

Article

The Legacy of Blood Atonement? Gauging Mormon Support for the Death Penalty

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Abstract: American support for the death penalty has declined over time, but conservative religious groups have exhibited more favorable attitudes toward this practice than their mainline religious and secular peers. Scholars have generally overlooked Latter-day Saint (LDS, Mormon) support for capital punishment. However, this faith tradition is a case worthy of careful examination. Historically, LDS leadership was supportive of the death penalty, which was congruent with their teachings on blood atonement, i.e., theological rationales for capital punishment as a just response to murder. However, Mormon leaders have more recently adopted a neutral position toward the death penalty. To what degree might changing social attitudes and flagging LDS leader endorsements of the death penalty have contributed to diminished grassroots Mormon support for capital punishment? This study uses data from the General Social Survey to test three hypotheses: (1) those with an LDS affiliation will exhibit greater support for the death penalty when compared with their non-Mormon peers, including other religious conservatives; (2) LDS support for the death penalty will diminish over time; and (3) LDS support for capital punishment will be bolstered by frequent Mormon worship service attendance. Using cross-tabulations, logistic regression, and time series analyses, the results indicate support for all three hypotheses. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Latter-day Saint; Mormon; religion; faith; capital punishment; death penalty; crime; retribution; justice



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1. Introduction

About six in ten Americans support the death penalty (Pew Research Center 2020), which has fallen from eight in ten expressing favorable attitudes toward capital punishment during the mid-1990s (Death Penalty Information Center). This change is traced to various factors that include declining crime rates (Tseloni et al. 2010), as well as the number of innocent individuals who have been wrongfully convicted. In fact, according to The Innocence Project, it is estimated that 1% of prisoners (about 20,000) in the U.S. are wrongfully convicted (Innocence Project 2011). Evidence suggests that over 100 innocent individuals have been sentenced to death within the past three decades (Gross 2008). Since 1989, there have been 2810 exonerations due to wrongful convictions (The National Registry of Exonerations 2021).

Support for capital punishment varies considerably by political affiliation, gender, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, and other characteristics (Unnever and Cullen 2006). Specific to religion, conservative Protestants are quite supportive of the death penalty and, on average, view it as an appropriate punitive response to breaking the law (Britt 1998). Catholics are less supportive due to their ethics concerning life. Catholics are typically anti-abortion and tend to value life at all stages of development from “womb to tomb.” In fact, capital punishment opposition is strongly predicted by Catholics who oppose abortion (Perl and McClintock 2001; Unnever et al. 2010). Black Protestants are least supportive of

the death penalty due to it being unjustly applied (Britt 1998). Interestingly, Latter-day Saints (LDS) have been generally overlooked when assessing attitudes toward capital punishment.

Latter-day Saints (LDS, commonly called Mormons) are a self-described “peculiar people” who have many unique religious beliefs and practices (e.g., Davies 2003; Eliason 2001; Givens 2003, 2007, 2014, 2017; Givens and Barlow 2015; Hammarberg 2013). LDS members make up 1.7% of the American population (about 9.4 million Americans identify as LDS) (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Newsroom 2023a). Mormons have a highly distinctive religious subculture and have a unique U.S. geographic concentration, with 76% living in the West and 35% living in Utah alone (Pond 2009). Same-faith marriages are quite prevalent among Latter-day Saints (83%) as opposed to same-faith marriages in the U.S. at large (64%) (Masci 2016). There is a hierarchal LDS leadership structure with religious authorities located in Salt Lake City and lay leadership situated in local congregations (wards). The distinctiveness of this religious subculture coupled with the faith’s hierarchal structure contributes to robust ideological cohesion.

Among the bedrock principles of Mormonism are the theological concepts of agency, accountability, and atonement, what we would call the three A’s of Mormonism (see, e.g., Eliason 2001; Givens 2007, 2014, 2015; Hammarberg 2013; McLachlan 2015 for treatments of core LDS tenets). These concepts make Mormons a unique religious subculture and a distinct interpretive community in their approach to scripture. In LDS theology, agency asserts that the world people inhabit is characterized by the ability to choose between an array of beliefs, courses of action, etc. In fact, Mormonism argues that God has intentionally created the mortal world to present “oppositions” to its inhabitants and has purposely permitted Satan to exert influence in it as a “test” (probationary period) through which God’s human children can gain deliberative capacities, cultivate self-mastery through mortal trials, and ultimately demonstrate their commitment to obey divine commandments.

