

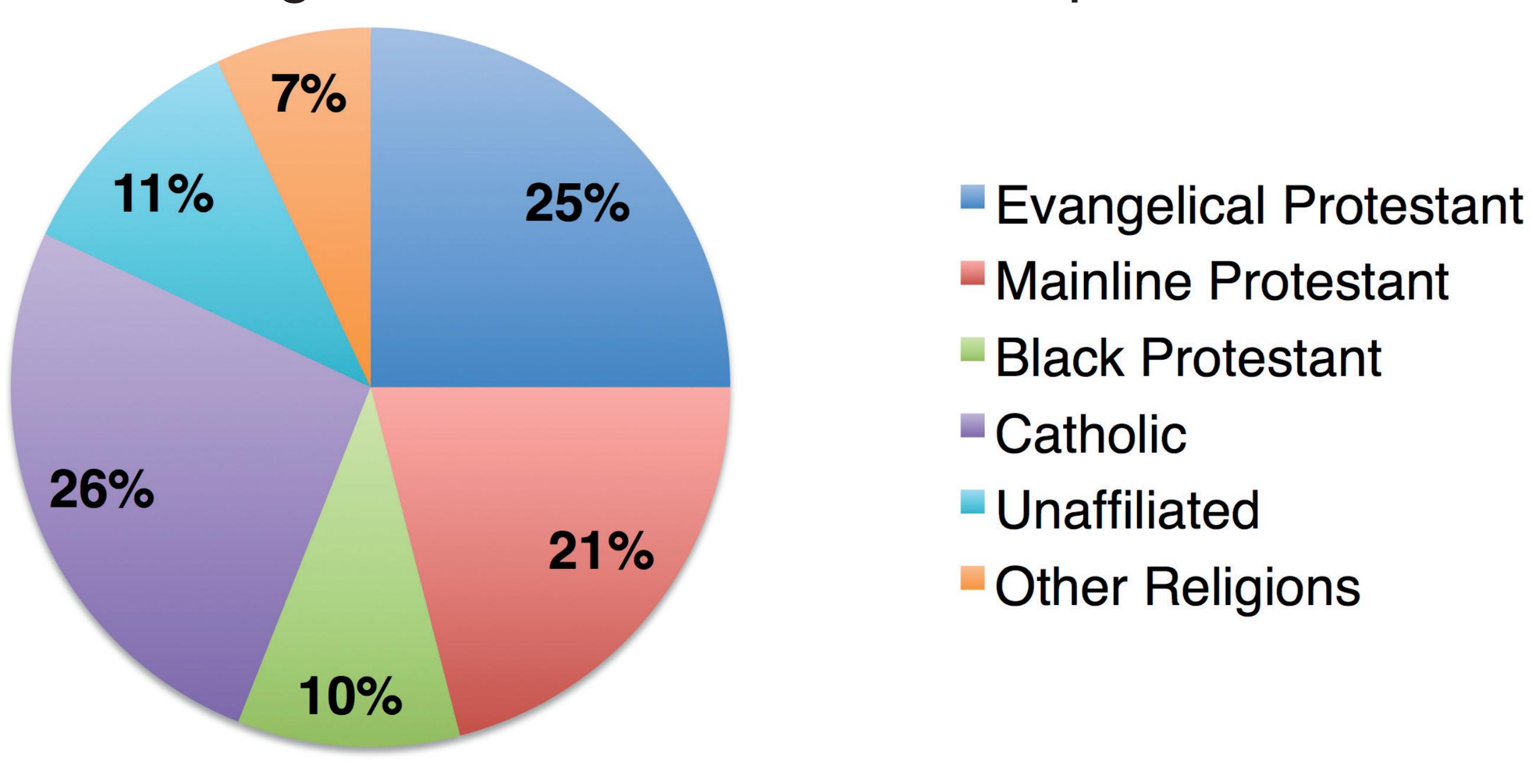
Background

America is one of the only wealthy nations to still use capital punishment. Use of DNA evidence to reverse death sentences and the media's coverage of botched executions have recently brought the issue back to the forefront. The issue of capital punishment lies at the intersection of economics, sociology, and criminology. Beginning with Gary Becker's seminal work in the 1960s, economic tools have been used to analyze social issues such as crime and punishment. Researchers have presented mixed results when attempting to use these tools to identify a deterrent effect of carrying out the death sentence.

