

Article

Expanding the Spectrum of Attitudes Toward the Death Penalty: How Nondichotomous Response Options Affect Our Understandings of Death Penalty Attitudes

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Abstract

Overall, studies show that the majority of Americans support the use of the death penalty for murderers; however, few studies have investigated response patterns to death penalty survey questions that offer more than yes/no response options. Without a realistic understanding of Americans' attitudes, the existence of this controversial legislation may hinge on inaccurate depictions of public opinion. The current study utilizes a college sample of students from a southern university ($N = 775$, average age 22) to investigate how nondichotomous response options affect our understandings of death penalty attitudes. Using independent variables that are commonly found in quantitative studies about death penalty attitudes (i.e., religiosity, biblical literalism, political attitudes, race, gender, age, southern region) as well as independent variables less commonly seen in death penalty studies (i.e., feminist identity, and student-specific variables: grade point average, freshman status, high school size, and sociology major/minor), ordinary least squares and logistic regression results indicate that examining death penalty support with nondichotomous response options reveals more nuanced results when compared to examinations of death penalty that use dichotomous response options. Policy implications are discussed.

Keywords

death penalty attitudes, religion, feminism, political beliefs, college students

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The death penalty remains one of the most controversial issues in the U.S. legislation (Bohm, 2012). The decision of whether to take one's life for acts of wrongdoing has been widely debated for nearly a century, with the bulk of the argument coming within the last 50 years (Bowers, 1993; Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000). There are a variety of ways to study capital punishment, but one method that has seen much growth over the last half century is public opinion research. The results of past public opinion studies suggest that many factors affect attitudes toward capital punishment including religiosity, political views, gender, race, income, education level, and marital status (e.g., Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000). Although past research has provided important contributions to our understandings of death penalty support, the bulk of this literature fails to adequately explore nondichotomous responses to survey questions about the death penalty but rather focuses almost exclusively on analyses of yes/no questions. As a result, a critical aspect of vital information is missing from research that has contributed to the decisions behind abolishing and reinstating the most severe form of punishment possible. To better capture an accurate representation of public opinions about capital punishment, the current study investigates how nondichotomous response options affect our understandings of death penalty attitudes. In addition, the current study expands upon prior work by utilizing a college sample and examining independent variables less commonly seen in death penalty studies to allow for a wide range of investigation of predictors of death penalty support.

Public Opinion and the Death Penalty in the United States

Many researchers have acknowledged the power of public opinion and its link to death penalty policies (e.g., Burstein, 2003; McGarrell & Sandys, 1996). Indeed, Sharp (1999) notes that public opinion can have a considerable effect on policy initiatives, especially in the case of laws and policies about capital punishment. Since *Trop v. Dulles* (1958), courts, legislators, and governors in the United States have relied heavily on evidence of public support of the death penalty when making decisions about capital punishment (McGarrell & Sandys, 1996). For example, in two of the most impactful Supreme Court cases involving the constitutionality of capital punishment, public opinions about the death penalty were cited as justifications to uphold the Supreme Court's decisions in both *Furman v. Georgia* (1972) and *Gregg v. Georgia* (1976). To be sure, the U.S. Supreme Court has openly acknowledged public opinion as a legitimate reason for ruling on the constitutional grounds of the death penalty under the Eighth Amendment (Finckenauer, 1988; *Furman v. Georgia*, 1972; *Gregg v. Georgia*, 1976; *Roper v. Simmons*, 2005). As a result, public opinion evidence has had a clear impact on the existence of the death penalty in the United States in the past.

Measuring Death Penalty Attitudes in the United States Today

With the link between public opinion and death penalty policies established in past Supreme Court cases, the accuracy of measuring death penalty attitudes is paramount. To understand attitudes toward the death penalty, researchers examine responses to scenarios and attitudinal surveys. Studies that investigate responses to scenarios and vignettes typically show that attitudes toward capital punishment depend largely on the elements of the case including aggravating factors (e.g., cruelty and brutality of murder) and mitigating factors (e.g., mental health disorders or provocation; Durham, Elrod, & Kinkade, 1996; Falco & Freiburger, 2011; O'Neil, Patry, & Penrod, 2004). Further, scenario-based research shows that the bulk of respondents have both positive and negative views about the use of a capital sentence (Falco & Freiburger, 2011). Dabney, McSkimming, and Berg (2002) find that thinking about the death penalty from a variety of different perspectives (e.g., as a parent, sibling, spouse) affects capital punishment support. In addition, evidence from Durham, Elrod, and Kinkade (1996) suggests that respondents have a broad range of attitudes toward the

death penalty. For example, although results from the Gallup poll showed high levels of death penalty support at the time (80%), Durham, Elrod, and Kinkade (1996) found that respondents had lower levels of death penalty support (60.8%) overall; however, respondents reported extremely high death penalty support (upward of 90%) in response to some scenarios.

Studies of attitudinal surveys (which almost exclusively offer yes/no response options) show that a majority of the adult American population supports capital punishment (Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; Jones, 2013; Lambert, Clarke, & Lambert, 2004; Murray, 2003; O'Neil, Patry, & Penrod, 2004; Soss, Langbein, & Metelko, 2003; Unnever & Cullen, 2007a, 2007b). However, there is a fundamental problem that exists among much public opinion research regarding the death penalty: typical survey questions are too simple and therefore, analyses of them are misleading (Bohm, 2007; Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; Jones, 1994). To be sure, the common justifications for handing out a death sentence may rely on oversimplified notions (measured through yes/no responses in polls) of opinions of the death penalty and its application (Murray, 2003). As a result, a more sophisticated measure of attitudes toward capital punishment for murder is needed so that our laws can more accurately reflect public opinion, which may in turn affect the overall status of the death penalty in the United States.

According to Vollum, Longmire, and Buffington-Vollum (2004), many individuals who lack confidence in a death sentence and support a moratorium on its use still favor the use of the death penalty. This, in large part, suggests that death penalty support may be largely "value expressive," which suggests that rather than a simple "yes" or "no," there may be more categories of death penalty support that should be further explored. For example, Unnever, Cullen, and Roberts (2005) show that there is a contingent of people (nearly 33%) who do not strongly support the death penalty, in addition to others who have weakly held views that are supportive of a capital sentence. This suggests that more than one third of the American public do not actually "favor" the death penalty. In other words "overwhelming support" for capital punishment is likely a misnomer and more sophisticated measures that allow for such nuances may provide a more adequate picture of death penalty support. Overall, several scholars, including Lambert and associates (2004), Cullen and colleagues (2000), and Unnever, Cullen, and Roberts (2005), have adequately demonstrated that public opinion regarding the death penalty is simply not a yes or no decision for most people. Additional studies show that offering alternatives to the death penalty such as "life without parole" in survey analyses allows for further nuance in understanding capital punishment support (Bowers, 1993; Durham, Elrod, & Kinkade, 1996; Gross, 1997; Kubiak & Allen, 2011; Unnever & Cullen, 2005). As a result, it is imperative that we begin to move beyond dichotomous yes/no response options and expand the spectrum of attitudes toward the death penalty.