Accountability from an LDS perspective highlights the consequences for choices made and conduct undertaken in the mortal world. Human beings’ ability to “choose the right (CTR)” is seen as blessed by God through rewards conferred on those whose choices and conduct conform to divine mandates. Accountability also entails the divine withholding of rewards and, often, the meting out of punishments for choices and actions that deviate from divine edicts. Thus, Mormons view the world as posing a series of alternatives (competing options) to people and envision God as a “Heavenly Father” who aims to encourage correct deliberation and decisions through a combination of rewards and punishments. Accountability is certainly present in the mortal (earthly) existence for Mormons, but also has long-range consequences into the eternities such that actions taken during one’s mortal life are seen to have ramifications in the afterlife.

These perspectives on agency and accountability are found in muted form by Mormons in the Bible, a scriptural text which they esteem as divine revelation with much of the Christian world, albeit with selective (and potentially audacious) corrections offered by the LDS founder and prophet Joseph Smith. Yet, these bedrock concepts are featured more explicitly and in richer detail within extra-biblical scriptures that are unique to Mormonism, namely, the Book of Mormon, Pearl of Great Price, and Doctrine & Covenants (Givens 2003; Givens and Hauglid 2019). It is these scriptures that give LDS theology a unique cast when compared with other Bible-only theologically conservative traditions such as conservative Protestantism. Key passages found in these additional Mormon scriptures, combined with modern-day revelation attributed to LDS prophets, are said to give Mormons “the fulness of the gospel” that was “restored” through Joseph Smith, the faith’s founding prophet. This restoration is seen as continuing through modern-day revelation.

Mormonism recognizes the persistent imperfections of all earthly beings and the essential role of Jesus Christ’s atonement in people’s salvation. From an LDS standpoint, it is this third “A”—atonement—that fills the gap between efforts toward righteous action during mortality, which are divinely encouraged but always imperfect in practice, and the long-term goal of “exaltation” (Givens 2015). Exaltation is the promise of being reunited

with humanity's creator (Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother). This reunification also involves one's earthly family (spouse and children) if the persons involved have been sealed in a Mormon temple and true to the covenants they have made there (echoing agency and accountability). Ultimately, these individuals are viewed as capable of becoming immortal beings—literally gods like their Creator—who then have their own spirit children over whom they exercise authority.

Because of their additional scriptures, this Mormon approach to atonement is quite different than that found in other Christian traditions. For example, while many Christian faiths point to Jesus Christ's death on the cross as the sole or supreme act of atonement, thereby "paying the price" for human sinfulness through his crucifixion, Mormons argue that the atonement was a process that began with the spilling of Christ's blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is where Christ is said to have sweat blood as he physically took upon himself the sins of the world. This distinction about atonement may seem theologically trivial to those outside the orbit of conservative Christianity, but it underscores Mormonism's major departure from conventional Christian theology in a core religious doctrine. There is a sustained and unmistakable physicality to the atonement in Mormon theology—blood sweat from every pore in Gethsemane, blood spilled from the body of Christ on Calvary—that is not reducible to an ethereal "empathy" that Jesus Christ exhibited toward humanity. This insistence on the prolonged physicality of the atonement is congruent with the Mormon conceptualization of soul as composed of both body and spirit, a view with little or no traction in other Christian faiths. LDS President Joseph Fielding Smith, one leader of the Church during the twentieth century, describes quite well the Mormon perspective on atonement:

We speak of the passion of Jesus Christ. A great many people have an idea that when he was on the cross, and nails were driven into his hands and feet, that was his great suffering. His great suffering was before he ever was placed upon the cross. It was in the Garden of Gethsemane that the blood oozed from the pores of his body: 'Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink' (Doctrine & Covenants [D&C] 19:18). ([Gospel Classics 2006](#))

Current Mormon leaders echo this refrain by stressing how the atonement of Jesus Christ was made "according to the flesh." Dallin Oaks' address, "Strengthened by the Atonement of Jesus Christ," provides a sustained treatment of this subject by relying on distinctively LDS scriptural passages from the Book of Mormon:

