

REVISITING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTITUDES TOWARD ABORTION AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that public opinion on abortion is not a simply a dichotomy of pro-life and pro-choice. Instead, there appears to be three general attitudes: absolutist (opposing abortion in all cases, including rape), situationalist (opposing abortion for all cases except “hard” cases such as rape and incest), and pro-choice. Previous studies have also shown little or no correlation between attitudes towards abortion and capital punishment. The present study hypothesizes that those who take an absolutist stance on abortion will oppose capital punishment based on the value of life while situationalists will support capital punishment based on the value of responsibility. The results show support among those who are 23 and older, but no support that are 22 and younger. Implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The issues of abortion and capital punishment are very salient in the public domain. People are divided in their stance and the issues receive significant attention in the media, as well as in political campaigns and elections (Hershey and Holian 2000). Given that they are both moral issues and involve matters of life and death, suggests that attitudes toward one issue are likely to be related to attitudes toward the other.

Curiously, several studies have found no correlation between attitudes toward abortion and capital punishment (Granberg 1978; Granberg and Granberg 1981; Baker, Epstein and Forth 1981; Vander, O’Neil and Lester 1999; Cleghorn 1986; Jordan 1995), only a weak relationship (Hertel 1994; Sawyer 1982) or a relationship just among Catholics (Kelly and Kudlac 2000; Perl and McClintock 2001) and mainline protestants (Perl and McClintock 2001). On the other hand, there are significant relationships between attitudes toward abortion and euthanasia (Cook, Jelen and Wilcox 192; Granberg and Granberg 1981; Sawyer 1982; McCutcheon 1987; Vander, O’Neil and Lester 1999) and euthanasia and capital punishment (Sawyer 1982; Vander, O’Neil and Lester 1999). Given similar natures among these issues, the relationship between attitudes toward abortion and capital punishment should be revisited. A possible explanation for the null or weak relationships between the two attitudes is that such attitudes have been measured with alternative methods.

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McCutcheon (1987) showed that the characterization of public opinion on abortion is not a simple dichotomy between pro-choice and pro-life. Rather there appear to be three general attitudes toward abortion: 1) Pro Choice; 2) pro-life, with some tolerance for non-discretionary abortion (i.e. rape); and, 3) those who are against discretionary abortion (i.e. mother doesn't want another child) as well as non-discretionary abortion.

He showed that pro-life values, which are those composed of opposition to euthanasia, predicted opposition to discretionary abortion, that is, abortion because the mother doesn't want another child, and non discretionary abortion when, for example, the mother was raped. Sexual conservatism such as opposition to premarital sex, only predicted opposition to discretionary abortion (McCutcheon 1987). The results are completely logical, for if someone takes an extreme stance against abortion and opposes it even in the case of rape, then there is obviously a value of life. However, if one does not oppose abortion in the case of rape but opposes it for "soft" reason, then one may place a greater value on the mother taking responsibility for the pregnancy.

In a similar study Hertel (1994) looked at the relationship between abortion and capital punishment. Using data from the General Social Survey, he classified the stands on abortion into three categories: Pro-Life, Situationalist, and Pro-Choice. He classified someone as Pro-Life if they opposed abortion in at least one of the cases of non-discretionary abortion such as rape, fetal defect and mother's health. Pro-choice was classified as those who supported abortion rights in at least two of the cases of nondiscretionary abortion. The middle category, which he termed situationalist, was classified as those in between. Hertel (1994) found that there was a small but significant correlation between abortion and capital punishment. The middle group was the most supportive of capital punishment (84 percent) while the Pro-Life group was least supportive (75 percent). The pro-choice group was in between with 81 percent supporting capital punishment.

The present study seeks to revisit the relationship between attitudes towards abortion and capital punishment. More specifically, the concern is the relationship between antiabortion attitudes and capital punishment. McCutcheon (1987) showed that pro-life values predicted opposition to discretionary as well as non-discretionary abortion, but its relationship to capital punishment was not examined. McCutcheon also showed that sexual conservatism predicted opposition to discretionary abortion only. Although sexual conservatism was measured as ones attitude towards premarital sex, I will argue that it is also a form of responsibility. That is, one must refrain from sex and be sexually responsible. Capital punishment is something that also relates to the value of responsibility, that is, the criminal must take responsibility for his or her actions. In addition, McCutcheon (1987) classified those who were Pro-life as those who opposed abortion in the case of rape while Hertel's (1994) Pro-Life group consisted of anyone that opposed abortion in just one of the cases of discretionary abortion.

Of the three "hard" cases, rape is clearest to the respondent and in a unique way the most indicative of a high value of life. It is entirely plausible that people could have opposed abortion in the case of the mother's health because they perceived that the mother was in bad health to begin with and the mother should be punished. Likewise, for the case of fetal defect, it could be perceived as a something that isn't major such as Down syndrome. Furthermore, Hertel was primarily looking at those who were pro-choice and pro-life and excluded the middle group from analysis.

Given the above, to revisit the relationship between antiabortion attitudes and capital punishment, a questionnaire was designed to tap two types of antiabortion attitudes: absolutist, that is, opposing abortion in all cases with the exception of saving the life of the mother; and conservative, that is, opposing abortion in all cases with the exception of saving the life of the mother as well as rape. The study was designed to address the following research question and hypothesis.

RQ: Is there a relationship between anti-abortion attitudes and capital punishment?

H: Those with an absolutist pro-life stance will oppose capital punishment while those with a conservative pro-life stance will support capital punishment.