Expanding the Spectrum of Attitudes Toward the Death Penalty to Nondichotomous Response Options

With an established link between public opinion and death penalty policies (e.g., Burstein, 2003; McGarrell & Sandys, 1996; Sharp, 1999), it is essential that we understand the full spectrum of attitudes toward the death penalty. Put another way, if public opinion can have a strong effect on public policy, then a situation where public policies are supported based on an inaccurate picture of public opinion can be particularly damaging. In essence, if we continue to interpret support of capital punishment based on public opinion polls that do not adequately represent the spectrum of death penalty attitudes, this could lead to higher correctional administrative costs, the execution of innocent people, and other devastating outcomes. Thus, more research utilizing nondichotomous response options to understand death penalty attitudes is necessary to prevent the further dissemination of misinformation.

Other Factors Affecting Death Penalty Support

Past studies have documented several characteristics that may be associated with attitudes toward the death penalty. These characteristics can be divided into three groups: beliefs (religiosity, political attitudes, feminist identity), sociodemographics (gender, race, age, southern region, gay/lesbian identity), and student-specific variables (freshmen, grade point average [GPA], college major, high school size).

Beliefs and Attitudes Associated With Attitudes Toward the Death Penalty

The relationship between religiosity and support for capital punishment has been studied in a variety of ways, including measures of church attendance, religious affiliation and denomination, biblical literalism, salience of religion in everyday life, religious ideology, perspectives about god, and religious fundamentalism (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Bader, Desmond, Mencken, & Johnson, 2010; Borg, 1997; Britt, 1998; Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; Grasmick, Cochran, Bursik, & Kimpel, 1993; Unnever, Cullen, & Bartkowski, 2006). There are mixed findings about religiosity and the death penalty; however overall, most studies show that those who are biblical literalists are more likely to support the death penalty than those who do not agree with literal interpretations of the bible (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Britt, 1998; Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; Grasmick, Cochran, Bursik, & Kimpel, 1993; Unnever & Cullen, 2006).

Another large body of research has shown that political beliefs are significantly linked to attitudes about capital punishment. Studies have repeatedly found that compared to those who identify as politically liberal, those who identify as politically conservative are more likely to favor the use of the death penalty (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Barkan & Cohn, 2010; Borg, 1997; Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; Stack, 2000; Unnever & Cullen, 2005, 2007a; Unnever, Cullen, & Fisher, 2005; Unnever, Cullen, & Roberts, 2005; Young, 1992). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that those who are politically conservative are likely to support the death penalty.

Feminist identity has also been linked to public opinion. For example, research indicates that those who identify as feminists are more egalitarian, more liberal, less traditional, less racist, and more sympathetic toward the disadvantaged (Conover, 1988). Some researchers have also investigated the relationship between death penalty support and feminism (Cochran & Sanders, 2009; Cruikshank, 1999; Stinchcombe et al., 1980). In their exploratory study, Cochran and Sanders (2009) examined feminist consciousness as it relates to the gender gap in death penalty support; however, they found that the gender gap in death penalty support could not be explained by traditional versus feminist gender norms and gender roles. Even so, limited past research suggests that feminist identity and beliefs may be linked to death penalty attitudes (Pope, 2002).

Relationships Among Political, Feminist, and Religious Beliefs

Although there may be evidence to support the individual ways that political, feminist, and religious belief systems relate to attitudes toward the death penalty, it is also important to recognize the relationships among these beliefs. Indeed, research indicates that there may be complex interrelationships between attitudes toward politically motivated topics and religious, feminist, and political beliefs. For example, Brody and Lawless (2003) found that self-designated liberals were more likely than self-designated conservatives to support equality for women in social, economic, and political institutions (i.e., the “feminist agenda”) and were less likely to attend church. In the United States, the Republican (conservative) party has defined itself as “antifeminist,” and the antifeminist groups (many of which are religious in nature) have rallied to combat the laws and policies directed toward feminist goals (Young & Cross, 2003, p. 207). Indeed, studies show that those who identify with

feminism are less likely to have politically conservative beliefs compared to nonfeminists (Cowan, Mestlin, & Masek, 1992; Jackson, Fleury, & Lewandowski, 1996; Liss, O'Connor, Morosky, & Crawford, 2001; Roy, Weibust, & Miller, 2007). Thus, "feminism" may be a strong component of a liberal political ideology and both may be related to attitudes toward the death penalty. Furthermore, biblical literalists have aligned themselves with the Republican (conservative) party (Layman, 2001; McDaniel & Ellison, 2008); thus, there may be an important relationship between conservative political ideology, biblical literalism, and attitudes toward the death penalty. Overall, the interactive quality of belief systems and attitudes suggests the need for understanding the interrelationships between multiple beliefs systems (i.e., political, feminist, and religious) and the ways they may affect attitudes toward the death penalty.

Sociodemographics and Attitudes Toward the Death Penalty

In regard to gender, most research shows that men tend to be more supportive of the death penalty compared to women (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Cochran & Sanders, 2009; Unnever & Cullen, 2005; Whitehead & Blankenship, 2000; Young, 1992). Additionally, those in the south are more supportive of the death penalty than those in other regions of the United States (Borg, 1997). Furthermore, Whites are more likely to support the death penalty when compared to African Americans (Soss, Langbein, & Metelko, 2003; Young, 1992) and Hispanic individuals (Zeisel & Gallup, 1989). Research also indicates that age is related to death penalty attitudes with younger individuals less likely to support the death penalty when compared to older adults (Stack, 2000). Finally, a recent study found that gay/lesbian identity may also be related to attitudes toward the death penalty (Worthen, Sharp, & Rodgers, 2012).

College Students

Although the vast majority of past studies about the death penalty have found that those with greater levels of education are less supportive of capital punishment (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Britt, 1998; Soss, Langbein, & Metelko, 2003), most researchers have not examined specific samples of those currently obtaining postsecondary education. Rather most studies investigate members of the general population who have likely already completed their educational training (e.g. Unnever & Cullen, 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2012). In fact, few studies have utilized college samples to investigate death penalty attitudes and those that do typically rely on small convenience samples (e.g. Baker, Lambert, & Jenkins, 2005; Bohm & Vogel, 2004; Jiang, Lambert, & Wang, 2007; Lambert & Clarke, 2001; Schadt & DeLisi, 2007; Vidmar & Dittenhoffer, 1981; Wright, Bohm, & Jamieson, 1995). Compared to general population samples, college student samples may be especially unique. For example, research investigating the influence of the experience of college on students shows that along with obvious improvements in educational attainment, students who attend college experience shifts in cultural, intellectual, political, social, and religious values (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Places of personal discovery, colleges offer a host of new experiences that contribute to shifts in lifestyle, attitudes, and exposure to new ideas that students experience as they arrive at their chosen institutions of higher learning (Gumprecht, 2003). Furthermore, moving away from home can serve as a catalyst for growth and change. Young adults who have previously lived at home under direct parental supervision now have the freedom to engage in new activities and free thinking. At the same time, college students with exposure to new ideas may begin to develop attitudes and beliefs that may coincide with their experiences in college.