Most scriptural accounts of the Atonement concern the Savior's breaking the bands of death and suffering for our sins. In his sermon recorded in the Book of Mormon, Alma taught these fundamentals. But he also provided our clearest scriptural assurances that the Savior also experienced the pains and sicknesses and infirmities of His people. Alma described this part of the Savior's Atonement: "And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people" (Alma 7:11; also see 2 Nephi 9:21) . . . Think of it! In the Savior's Atonement, He suffered "pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind." . . . Why did He suffer these mortal challenges "of every kind?" Alma explained, "And he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:12) . . . Our Savior experienced and suffered the fulness of all mortal challenges "according to the flesh" so He could know "according to the flesh" how to "succor [which means to give relief or aid to] his people according to their infirmities." He therefore knows our struggles, our heartaches, our temptations, and our suffering, for He willingly experienced them all as an essential part of

His Atonement. And because of this, His Atonement empowers Him to succor us—to give us the strength to bear it all. (Oaks 2015)

Given these unique Mormon theological convictions regarding agency, accountability, and the atonement, we turn to our primary research question: Are Mormons unusually supportive of the death penalty? The foregoing theological considerations and key elements of Mormon history underscore this possibility (Gardner 1979). In the traditional LDS faith and as part of the unique Mormon understanding of atonement, there has long been support for a theological concept called “blood atonement.” LDS scriptures define the “spilling of innocent blood” as among the gravest of sins, one with dire consequences for the perpetrator. The Book of Mormon’s Alma, an ancient prophet, is highlighted by Mormons past and present: “These things [sexual sins] are an abomination in the sight of the Lord, yea, most abominable above all sins *save it be the shedding of innocent blood* or denying the Holy Ghost” (Alma 39:5, emphasis added). In the Mormon hierarchy of sinfulness, murder is among the most heinous of acts. While the Bible certainly condemns this action as well, the ideological power of blood atonement—the religiously justified taking of the life of a convicted murderer—is a rather distinctive feature of Mormonism within the larger Christian world.

Blood atonement, then, is the idea that a murderer’s own blood must be shed for forgiveness to take effect (e.g., Blood Atonement 1882; Smith 1954; see Gardner 1979; Mason 2016 for reviews and commentary). In fact, *bloodshed* is what was considered important for atonement. Nineteenth century Mormon leader George Q. Cannon said, “We do not believe in hanging. We think that if a man sheds blood, his blood should be shed by execution,” though Cannon added that this position was not to be treated as Church doctrine (as quoted in Gardner 1979). In a 1910 address, it was documented that Elder Orson F. Whitney said, “Ancient scriptures indicate that capital punishment is an appropriate penalty for murder. God said to Noah, ‘And whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for man shall not shed the blood of man’ (JST Gen. 9:12).” Additionally, it was documented that he said, “Capital punishment is viewed in the doctrines of the Church to be an appropriate penalty for murder, but that penalty is proper only after the offender has been found guilty in a lawful public trial by constitutionally authorized civil authorities (CR, Oct. 1910, p. 51)” (Hinckley 1992).

There is some evidence of support for the death penalty in contemporary Mormonism. Interestingly, Utah has been the only state in which a firing squad has been used to execute inmates in the modern era. In fact, the last person to be executed by firing squad was on 18 June 2010 (Utah 2021). The use of a firing squad to execute convicted murderers is certainly consistent with the idea of blood atonement. However, the Church’s contemporary position reflects a rejection of blood atonement combined with a move, during the past decade or so, toward a more neutral posture concerning the death penalty. During the last decades of the twentieth century, Mormon leaders’ rejection of the concept of blood atonement gained considerable momentum (Stack 2010). And, as early as 2013, the LDS Newsroom stated, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints regards the question of whether and in what circumstances the state should impose capital punishment as a matter to be decided solely by the prescribed processes of civil law. We neither promote nor oppose capital punishment” (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Newsroom 2023b). And even well before he became the President and Prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Gordon B. Hinckley is said to have indicated that blood atonement ended with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, thus implicitly calling into question this precept’s legitimacy at any point in Mormon or Christian history (Stack 2010).

