

Sociology 102B (Research Methods)
Spring 99

ABSTRACT: This study addresses the effect of one's religious affiliations on his attitudes toward capital punishment. Data are from the 1991 General Social Survey. Participants were asked if they favored or opposed the death penalty for the crime of murder. They were then asked to identify as Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other religion, or No religion. They were finally asked to respond for gender, race, education level, political orientation, and strength of religious affiliation. Protestants were most supportive of capital punishment, and those of other religions were more opposed than Protestants and Catholics.

Statement of the Problem

The national and world debates over capital punishment have long been thoroughly contested. It is one of our more important and divisive issues. This divisiveness is demonstrated in many social arenas, not the least of which is religion.

The lines that are drawn between supporters and protesters of the death penalty often separate one religion from another. As vaguely similar as most major world religions are, there can be sharp differences in the moral philosophy of the death penalty. It is no coincidence that in the fundamentalist Islamic world, for example, the nature of punishment is retributive; if one cuts out someone's eye, he will most likely lose his own eye. That policy is surely not completely secular.

If you turn the United States, agreement on any one policy is not so cohesive. The murky negotiation between freedom of religion and separation of church and state makes the issue much more complicated. In recent years, the American voting public has called for punitiveness and is thirsty for criminal blood; a strong majority favors the death penalty, and politicians generally need to endorse it for their current political livelihood. This is not to say that there is not harsh opposition from a vocal minority. The strongest opposition comes from the Catholic Church. And even though the official papal stance is against the death penalty, there is dissension on this issue from some Catholics. The primary division, though, is within Christianity itself, the line is generally drawn between Catholics and Protestants.

I am not certain that religion is the primary divider between people with regard to capital punishment; there might be any number of significant factors that have not occurred to me. But it makes sense that religious preference could be a factor on an individual's stance. It is a possibility worth exploring, and that is what I shall do for this next school year: in a nutshell, I will attempt to discover what effects, if any one's religious preference (or lack thereof) has on his position on capital punishment.

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