College students were chosen for this research because they may represent the most "liberal" emerging generation of young people within society, and thus, they may also be a catalyst for change. Indeed, in a study of 2,508 randomly selected Americans, Brake (2010) found that education

level was significantly related to more liberal attitudes. Furthermore, the same study found that a college graduate is significantly less likely than a noncollege graduate to believe “the bible is the word of God” (Brake, 2010). If we want to ultimately understand attitudes toward capital punishment, examining “liberal-leaning” college populations may be one way to begin to work toward this goal. Indeed, Maggard and colleagues (2012) compared students to nonstudent community residents and found the former to be less supportive of capital punishment and more skeptical about its use than the latter. Thus, the current study takes the approach of understanding attitudes toward the death penalty among populations that may be among the most liberal and educated within a society since these individuals may very well be at the forefront of a movement toward changes in capital punishment laws and regulations.

Student-Specific Variables

In general, most researchers have not investigated student-specific characteristics as they are related to death penalty attitudes. However, several studies have examined student-specific variables as they are related to more “liberal” attitudes, a characteristic that has been found to be associated with less support for capital punishment as noted earlier. For example, freshmen (compared to upper-class men), those with lower GPAs, college students majoring in business and hard sciences (compared to those with academic majors in humanities and liberal arts such as sociology), and those from smaller high schools (compared to those from larger high schools) tend to be least liberal (Bierly, 1985; Larsen, Reed, & Hoffman, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Rey & Gibson, 1997; Thumin, 1972; Worthen, 2011). Thus, it may be important to consider how such student-specific characteristics affect attitudes toward the death penalty among college students.

Current Study

The majority of past studies have utilized insufficient measures of attitudes toward the death penalty, which can affect the status of the death penalty in society and, by extension, our justice system. Although we now know much more information about death penalty opinions today than at any other time in the history of death penalty public opinion polling (Bohm, 2012), future efforts must continue in the direction of more sophisticated instruments, with more refined polling options, more detailed questions, and a greater variety of respondents in order to properly assess these critical issues. Specifically, the current study offers three important contributions to the literature. First, this study investigates how nondichotomous response options affect our understandings of death penalty attitudes. Second, the current study uses a college sample to expand our understandings of death penalty support among educated liberal-leaning populations. Third, this study examines variables less commonly seen in death penalty studies (i.e., feminist identity, gay/lesbian/bisexual identity, and student-specific variables: GPA, freshman status, high school size, and sociology major/minor) and the interrelationships among belief systems to allow for a wide range of investigation of predictors of death penalty support. Overall, the uniqueness of the current study’s contributions may allow for important ways of understanding death penalty attitudes which may inform policy.

Method

Data and Participants

The data for this project were derived from anonymous paper-and-pencil surveys completed by undergraduate students enrolled in sociology classes at a large public university located in the southern United States. All instructors teaching sociology undergraduate courses at the university in the spring of 2010 were contacted by the researcher and asked whether they would allow the researcher

to come to their classes to ask students to participate in the survey during class time. Of the 29 instructors contacted, 24 agreed to participate.¹ During each of the 33 classroom visits, the researcher instructed students that participation was completely voluntary and that there were no incentives for students who completed the survey. Students were told that if they did not want to complete the survey, they could sit quietly and read while others completed the survey. The instructor was asked to leave the room while students completed the survey to reduce any potential biasing effects that might result from the presence of the instructor. The university from which the sample was drawn serves as the flagship university for all the students in the state. Flagship universities receive the largest share of higher education funding in their states and have been identified as highly influential toward the intellectual climate of the city where they are situated (Gumprecht, 2003). The university is located in what has been identified as a “typical college town” in Gumprecht’s (2007) research. College students made up 27% of the population of the city (29,931 of 110,478 residents were students at the time of data collection), which suggests a potentially high level of college influence on the city’s culture (Gumprecht, 2003).

Measurement of Variables

Dependent variable. Death penalty support was estimated with responses to the following statement: “Are you in favor of the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?” In order to best understand death penalty attitudes, two estimates of death penalty support were examined. For the ordinary least square (OLS) regressions, death penalty support was estimated with four response options: (1) Never under any circumstances, (2) Only under certain extreme circumstances, (3) Sometimes under certain circumstances, and (4) Always under any circumstances. A binary (0/1) variable to measure death penalty support was created in order to conduct logistic regression analyses. As a result, the response options were collapsed to create a dichotomous variable which was coded as (0) for those responding with options 1 or 2 and (1) for those responding with options 3 or 4 for the models using logistic regression. Estimating death penalty support through both dichotomous and nondichotomous measures allows for better understanding of death penalty attitudes.

Independent variables: Belief systems. Conservative political beliefs were measured by student responses to the following question: “Which of the following describes you best?” Response options were (1) extremely liberal, (2) liberal, (3) moderate, (4) conservative, and (5) extremely conservative. Higher scores indicate alignment with conservative political beliefs.

Nonfeminist identity was constructed from the following question: “Do you think of yourself as a feminist?” The response options were as follows: (1) Yes, I consider myself to be a strong feminist; (2) Yes, I consider myself to be a feminist; (3) No, I do not consider myself to be a feminist; and (4) No, I do not consider myself to be a feminist and I disagree with feminism. Higher scores indicate alignment with nonfeminist beliefs.

The *Religiosity Scale* ($\alpha = .76$; 61% variance explained) included four questions about general religiousness and church attendance as well as parental general religiousness and church attendance. This scale was created as a combined measure of these questions due to the results of the principal component factor (PCF) analysis (see Appendix for results of the PCF analysis and individual components of the *Religiosity Scale*). Although an exact number of factors was not requested in the PCF analysis, only one factor with an eigenvalue greater than 1 was revealed (eigenvalue 2.44). Higher scores on the *Religiosity Scale* indicated higher levels of religiosity. The range for the *Religiosity Scale* was 4–18 and the mean for the total sample was 11.71 (standard deviation 3.66).

Biblical literalism was a dichotomous variable estimated through responses to the following question: “Which of these statements comes closest to describing your current feelings about the Bible?” The original survey question response options were as follows: (1) The Bible is the actual

word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; (2) The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally; (3) The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men; and (4) None of these statements describe my feelings about the Bible. For the purpose of analyses in the current project, the response options were collapsed to create a dichotomous variable, biblical literalism, which was coded as (1) for those responding with option 1 and (0) for those responding with option 2, 3, or 4.