This doctrinal transition within Mormonism raises an intriguing question: Do Latter-day Saints continue to exhibit support for capital punishment even after the Church has rejected the theology of blood atonement and taken a neutral position on the death penalty? Continued support for capital punishment could reflect grassroots ideological entrenchment in such a tradition-bound faith. Moreover, the Church did not reject the death penalty as wholly illegitimate but instead adopted a neutral stance on this practice,

essentially arguing that local civil law on this issue should hold sway. It stands to reason that LDS adherents who have had ample exposure to the theology of blood atonement would be more supportive of capital punishment. If enthusiastic support for the death penalty remains evident at the LDS grassroots, it may persist through local institutional factors that entail robust involvement in local congregational (ward), sacerdotal (worship), and social activities. In short, ideological exposure to this precept may be a product of social network embeddedness. The role of network embeddedness could be magnified for Mormons given their geographical concentration (community reinforcement coupled with congregational exposure), as well as the remarkable frequency in which they attend religious services (Pew Research Center 2020). In fact, 77% of Mormons report attending religious services at least weekly. LDS attendance is second only to the 85% of Jehovah's Witnesses who attend once per week. Among conservative faiths, considerably fewer evangelical Protestants (58%) attend once per week. The following hypotheses are therefore offered.

H1. *Given the longstanding historical legacy of blood atonement within Mormonism, Latter-day Saints (LDS) will exhibit more robust support for the death penalty than their religious peers in other faiths and the religiously unaffiliated.*

H2. *Due to the more recently adopted neutral stance toward capital punishment and rejection of blood atonement among Mormon religious leaders, LDS support for the death penalty will diminish over time.*

H3. *Based on ideological exposure to death penalty support in Mormon social networks, LDS support for the death penalty will be more robust among frequently attending Mormons than their infrequently attending counterparts.*

2. Research Methodology

The General Social Survey (GSS) (<https://gss.norc.berkeley.edu/>), accessed on 1 January 2020) provides the data needed to test these hypotheses. Our study includes data from surveys conducted between 1974 to 2018, with all cases drawn from a cumulative data file (N = 52,851). The outcome variable was the question, "Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?" with the response categories of "favor" or "oppose." Religious groups analyzed included Latter-day Saint, Catholic, conservative Protestant, mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, other religion, and no religion, which is generally consistent with RELTRAD coding (Steensland et al. 2000), albeit with LDS broken out separately for analytical purposes. Other variables included were gender, marital status, employment status, region (including Southern native, rural native, and lives in Mountain Census Region, the last of these due to regional Mormon concentration), race/ethnicity (Caucasian, African American, Latino, and other race/ethnicity), political party preference (Democrat, Independent, Republican), political ideology (liberal, moderate, conservative), number of children, education in years, family income, religious service attendance, age, and the decade during which the surveys were administered (1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s). See Table 1 for demographics, including percentages and means of the variables. Binary logistic regression was used to estimate the associations between the key independent variable (religious group) and the dependent variable (death penalty favorability), net of the potentially confounding influence of control variables (Hoffmann 2021).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

| Variables | Percent or Mean (SD) | Range |
|-------------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Religious group | | |
| Latter-day Saint | 1.3% | 0–1 |
| Catholic | 25.5% | 0–1 |
| Conservative Protestant | 20.4% | 0–1 |
| Mainline Protestant | 27.2% | 0–1 |
| Black Protestant | 7.0% | 0–1 |

Table 1. Cont.