The underlying rationale for this hypothesis is as follows: Absolutists oppose ending life for all reasons, while conservatives are willing to make exceptions if they feel one is not responsible.

METHOD

The study used convenience sample of students attending a major research university in the Pacific Northwest, as well as adults who were sampled through the network of the coworkers and friends of the author's family. A total of 100 surveys were collected, but 20 were discarded due to response error. The total useable sample included 80 respondents (37 males and 43 females). Forty of the 80 respondents were between the ages of 18 to 22. The remainder were 23 or older. The sample is not meant to be representative of the United States population in order to generalize findings. Instead, we were interested in understanding relationships between various attitudes towards life and death issues.

In addition to demographic variables such as age and sex, respondents were asked about their attitudes towards the legality of abortion and capital punishment as well as why those attitudes were held. Data were analyzed using a computer statistical program called Stata. Various statistics such as correlation, t-test, and chi-square were examined. Also, because when people grow older their ideological ideas tend to be more crystallized (Sears 1986), the analyses of the present study will compare the attitudes of respondents who are over and under the age of 22 (23 and up versus 22 and under).

RESULTS

The research question is whether or not there is a relationship between anti-abortion attitudes and capital punishment. In general the answer is yes. A Pearson correlation test was performed to measure the relationship between attitudes toward capital punishment and anti-abortion attitudes (absolutist versus conservative). When those that are pro-choice are included in the analysis, in addition to those that are pro-life, there is no difference between attitudes toward abortion and capital punishment ($r = .08$, $p > .05$). When those that are pro-life are analyzed separately, the correlation, though seemingly stronger is not significant either ($r = -.44$, $p > .05$). However, when age is considered, a different picture emerges. Among pro-life (both absolutist and conservative) respondents who are 23 or older, the correlation between the anti-abortion and capital punishment attitudes is $-.81$ ($p < .01$). By way of contrast, among those under the age of 23, the correlation is $.07$ ($p > .05$). These findings suggest that, when age is controlled (> 23), the more absolutist one's anti-abortion attitude is, the more one will oppose capital punishment. On the other hand, this is not true among those who are 22 or younger. The hypothesis, which posits that those with an absolutist pro-life stance will oppose capital punishment while those with a conservative pro-life stance will support capital punishment, is then, partially supported.

A t-test was performed to compare absolutist (mean = 2.86) and conservative pro-life stands (mean = 1.69) on capital punishment. The difference of means is not statistically different ($t = 2.08$, $p > .05$). However, for respondents who are over the age of 22 (including 23 and older), absolutists are more likely to oppose capital punishment than conservatives. For this group, the means for opposing capital punishment are 3.50 and 1.29, respectively ($t = 4.18$; $p < .01$). By

contrast, the t-test statistics turned out insignificant ($t = -.17$; $p > .05$) for those with who are 22 years or younger and hold absolutist and conservative pro-life stands in terms of attitudes toward capital punishment. Therefore, this hypothesis is supported among the respondents who are 23 years or older.

Additional analyses were performed to further examine the differences among abortion opponents. Absolutists and conservatives were compared to examine differences in their reasons for opposing abortion. In addition to surveying the respondents' attitude towards the legality of abortion, a separate question asked respondents why they opposed abortion. Possible responses included: 1) it was taking of a human life; 2) the mother must take responsibility for the child; and, 3) abortion is against God's will. Respondents checked all reasons that were relevant to their abortion opposition.

The results were recoded into a variable that isolated all responses into two groups: one group that included abortion was against God's will and another group that opposed abortion for reasons other than abortion was against God's will. A cross tabulation and Fisher's exact test was used to compare differences between the groups to the absolutist and conservative view on abortion. The results showed that those who opposed abortion because it is against God's will were more likely take an absolutist stance on abortion

Table 1. Tabulation of anti-abortion attitude compared to whether or not it is against the will of God

	No	Yes	Total
Absolutist	0	7	7
Conservative	7	6	13
Total	7	13	20

Fisher's exact test $p < .05$

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The findings show support for the notion that there are two types of abortion opponents. Among those 23 and over, those that have an absolutist opposition to abortion are more likely to oppose capital punishment while those that oppose abortion in discretionary circumstances only are more likely to support capital punishment. In addition, those that have an absolutist opposition to abortion are more likely to hold their opinion because it is against God's will while those that oppose it in "soft" cases only are more likely to oppose abortion because the mother must take responsibility for the child. While previous studies distinguished between who opposes abortion, this study had a direct, separate question asking *why* respondents opposed abortion.

The main weakness of the study is the size and representation of the sample. Although approximately half of the public opposes abortion (Cook et al 1992), only one quarter of the sample opposed legal abortion. Part of the reason for the low percentage of those that were pro-life is because those surveys with response error were more likely to be from those that opposed abortion. The reason is that there was a separate question asking those to check all reasons why they opposed abortion and to rank those reasons. This did not prove to be user-friendly to some respondents and therefore those that were pro-life were more likely to be left out of the survey.

In addition to a small size, the sample is also not representative. Although this is less of an issue because the researcher is interested in understanding the relationships among attitudes rather than who holds attitudes, it is still a factor because certain demographics have different attitude structures and relationships. For example, there is a correlation between abortion and capital

punishment among Catholics, but there is no relationship among evangelicals (Perl and McClintock 2001).

Future studies may wish to use a larger sample or use a major data set such as the General Social Survey. Using the GSS would allow researchers to obtain a nationally representative sample and further examine the relationship between antiabortion attitudes and capital punishment. The main weakness with such a study, however, is that the GSS does not have a separate question that asks respondents why they oppose abortion.

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