Control variables. Several sociodemographic controls were also utilized for this study. Respondents were asked their sex: male or female, how they identified: homosexual (gay/lesbian), bisexual, or heterosexual², and their racial category. Non-White was coded as (1) for those responding with “African American/Black,” “Asian American/Pacific Islander,” “Native American/Alaskan Native,” or “Other.” Age was constructed through asking respondents their birth date. Grew up in the south was a dichotomous variable constructed from those answering yes to the question, “Would you say that you grew up in the southern United States?”

Student-specific variables were also utilized as control variables. Freshman was coded as (1) for freshmen; all others were coded as (0). Current GPA response options were (1) Less than 2.0, (2) 2.0–2.49, (3) 2.5–2.9, (4) 3.0–3.49, and (5) 3.5–4.0. Respondents were also asked “Are you currently majoring in sociology?” and were coded as (1) for Sociology Major or Minor if they responded with “Yes, I am a sociology major” or “No, but I am minoring in sociology”; all others were coded as (0).

Total high school size response options were (1) Less than 100 students, (2) 100–300 students, (3) 301–500 students, (4) 501–1,000 students, and (5) More than 1,000 students.

Method of Analysis

In the current study, five methods were employed to understand death penalty attitudes. First, four groups were created based on the four different available response categories to the death penalty question. This resulted in the following death penalty support category groups: “never support” group ($N = 120$), “only under extreme circumstances” group ($N = 193$), “sometimes support” group ($N = 378$), and “always support” group ($N = 135$). The t -tests were conducted to compare the four death penalty support category groups to one another as they varied by the belief system variables: conservative political beliefs, nonfeminist identity, *Religiosity Scale*, and biblical literalism (results discussed subsequently, see Table 1). Second, the belief system variables were transformed into standardized z -scores with a range of 0–1 ($z = x - \mu/\sigma$) in Figure 1 to allow for easy comparisons between four death penalty support category groups to one another as they varied by the belief system variables. Third, correlations between the variables were examined in Table 2. Fourth, death penalty support was investigated using both OLS and logistic regressions in Table 3 to allow for a side-by-side comparison of results using two types of measurement of death penalty support. In the OLS regressions, the measure of death penalty support utilized all four points available as response options (*never support*, *only under extreme circumstances*, *sometimes support*, and *always support*), while in the logistic regressions, death penalty support was collapsed into a 0/1 binary variable. For both the OLS and logistic regressions, Model 1 includes belief system variables, sociodemographics, and student-specific controls. Model 2 includes the addition of belief system interaction effects by multiplying each of the four belief system variables by one another to create six interaction effects. The final method of analysis in Table 4 utilized logistic regression and the four death penalty support category groups. These logistic regression models estimate the odds of belonging to one group as compared to the odds of belonging to all other three groups. For example, in the first model, the odds of belonging to the never support group (coded as 1) are compared to the odds of belonging to all other three groups (coded as 0 for this model). For all four models in Table 4, belief system variables, sociodemographics, and student-specific controls were entered simultaneously.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Variables for Total Sample and by Category of Death Penalty Support With t-Test Results.

	Total Sample (N = 775)			Never Support (N = 120)		Only Under Extreme Circumstances (N = 193)		Sometimes Support (N = 378)		Always Support (N = 135)	
	Range	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Death penalty support	1–4	2.64	0.92	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Binary death penalty support	0–1	0.62	0.49	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Belief system variables											
Conservative political beliefs	1–5	3.02	0.93	2.57 ^{bcd}	1.03	2.92 ^{acd}	0.85	3.11 ^{abd}	0.87	3.31 ^{abc}	0.90
Nonfeminist identity	1–4	2.64	0.64	2.48 ^{cd}	0.69	2.55 ^{cd}	0.60	2.70 ^{ab}	0.63	2.77 ^{ab}	0.64
Religiosity Scale	4–18	11.71	3.66	11.73	3.89	11.91	3.50	11.65	3.71	11.53	3.48
Biblical literalism	0–1	0.20	0.40	0.15	0.36	0.21	0.41	0.20	0.40	0.24	0.43
Sociodemographic variables											
Female	0–1	0.61	0.49	0.67	0.47	0.71	0.46	0.56	0.50	0.54	0.50
Non-White	0–1	0.22	0.41	0.27	0.44	0.22	0.42	0.21	0.41	0.18	0.38
Age	18–59	21.82	3.51	21.92	4.29	21.77	3.03	21.87	3.58	21.60	3.17
Gay/lesbian ²	0–1	0.03	0.18	0.03	0.18	0.04	0.20	0.03	0.17	0.04	0.19
Bisexual ²	0–1	0.01	0.12	0.02	0.13	0.02	0.14	0.01	0.07	0.03	0.17
Grew up in the south	0–1	0.81	0.39	0.75	0.43	0.81	0.40	0.82	0.39	0.84	0.36
Student-specific variables											
Freshman	0–1	0.20	0.40	0.23	0.42	0.18	0.38	0.20	0.40	0.23	0.42
Current GPA (< 2.0, 2.0–2.49, 2.5–2.9, 3.0–3.49, 3.5–4.0)	1–5	3.78	0.95	3.93	0.98	3.83	1.02	3.72	0.93	3.72	0.84
Sociology major or minor	0–1	0.45	0.50	0.41	0.49	0.44	0.50	0.46	0.50	0.48	0.50
Total high school size (<100, 100–300, 301–500, 501–1,000, 1,000+ students)	1–5	3.75	1.31	3.88	1.33	3.67	1.28	3.77	1.30	3.66	1.36

Note. GPA = grade point average; SD = standard deviation. The t-test results: means are different from ^anever support, ^bonly under extreme circumstances, ^csometimes support, and ^dalways support at the $p < .05$ level.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics of the total sample ($n = 775$) and by death penalty support category groups for all variables used in the models. In Table 1, the first thing to notice is that the mean for 1–4 measure of death penalty support for the total sample is 2.64 and the mean for the 0/1 measure of death penalty support for the total sample is .62, indicating that a majority of individuals support the death penalty, although not a substantial majority. For the belief system variables, the total sample was slightly conservatively leaning (mean = 3.02; range 1–5), slightly nonfeminist leaning (mean = 2.64; range 1–4), moderately religious (mean = 11.71; range 4–18), and most were