| Variables | Percent or Mean (SD) | Range |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Other religion | 6.6% | 0–1 |
| No religion | 12.0% | 0–1 |
| Female | 53.7% | 0–1 |
| Married | 52.3% | 0–1 |
| Full-time worker | 50.5% | 0–1 |
| Southern native | 27.7% | 0–1 |
| Rural native | 20.4% | 0–1 |
| Lives in Mountain Census Region | 6.4% | 0–1 |
| Race/ethnicity | | |
| Caucasian | 80.0% | 0–1 |
| African American | 12.9% | 0–1 |
| Latino | 1.9% | 0–1 |
| Other | 5.4% | 0–1 |
| Political party preference | | |
| Democrat | 35.8% | 0–1 |
| Independent | 36.2% | 0–1 |
| Republican | 28.0% | 0–1 |
| Political ideology | | |
| Liberal | 13.7% | 0–1 |
| Moderate | 63.6% | 0–1 |
| Conservative | 22.7% | 0–1 |
| Number of children | 1.9 (1.8) | 0–8 |
| Education in years | 12.9 (3.1) | 0–20 |
| Family income | 20.5 (15.9) | 0–50 |
| Religious service attendance | 3.8 (2.7) | 0–8 |
| Age | 44.5 (17.1) | 18–89 |
| Decade of survey | | |
| 1970s | 13.3% | 0–1 |
| 1980s | 25.1% | 0–1 |
| 1990s | 22.7% | 0–1 |
| 2000s | 18.3% | 0–1 |
| 2010s | 20.7% | 0–1 |
| Attitudes toward death penalty | | |
| Oppose | 28.7% | |
| Support | 71.7% | |

Note: The means/percentages are based on weighted analyses. They may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

3. Results

Hypothesis 1 (H1) anticipated more robust LDS death penalty support compared to all other religious groups and the non-religious. To assess H1, a cross-tabulation of religious group affiliation by attitudes toward the death penalty was initially conducted, followed by logistic regression. Hypotheses 2 and 3 (H2 and H3), respectively, reflecting diminished LDS support over time and enhanced support associated with frequent attendance, were tested using Firebaugh's (1997) methods for analyzing repeated cross-sectional survey data. The analysis included age and period effects, with the latter identified by decade. Since the outcome variable is dichotomous, we utilized binary logistic regression. We estimated three models, with the first including only the religious groups, the second adding decade of the survey and religious service attendance, and the third including all the variables. The results of Model 3 (the full model) are reported below, however, since it is the best fitting model based on comparing the AICs.

H1 was fully supported. LDS adherents exhibited robust support for the death penalty. In fact, 86.9% were in favor of the death penalty for persons convicted of murder (see Table 2). LDS members exhibited the highest percentage of those who were in favor of the death penalty compared to all other religions analyzed. Furthermore, the logistic regression model predicting support for the death penalty net of all covariates (Model 3 of Table 3) indicates that LDS affiliation significantly predicted support ($OR = 2.68, p < 0.01$). So,

compared to those who indicated they had no religion, LDS were 2.68 times more likely to support the death penalty for persons convicted of murder.

Table 2. Cross-Tabulation of Religious Group by Attitudes toward the Death Penalty.

| Religious Group | Death Penalty | |
|-------------------------|---------------|---------|
| | % Oppose | % Favor |
| Latter-day Saint | 13.7 | 86.9 |
| Catholic | 28.6 | 71.4 |
| Conservative Protestant | 21.5 | 78.5 |
| Mainline Protestant | 24.6 | 75.4 |
| Black Protestant | 51.6 | 48.4 |
| Other religion | 36.0 | 64.0 |
| No religion | 34.5 | 65.5 |
| Total | 28.7 | 71.3 |

Note: The percentages are based on weighted analyses. They may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Cramer's $V = 0.176$ ($p < 0.001$).

Table 3. Logistic Regression Model Predicting Support for the Death Penalty.