A parallel vein of research has focused on the determinants of support for capital punishment, including socioeconomic factors such as race, education, gender, income, and religious views. Much of the previous research regarding the role of religious views uses topical modules on religion from the General Social Survey (GSS). However, these topical modules have a relatively small number of respondents compared to the full GSS survey. I will use the complete GSS dataset to test my hypothesis that fundamentalist religious views are a determinant of support for capital punishment.

Data

Religious Affiliation of GSS Respondents



- Data come from the GSS, which has been administered by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago since 1972.
- Respondents are an independently drawn sample of American adults 18 years of age or older.
- Questions include economic status information, opinions about social issues, religious behaviors and beliefs, and views on a wide range of other topics.
- The full sample of the survey has 57,061 respondents. Depending on which variables are used, sample sizes for my models range from 13,185 to 25,071.
- The key variables are a measure of the fundamentalism of the respondents' church, how literally they interpret the Bible, how often they pray and attend church, and their denomination.
- Other variables of interest and controls include age, gender, race, residence in a Southern state, education, income, political views, and whether the respondent was born in the U.S.

Summary Statistics of Key Variables

	Number of Observations	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Support for Capital Punishment	46,283	0.72	0.45	0	1
Member of a Fundamentalist Religion	17,242	0.31	0.46	0	1
Literal Interpretation of the Bible	9,460	0.34	0.47	0	1
The Bible is the Inspired Word of God	13,579	0.48	0.50	0	1
How Often Does Respondent Pray	28,123	2.74	1.60	1	6
How Often Attends Religious Services	56,512	3.83	2.71	0	8

Results

Binary Logistic Regression Results Using Support for Capital Punishment as the Dependent Variable

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Fundamentalist Religion	0.168*** (0.0374)					
Evangelical Protestant					0.382*** (0.0471)	0.672*** (0.0704)
Mainline Protestant					0.432*** (0.0488)	0.521*** (0.0689)
Black Protestant					-0.887*** (0.0586)	-0.471*** (0.0863)
Catholic					0.138*** (0.0435)	0.303*** (0.0612)
Literal Interpretation of the Bible		0.110* (0.0567)				0.164** (0.0724)
The Bible is the Inspired Word of God			0.259*** (0.0479)			0.313*** (0.0584)
How Often Prays				0.0826*** (0.0131)		0.106*** (0.0167)
How Often Attends Church					-0.0561*** (0.0062)	-0.068*** (0.0100)
Pseudo R ²	0.0762	0.0773	0.0802	0.0795	0.0685	0.0783
Sample Size	24,264	16,228	15,688	25,071	24,179	13,185

Notes: Robust standard errors appear in parentheses. ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

- According to Model (1), belonging to a fundamentalist church raises the probability of supporting the death penalty.
- Model (5) shows that Protestants have a higher probability of support for the policy relative to those that are unaffiliated.

Religious Views as a Determinant of Support for Capital Punishment

By Brett Patrick

- Model (6) controls for all four measures of religiosity and shows that belonging to an evangelical denomination has the largest marginal effect on the probability of support.
- Consistent with Wozniak and Lewis (2010), Models (5) and (6) show members of black Protestant denominations have a lower probability of supporting the death penalty.
- Interestingly, Models (5) and (6) show Catholics have a higher probability of support despite the church's institutional stance opposing the policy.
- Models (3), (4), and (6) also show a decrease in probability of supporting the policy as the frequency of church attendance and prayer increase (prayer is a scale of 1 to 6 with 1 being several times a day and 6 being never).
- Literal interpretation of the Bible results in an increase in support, although with a smaller marginal effect than for those who interpret the Bible as the inspired word of God.

Conclusion

The Eighth Amendment of the United States Constitution prohibits the use of cruel and unusual punishment. Because capital punishment is the ultimate penalty, it is important that we consider not only its effectiveness in deterring future murders, but also the reasons why Americans support the policy.

The results above show that religious views are a significant determinant of support for the death penalty. In Model (6), which controls for all socioeconomic factors and all measures of religiosity, belonging to an evangelical denomination has the largest marginal effect on support for capital punishment at 12 percent.

Results that are not shown in the table are consistent with Unnever et al. (2005) who find that African Americans, females, those with higher education levels, and those with less conservative political views are less likely to favor the use of the death penalty. Whites, males, higher income respondents, and those with more conservative political views are more likely to support the policy.

To further the research in this area, a multiyear panel study could be conducted in an attempt to investigate the reasons a majority of Americans continue to support the death penalty and how opinions about the policy change over time.