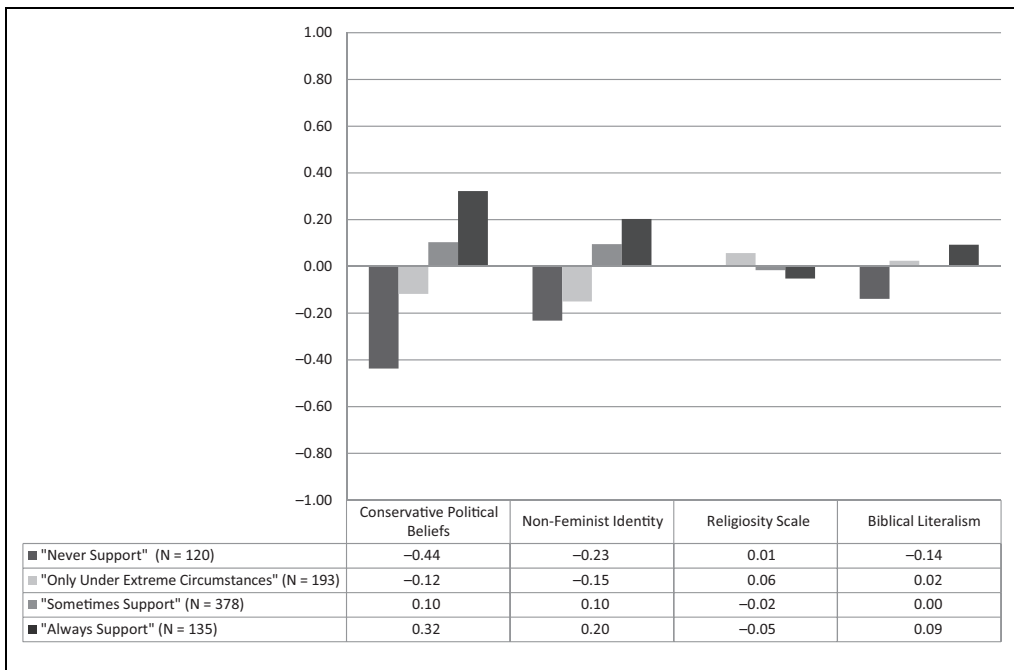


Figure 1. Z-scores of belief system variables by death penalty support category group.

not biblical literalists (mean = 0.20; range 0–1). For the sociodemographics, the total sample was 61% female, 78% White, 81% grew up in the south, and the average age of respondents was about 22. A small percentage reported nonheterosexual identities (3% gay/lesbian and 1% bisexual); thus, these variables were removed from the final regression models. For the student-specific variables, the total sample was 20% freshmen, 45% were sociology majors/minors, most reported being from a relatively large high school, and most reported relatively high GPAs.

In Table 1, the four death penalty support category groups were compared to one another using *t*-tests in order to discover whether there were any statistically significant differences between the death penalty support category groups and the belief system variables. The *t*-test results show that the four groups are significantly different from one another in the conservative political beliefs and nonfeminist identity measures as indicated by the a, b, c, and d superscripts in Table 1. For example, the never support group has significantly lower mean scores on the conservative political beliefs measure when compared to all three other groups and significantly lower mean scores on the non-feminist identity measure when compared to the sometimes support and always support groups. The only under extreme circumstances group follows a similar pattern to the never support group. There were no statistically significant differences between the four death penalty support category groups and the *Religiosity Scale* or biblical literalism measure.

In Figure 1, the belief system variables were transformed into z-scores with a range of 0–1 to allow for easy comparisons between the death penalty support category groups. A visual inspection of these findings is revealing. It is clear that the four death penalty support category groups are quite different from one another in their beliefs. The most extreme differences can be found in the conservative political beliefs measure that shows that the never support group is well below zero ($z = -.44$) while the always support group is well above zero ($z = .32$). The other two groups follow similar patterns, although not as extreme with the only under extreme circumstances group and sometimes support group nearly inverse opposites of one another ($z = -.12$ and $z = .10$).

Table 2. Correlations of Variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Binary death penalty sup.	—	.20***	.15***	-.03	.03	-.14***	-.04	-.00	-.02	-.03	.05	.01	-.07*	.04	-.00
1. Death penalty support	—	.24***	.15***	-.03	.03	-.14***	-.04	-.00	-.02	-.03	.05	.01	-.07*	.04	-.00
2. Conservative beliefs	.15***	—	.15***	.30***	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
3. Nonfeminist identity	.39***	.26***	.14***	.08*	.01	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
4. Religiosity Scale	.05	.26***	.14***	.08*	.08*	.04	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
5. Biblical literalism	-.12**	-.04	-.30***	.05	.08*	.04	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
6. Female	-.06	-.14***	-.07*	.05	.08*	.04	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
7. Non-White	-.02	-.17***	-.05	-.16***	-.09*	-.07*	.04	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
8. Age	-.01	-.14***	-.08*	-.06	-.08*	-.09*	.05	.03	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
9. Gay/lesbian	.00	-.15***	-.11**	-.08*	-.04	-.02	-.06	.04	-.02	—	—	—	—	—	—
10. Bisexual	.06	.03	.03	.06	.03	.07	-.02	-.04	.04	.01	—	—	—	—	—
11. Grew up in the south	.01	.13***	.07*	.16***	.11**	.01	-.05	-.37***	-.03	-.06	.04	—	—	—	—
12. Freshman	-.08*	.03	-.06	.07*	-.05	.12***	-.14***	-.06	-.02	.03	-.03	.04	—	—	—
13. Current GPA	.05	-.04	-.00	-.07*	-.02	-.03	.02	.15***	.05	-.03	.01	-.28***	-.05	—	—
14. Sociology major/minor	-.03	-.08*	-.08*	-.08*	-.09*	.01	-.02	-.05	-.02	-.02	-.04	.04	.04	-.06	—
15. Total high school size	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note. GPA = grade point average.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Side-by-Side Comparison of OLS and Logistic Regression Results Estimating Support of Death Penalty With Interaction Effects.