| Variables | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | OR | Std. y | OR | Std. y | OR | Std. y |
| Religious Group | | | | | | |
| Latter-day Saint | 3.29 ** | (0.64) | 4.25 ** | (0.77) | 2.68 ** | (0.50) |
| Catholic | 1.36 ** | (0.17) | 1.64 ** | (0.26) | 1.40 ** | (0.17) |
| Conservative Protestant | 1.99 ** | (0.37) | 2.45 ** | (0.48) | 1.71 ** | (0.27) |
| Mainline Protestant | 1.64 ** | (0.27) | 1.94 ** | (0.35) | 1.57 ** | (0.23) |
| Black Protestant | 0.53 ** | (−0.35) | 0.64 ** | (−0.24) | 1.35 ** | (0.15) |
| Other religion | 0.96 | (−0.02) | 1.10 * | (0.05) | 1.16 ** | (0.08) |
| No religion ^a | | | | | | |
| Decade of survey | | | | | | |
| 1970s ^a | | | | | | |
| 1980s | | | 1.43 ** | (0.19) | 1.54 ** | (0.21) |
| 1990s | | | 1.59 ** | (0.25) | 1.73 ** | (0.28) |
| 2000s | | | 1.01 | (0.01) | 1.13 ** | (0.06) |
| 2010s | | | 0.85 ** | (−0.08) | 1.03 | (0.01) |
| Religious service attendance | | | 0.92 ** | (−0.05) | 0.92 ** | (−0.04) |
| Female | | | | | 0.71 ** | (−0.18) |
| Age | | | | | 1.01 ** | (0.01) |
| Married | | | | | 1.25 ** | (0.11) |
| Full-time worker | | | | | 1.25 ** | (0.11) |
| Southern native | | | | | 1.10 ** | (0.05) |
| Rural native | | | | | 0.99 | (−0.03) |
| Lives in Mountain Census region | | | | | 1.24 ** | (0.11) |
| Race/ethnicity | | | | | | |
| Caucasian ^a | | | | | | |
| African American | | | | | 0.40 ** | (−0.46) |
| Latino | | | | | 0.53 ** | (−0.32) |
| Other | | | | | 0.67 ** | (−0.20) |
| Political party preference | | | | | | |
| Democrat | | | | | 0.88 ** | (−0.06) |
| Independent ^a | | | | | | |
| Republican | | | | | 1.64 ** | (0.25) |
| Political ideology | | | | | | |
| Liberal | | | | | 0.53 ** | (−0.32) |
| Moderate ^a | | | | | | |
| Conservative | | | | | 1.31 ** | (0.14) |

Table 3. Cont.

| Variables | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | |
|--------------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|
| | OR | Std. y | OR | Std. y | OR | Std. y |
| Number of children | | | | | 0.96 ** | (−0.02) |
| Education in years | | | | | 0.87 ** | (−0.07) |
| Family income | | | | | 1.00 ** | (0.01) |
| AIC | 62,271 | | 61,314 | | 57,909 | |

Note: The models are estimated based on weighted data. Effect sizes are represented as odds ratios (OR). The numbers in parentheses are y-standardized coefficients (Std. y) to allow efficient comparisons of effects across models (Williams 2009). ^a Omitted reference category. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

H2 was also supported. LDS favorability toward the death penalty has diminished appreciably over time after peaking in 1980. This pattern is roughly consistent with LDS leaders' rejection of the theology of blood atonement during the last couple of decades of the twentieth century, though it may also be reflective of flagging support for this practice in society at large. Interestingly, while LDS support did diminish over time, when comparing LDS to non-LDS, LDS adherents still have a greater proportion of members who favored the death penalty. This differential holds over time. See Figure 1 for a visual depiction of death penalty support among LDS adherents compared with all non-LDS survey respondents by the decade during which the surveys were administered.

