate for a full categorical test. Third, in the absence of a superior "death penalty vs. alternative punishment" question, it is best to examine the current data for global death penalty attitudes, of which support and opposition are the two poles. Finally, this choice is in line with the majority of scholars who have also dichotomized the death penalty question when using GSS data (Borg, 1997, 1998; Messner, Baumer, & Rosenfeld, 2006; Stack, 2003; Unnever & Cullen, 2006, 2007a; Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005; Unnever, Cullen, & Bartkowski, 2006; Unnever, Cullen, & Fisher, 2005; Young & Thompson, 1995).

5. The codes needed to create the RELTRAD variable in SPSS, SAS, and Stata are available on Steensland's website at Indiana University, Bloomington, < http://www.indiana.edu/~soc/pdf/RELTRADsyntax_3versions.pdf >. See the appendix of Steensland et al. (2000) for a full list of the GSS denomination response options categorized by religious tradition.

6. This finding highlights one of the greatest weaknesses of Steensland et al.'s (2000) denominational coding scheme. The authors code *any* African American who affiliates with *any* Protestant denomination as a Black Protestant; this choice fails to appropriately isolate any effects caused by affiliation with a historically-Black denomination rather than the basic effects of racial cleavages, separate from religion. Re-working the RELTRAD coding of Steensland and his colleagues is beyond the scope of this study, but it is an endeavor that should be pursued in future work.

7. Per standard procedure, the data are divided into 10 groups for the Hosmer-Lemeshow test (Long & Freese, 2006).

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