	OLS Regression Results Death Penalty Support (1–4)		Logistic Regression Results Death Penalty Support (0–1)					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1			Model 2		
			β	(SE)	Odds Ratio	β	(SE)	Odds Ratio
Belief system variables								
Conservative political beliefs	.28***	.22	.57	.10	1.76***	.45	.53	1.56
Nonfeminist identity	-.10	-.36	-.25	.14	.78	-.61	.50	.55
Religiosity Scale	-.03**	-.05	-.06	.02	.94*	-.16	.14	.85
Biblical literalism	.01	-.69	-.08	.22	.92	-1.67	1.53	.19
Belief system interaction effects								
Conservative Political \times Non-Feminist		.04				.02	.15	1.02
Conservative Political \times Religiosity Scale		-.00				.01	.03	1.01
Conservative Political \times Biblical Literalism		.03				-.11	.28	.90
Nonfeminist \times Religiosity Scale		.01				.02	.04	1.02
Nonfeminist \times Biblical Literalism		.10				.14	.37	1.15
Religiosity Scale \times Biblical Literalism		.03				.12	.07	1.12
Sociodemographic controls								
Female	-.13	-.14	-.41	.18	.67*	-.42	.18	.66*
Non-White	-.06	.07	-.09	.20	.92	-.11	.20	.89
Age	-.01	-.00	.00	.02	1.00	.01	.03	1.01
Grew up in the south	.13	.14	.27	.20	1.31	.30	.20	1.34
Student-specific controls								
Freshman	-.05	-.05	-.04	.22	.96	-.07	.22	.94
Current GPA	-.07	-.06	-.14	.09	.87	-.15	.09	.86
Sociology major or minor	.08	.07	.18	.17	1.19	.18	.17	1.19
Total high school size	-.01	-.01	.03	.06	1.04	.03	.06	1.03
	$R^2 = .10$	$R^2 = .11$	Log likelihood = -460.59			Log likelihood = -458.39		

Note. GPA = grade point average; OLS = ordinary least squares; SE = standard error.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

respectively). The nonfeminist identity measure is also revealing with the never support group well below zero ($z = -.23$) and the always support group well above zero ($z = .20$). Differences in the *Religiosity Scale* are less pronounced but show that the only under extreme circumstances group is a close to inverse opposite of the always support group ($z = .06$ and $z = -.05$, respectively). Extreme differences between the biblical literalism measure are evident in comparisons between the never support group and the always support group ($z = -.14$ and $z = .09$, respectively).

Table 2 shows the correlations between all the variables used in the models. Both the binary and four-category measures of death penalty support are positively and significantly related to conservative political beliefs and nonfeminist identity. In contrast, both death penalty measures are negatively related to being female and current GPA. There are also many significant relationships found

Table 4. Logistic Regression Results Estimating Support of Death Penalty by Category of Death Penalty Support.

	Never Support			Only Under Extreme Circumstances			Sometimes Support			Always Support		
	β	(SE)	Odds Ratio	β	(SE)	Odds Ratio	β	(SE)	Odds Ratio	β	(SE)	Odds Ratio
Belief system variables												
Conservative political beliefs	-.80	.14	.45***	-.18	.11	.84	.25	.09	1.28**	.48	.13	1.62***
Nonfeminist identity	.18	.18	1.20	.17	.15	1.19	-.13	.13	.88	-.21	.19	.81
Religiosity Scale	.08	.03	1.09*	.02	.03	1.01	-.02	.02	.99	-.06	.03	.94
Biblical literalism	-.24	.35	.79	.22	.24	1.24	-.14	.21	.87	.07	.26	1.07
Sociodemographic controls												
Female	.16	.24	1.17	.44	.20	1.56*	-.22	.17	.80	-.22	.22	.80
Non-White	.19	.26	1.21	.00	.22	1.00	-.00	.19	1.00	-.12	.27	.89
Age	.01	.03	1.01	-.02	.03	.98	.02	.02	1.02	-.04	.04	.96
Grew up in the south	-.38	.26	.68	-.08	.22	.93	.11	.19	1.12	.21	.27	1.23
Student-specific controls												
Freshman	.44	.29	1.56	-.29	.25	.75	-.11	.21	.90	.09	.28	1.09
Current GPA	.20	.12	1.22	.04	.10	1.05	-.08	.08	.92	-.08	.11	.92
Sociology major or minor	-.10	.23	.91	-.17	.19	.84	.00	.16	1.00	.25	.22	1.29
Total high school size	.05	.09	1.05	-.07	.07	.93	.06	.06	1.06	-.05	.08	.95
Log likelihood	-282.22			-392.85			-499.44			-315.76		

Note. GPA = grade point average; SE = standard error. Each model here estimates the odds of belonging to one group as compared to the odds of belonging to all other three groups. For example, in the first model, the odds of belonging to the "never support" group (coded as 1) are compared to the odds of belonging to all other three groups (coded as 0), and so forth.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

among the belief system variables. In fact, conservative political beliefs, nonfeminist identity, the *Religiosity Scale*, and the biblical literalism measure are positively and significantly related to one another. Such findings support the exploration of interaction effects among the belief system variables. See Table 2 for more correlations among the sociodemographics and student-specific controls.

Table 3 provides a side-by-side comparison of OLS and logistic regression results predicting support of the death penalty. In the OLS regression results, the measure of death penalty support utilized all four points available as response options. The OLS regression results in Table 3 show that conservative political beliefs are positively related to support of the death penalty, while religiosity is negatively related to death penalty support in Model 1. However, with the inclusion of the six belief system interaction effects in Model 2 (none of which are significantly related to death penalty support), neither conservative political beliefs nor the *Religiosity Scale* remains significant. Interestingly, neither feminist identity, biblical literalism, belief system interaction effects nor any of the controls were found to be significantly related to death penalty support in the OLS regression results.

In the logistic regressions, death penalty support was collapsed into a 0/1 binary variable. In Model 1, those reporting conservative political beliefs were .76 times more likely to support the death penalty. In contrast, those reporting higher levels of religiosity were .06 times less likely to support the death penalty. Being female is also significant, with women .33 times less likely than

men to support the death penalty. Interestingly in Model 2, none of the belief system variables nor the interaction effects are significant. In fact, the only significant predictor of death penalty support remaining in Model 2 is being female. As found in the OLS regressions, there were no significant results found for feminist identity, biblical literalism, the belief system interaction effects, and student-specific controls.

In Table 4, the four death penalty support category groups are compared. These logistic regression models estimate the odds of belonging to one group when compared to the odds of belonging to all other three groups. In the first model predicting the odds of membership in the never support death penalty support category group as compared to being in any of the other three groups (only under extreme circumstances, sometimes support, and always support), results show that those in the never support group were significantly less likely to be politically conservative and more likely to be religious. No other variables were significant in this model. In the second model, the odds of membership in the only under extreme circumstances group are compared to the odds of being in any of the other three groups (never support, sometimes support, and always support). Results show that being female significantly increases the odds of membership in the only under extreme circumstances group by .56 times. In the third model, more politically conservative beliefs increase the odds of belonging to the sometimes support group by .28 times, although no other results are significant in this model. A similar pattern emerges in the fourth model: more politically conservative beliefs increase the odds of belonging to the always support group by .62 times. None of the student-specific controls were found to be significant in any models in Table 4.

Discussion

Overall, the results from this study show that expanding the spectrum of attitudes toward the death penalty can provide us with a more nuanced understanding of capital punishment. As shown in the side-by-side comparison provided in Table 3, using all four points available as response options would lead us to believe that having conservative political beliefs is a robust predictor of death penalty support. However, if we examine the logistic regression results with a collapsed 0/1 measure of death penalty support, this would allow us to draw the conclusion that being female is a much more robust predictor of death penalty support. Furthermore, we can see that the four groups within the death penalty support categories differ significantly from one another, as shown in both Table 4 and Figure 1. Such findings suggest that to best understand death penalty support, we must critically examine the ways we are measuring attitudes toward capital punishment because results can vary depending on the way death penalty support is measured. Overall, this study provides a springboard for future researchers to continue to examine more sophisticated ways to measure attitudes toward capital punishment.