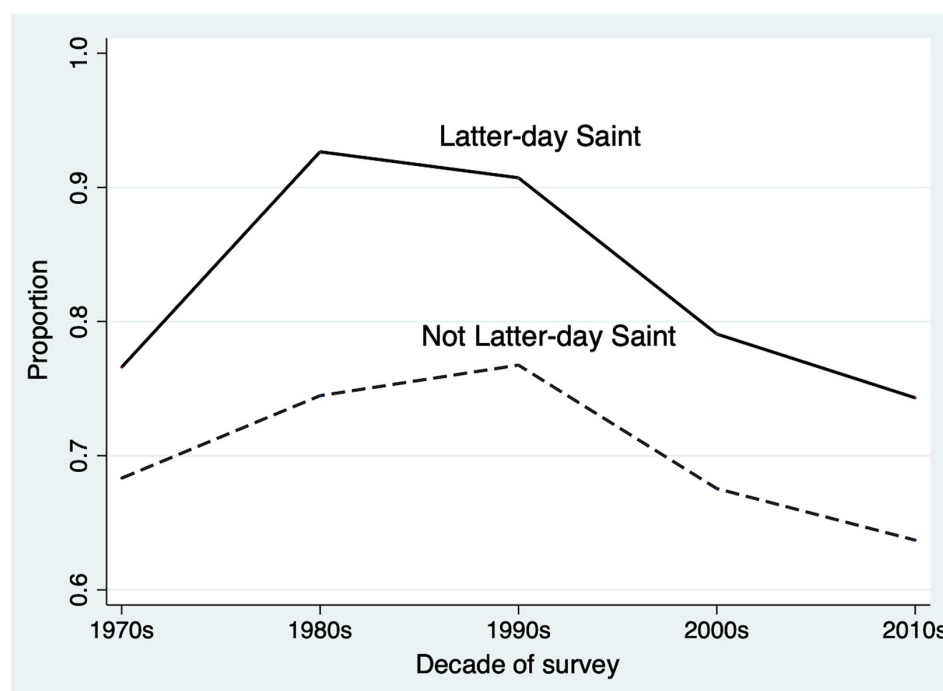


Figure 1. Proportion supporting the death penalty by decade of survey, General Social Surveys, 1974–2018.

H3 was also supported. LDS support for the death penalty was more robust among frequently attending Mormons than their infrequently attending counterparts. Figures 2 and 3 show the proportion of support among LDS adherents who attend weekly compared to LDS who do not attend. Figure 2 shows an opposite trend for Catholics. Catholics who do not attend religious services indicate more support for the death penalty than their counterparts who attend weekly. Figure 3 also reveals a similar trend for conservative Protestants. A greater proportion of conservative Protestants who support the death penalty do not attend religious services compared to their counterparts who attend weekly. Thus, in contrast to Catholics and conservative Protestants, more punitive attitudes are exhibited

by frequently attending Mormons than their non-attending peers. This pattern suggests support for the argument that posits amplified ideological exposure among Mormons through enhanced network embeddedness.

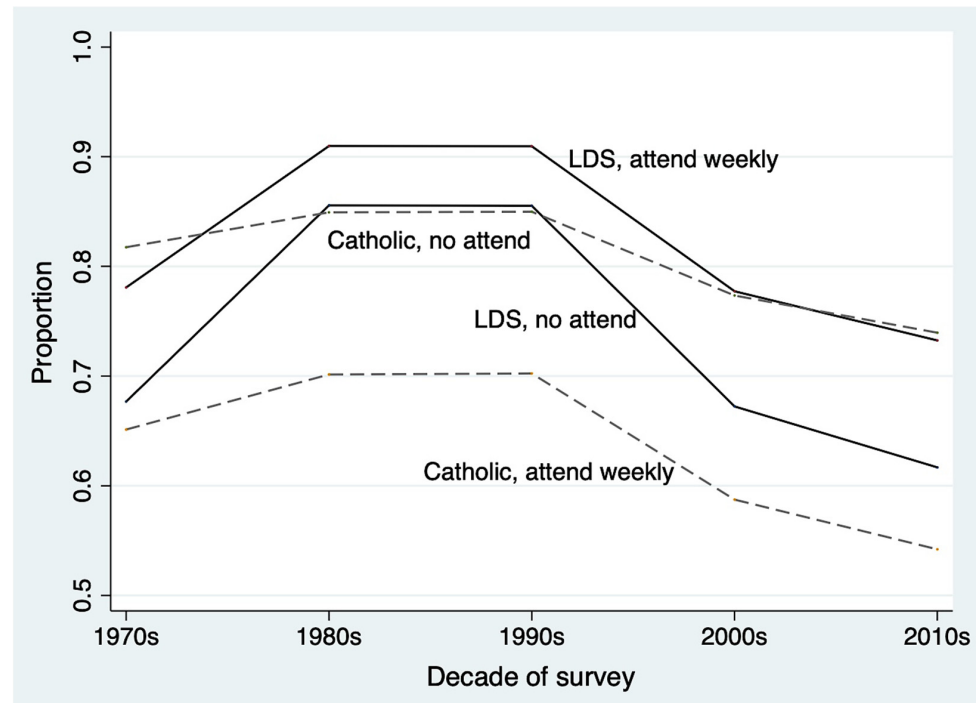


Figure 2. Proportion supporting the death penalty among Latter-day Saints and Catholics, by decade of survey and religious service attendance, General Social Surveys, 1974–2018. Note: the predicted values are based on a model that includes all the variables listed in Table 3.