Specifically, the current study offers three significant contributions to the literature. First, conservative political beliefs emerged as a significant predictor of death penalty support, similar to past studies (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Barkan & Cohn, 2010; Borg, 1997; Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; Stack, 2000; Unnever & Cullen, 2005, 2007a; Unnever, Cullen, & Fisher, 2005; Unnever, Cullen, & Roberts, 2005; Young, 1992). However, the current study also found that closer alignment with conservative political beliefs is related to increasingly supportive attitudes toward the death penalty across four points of attitude assessment. This suggests that there is a spectrum of support for the death penalty that may vary by the spectrum of alignment with conservative political beliefs (this is visually evident in Figure 1).

Table 4 provides even more detailed findings. Specifically, belonging to the never support group is significantly negatively related to conservative political beliefs; however, having conservative political beliefs is unrelated to the next group of death penalty support: only under extreme circumstances. In contrast, having conservative political beliefs is positively and significantly related to the

next two groups of death penalty support (sometimes support and always support). This suggests that having conservative political beliefs may better explain some types of death penalty support than others. It could be that those in the only under extreme circumstances group are qualitatively different than those in the other three groups. For example, those who only support the death penalty in extreme cases may be more likely to consider a criminal's "deathworthiness" (Crocker, 1997), while conservative political beliefs may be less important to this group. According to Crocker (1997), the idea of deathworthiness is less entwined with a generalized conservative political stance and more focused on the defendant's character, culpability, record, and background, and the circumstances of the crime (p. 26). Although other more extreme attitudes (i.e. never support and always support) may be based mostly on political stances toward capital punishment, the only under extreme circumstances group may differ and perhaps factors such as deathworthiness (Crocker, 1997) may be more important than political beliefs for this group. Overall, it is clear that conservative political beliefs might help us understand some levels of death penalty support; however, it is likely that more factors are important to consider to fully understand the spectrum of death penalty attitudes.

The second contribution of this study is related to religiosity and biblical literalism. Past studies (e.g., Britt, 1998) of death penalty attitudes have utilized a variety of ways to measure religiosity (i.e., measures of church attendance, religious affiliation and denomination, biblical literalism, salience of religion in everyday life, religious ideology, perceptions of god, and religious fundamentalism), suggesting a complex relationship between death penalty support and religiosity. The current study provides an important contribution to the past literature. Although the mean values of religiosity and biblical literalism across the four groups of death penalty support were not significantly statistically different from one another (see Table 1), the regression models in Tables 3 and 4 revealed some interesting findings. Overall, biblical literalism was not significantly related to death penalty attitudes in the current study which is in stark opposition to past studies, which show that a literal interpretation of the Bible fosters support of the death penalty (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Britt, 1998; Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; Grasmick, Cochran, Bursik, & Kimpel, 1993). In contrast, the *Religiosity Scale* was negatively related to death penalty support in both the OLS and the logistic regression models in Table 3. This finding also differs from past studies that have found measures of religiosity that are positively related to death penalty support (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Unnever & Cullen, 2006).

Furthermore, Table 4 provides more detailed results. Specifically, belonging to the never support group is significantly positively related to the *Religiosity Scale* while not significantly related to belonging to any of the other three death penalty support groups. This suggests that higher levels of religiosity may best explain a complete lack of death penalty support but may be less helpful in understanding other types of death penalty attitudes. It may be that those that never support the death penalty are quite different than those in the other three groups. For example, those who never support the death penalty may be more likely to consider their religious beliefs when contemplating capital punishment and may even have qualitatively different perspectives about god. Bader and colleagues (2010) found that those who viewed god as "punishing" were significantly more likely to support the death penalty than those who viewed god as "loving." In addition, Unnever, Cullen, and Bartkowski (2006) found that Americans who had a close and personal loving relationship with god were significantly less likely to be in favor of capital punishment. Thus, it could be that those who have higher scores on the *Religiosity Scale* in the current study have different understandings of religiosity and god, which may be related to a lack of death penalty support. However, the *Religiosity Scale* in the current study was created from measures that differ from past studies and included measures of general religiousness, church attendance, and religiousness while growing up. As a result, the findings from the current study suggest that multiple conceptualizations of religiosity and religious beliefs may help us understand the spectrum of death penalty attitudes.

The third contribution of the current study is the significance of being female in relation to death penalty attitudes. In the current study, being female is only significantly related to death penalty attitudes in three models. In Table 3, being female is not significantly related to death penalty support in the OLS regression results, while being female is significantly negatively related to death penalty support in the two logistic regression models. This is significant because most researchers have found that men are significantly more supportive of the death penalty when compared to women (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Cochran & Sanders, 2009; Unnever & Cullen, 2005; Whitehead & Blankenship, 2000; Young, 1992). Such findings suggest that the way death penalty support is measured (either as binary 0/1 or on a spectrum with four categories of response options) affects the relationship between gender and death penalty attitudes.

Table 4 reveals additional findings related to gender. Specifically, being female is only significant in the model estimating the predictors of belonging to the only under extreme circumstances group. In fact, being female is the only significant variable in this model. This finding suggests that gender differences in death penalty support found in previous studies may not be adequately capturing the complex relationships between gender and death penalty attitudes. Women may be more likely than men to be in the only under extreme circumstances group rather than in the other three groups because women may be more likely to empathize with both the victim and the offender, resulting in attitudes toward the death penalty that consider the circumstances of the crime. Indeed, Unnever, Cullen, and Fisher (2005) found that empathetic Americans were significantly less likely to support the death penalty (see also Worthen, Sharp, & Rodgers, 2012). In addition, others have hypothesized that caring for others and a general altruistic perspective may also contribute to lower levels of death penalty support (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Unnever, Cullen, & Bartowski, 2006). Since women are socialized to be more caring, nurturing, and empathetic than men (Gilligan, 1982), they may also be less likely to support punitive sanctions (i.e., capital punishment). However, the current study suggests a more nuanced relationship between gender and death penalty attitudes. Specifically, the finding that women are more likely to be in the only under extreme circumstances suggests that women may carefully calculate and consider the circumstances of the crime, considering both the experiences of the offender and victim.

Overall, although none of our interaction effects were found to be significant, the current study provides important contributions to the literature regarding the relationships between death penalty support, conservative political beliefs, religiosity, and gender. In addition, the findings indicate that expanding the spectrum of death penalty support to include multiple attitudinal responses (as opposed to 0/1 binary response options) can allow for new understandings of capital punishment. Previous researchers have documented the fact that many individuals have weakly held views that are supportive of a capital sentence (Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; Lambert, Clarke, & Lambert, 2004; Unnever, Cullen, and Roberts 2005; Vollum, Longmire, & Buffington-Vollum, 2004). The current study further dissects the correlates of death penalty attitudes as they vary by the strength of support of capital punishment. Even so, this is a starting point, more work is needed that specifically investigates how feelings about deathworthiness (Crocker, 1997), multiple conceptualizations of religiosity and empathic care relate to the spectrum of death penalty attitudes.

Policy Implications

The current study's findings may inform capital punishment policy. First, offering a spectrum of response options (as opposed to a single dichotomous yes/no response option) can allow for more detailed understandings of death penalty attitudes. For example, by investigating a spectrum of response options, we find that the majority of our sample does not strongly support the death penalty. Such findings suggest that college student support for capital punishment is at best, moderate. As Unnever and Cullen (2005) and Unnever, Cullen, and Roberts (2005) indicate, those who hold their

views more weakly may be more likely to alter their opinions about the death penalty. Thus, “moderate” supporters of the death penalty may be more likely to change their attitudes and should certainly not be coded as “entirely supportive” of capital punishment (as done in studies using yes/no response options). Thus, policy makers should take into account that most do not strongly support the death penalty and recognize that is highly problematic to base capital punishment policies on findings that fail to accurately reflect the spectrum of death penalty attitudes.

Moreover, as Mallicoat and Radelet (2004) explain, the Supreme Court has used public opinion as a way to ascertain the evolving standards of decency argument (e.g., *Furman v. Georgia*, 1972). Further, the Court recently indicated a new willingness to review data generated from public opinion polls when establishing the constitutionality of assorted components related to capital punishment (Mallicoat & Radelet, 2004). Thus, the results of this study support a need for a reassessment of public opinion on the death penalty as well as the death penalty statutes. Much in the same way that the death penalty has been substantiated with public opinions, reevaluations of the death penalty statutes must accurately reflect public opinion through utilizing a spectrum of response options.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study offers some important contributions to the literature and to public policy; however, there are some limitations worth noting. First, the current study was based on a college student sample collected from students enrolled at one university in the south; thus, results may not be generalizable to other populations. Relatedly, the sample was gathered through recruitment from sociology courses and included a high proportion of sociology majors/minors; thus, it is unknown how students enrolled in different courses in different majors might respond to these questions. Second, the sample was overwhelmingly White, relatively young, and most were from the south; thus, the lack of diversity may also be a limitation of the current study. In addition, although Worthen, Sharp, and Rodgers (2012) make a case for including gay and lesbian identity in their exploratory study of death penalty attitudes, the small number of individuals in the current study that occupy this identity status forced us to remove these variables from the final regression models (although Table 2 shows that there are several significant relationships between gay/lesbian/bisexual identity and conservative beliefs, nonfeminist identity, religiosity, and biblical literalism). Future studies might incorporate larger studies with more diverse samples of college students from multiple universities, especially in light of existing research that underscores the significance of race and attitudes toward capital punishment (e.g. Bobo & Johnson, 2004; Cochran & Chamlin, 2006; Unnever & Cullen, 2007a, 2007b; Unnever, Cullen, & Jonson, 2008). In addition, future research might utilize survey questions that offer alternatives to the death penalty (e.g. “Life Without Parole” in Bowers, 1993; Durham, Elrod, & Kinkade, 1996; Gross, 1997; Kubiak & Allen, 2011; Unnever & Cullen, 2005; see also “Life Without Parole plus Restitution” in Dieter, 1997) and qualitative interviews (Dabney, McSkimming, & Berg, 2002), in order to best understand the current landscape of death penalty attitudes. Furthermore, the data set utilized here did not include a death penalty survey question with dichotomous “yes/no” response options; rather the four response options were collapsed for the sake of comparison. It is important to note that collapsing four options into two categories is not the same as an examination of responses to a survey question in which only two options are provided. Thus, future studies might utilize a comparison approach in which two surveys are given to similar or matched samples and the death penalty question is offered with dichotomous yes/no response options in one survey while the other survey includes four response options. Also, in the current study religiosity and biblical literalism were significantly correlated with one another; thus, future studies might further tease out the relationship between multiple measures of religion, religiosity, and biblical literalism to best understand these relationships. Relatedly, researchers could utilize Smith’s (1990) classification of religious denominations to best understand the relationship between

religious denominations such as Catholic, Protestant, and so on (including the nuances found in previous studies that offer measures of liberal/moderate protestant and evangelical/fundamentalist protestant, see Grasmick, Cochran, Bursik, & Kimpel, 1993; Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Young, 1992) and death penalty support. Finally, authoritarianism has been recently examined as a characteristic associated with attitudes toward the death penalty (Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Rodgers, 2012; Stack, 2003); thus, future research might incorporate measures of authoritarianism as they are related to death penalty attitudes.

Concluding Remarks

The death penalty is one of the most controversial policies in the contemporary U.S. society. Many studies have examined attitudes and characteristics as they relate to death penalty support, but most utilize insufficient measures that do little to firmly establish viewpoints among various groups. The current research adds to the literature by utilizing a spectrum of response options to offer a more accurate assessment of death penalty views. We find that most do not strongly support the death penalty; thus, the implications of this research are clear: policy makers and legislators should review current death penalty statutes because when expanding the spectrum of death penalty support, there is not strong support for the death penalty.

Appendix

Principal Component Factor Loadings of Variables Concerning Religiosity Resulting in One Factor

	Factor I	Uniqueness
Religiosity Scale ($\alpha = .76$; eigenvalue = 2.44; 61% variance explained)		
Would you consider yourself to be: (1) not at all religious, (2) somewhat religious, (3) religious, (4) very religious	.78	.39
How often do you attend church? (1) never, (2) a few times a year, (3) about once a month, (4) several times a month, (5) every week	.79	.37
While you were growing up, would you consider your parental figure(s) to have been: (1) not at all religious, (2) somewhat religious, (3) religious, (4) very religious	.78	.40
While you were growing up, about how often did your parental figure(s) attend church? (1) never, (2) a few times a year, (3) about once a month, (4) several times a month, (5) every week	.77	.41

Note. Although an exact number of factors was not requested, this factor analysis revealed only one factor with an eigenvalue greater than 1.

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Notes

1. We are unable to provide a survey response rate for two reasons: (1) because many students were enrolled in multiple sociology courses, the unique enrollment count in each of the 33 classrooms is unknown and (2) we

did not take a headcount of the actual number of students present on the day of class in which the survey was given.

2. Due to the small number of individuals that identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual in our sample, we removed these variables from our final regression models. Results are available upon request.

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