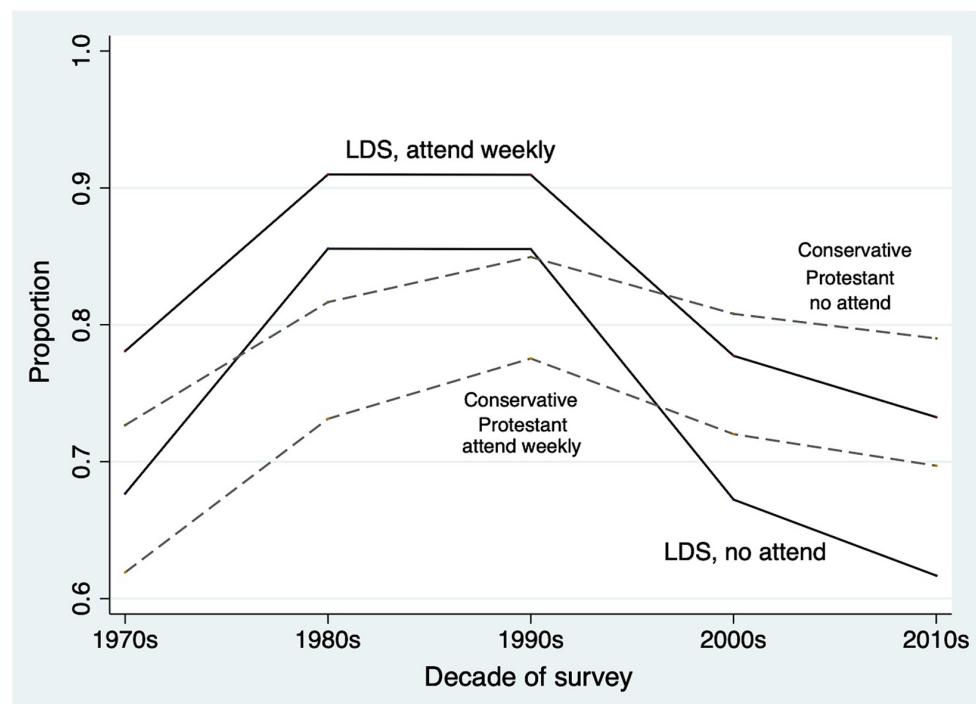


Figure 3. Proportion supporting the death penalty among Latter-day Saints and conservative Protestants, by decade of survey and religious service attendance, General Social Surveys, 1974–2018. Note: the predicted values are based on a model that includes all the variables listed in Table 3.

Of further note concerning religious service attendance, the logistic regression results (see Table 3) indicate that, in general, adherents who attended religious services more often tended to be opposed to the death penalty. Adjusting for denomination and other factors, as frequency of attendance increased by one unit, the odds of support for the death penalty for someone convicted of murder was about 8% lower ($OR = 0.92, p < 0.01$). The logistic regression results also indicate that there was a decline in support for the death penalty in more recent years. In fact, support for the death penalty in the 2010s was not noticeably higher than during the 1970s ($OR = 1.03, p > 0.05$). The period effects suggest a concave pattern, with death penalty support rising in the 1980s and 1990s, but then decreasing thereafter. This pattern can also be discerned in the figures, particularly among Latter-day Saints and conservative Protestants.

4. Discussion

Are Mormons more supportive of the death penalty when compared to their non-LDS peers? This study used General Social Survey (GSS) data to examine this question while also considering temporal variations and attendance differentials in LDS support for capital punishment. The official stance on capital punishment from LDS leaders is more neutral than it was in the past, and the last couple of decades of the twentieth century have seen a rejection of the longstanding Mormon theological principle of blood atonement. Based on these contextual factors, we predicted that Mormons would be more supportive of capital punishment than their religious peers and non-religious Americans. We also anticipated that LDS support for the death penalty would wane over time, but that more frequent attendance would predict greater support for capital punishment. These hypotheses were all supported. An unusually high proportion of Mormons continue to support the death penalty, but this percentage has declined over time. Consistent with our network embeddedness argument, frequently attending LDS adherents are considerably more supportive of capital punishment than their non-attending peers, which is the opposite of patterns found among Catholics and conservative Protestants. In the end, we conclude that the logic, if not the specific edict, of blood atonement is persistent within Mormonism. The shadow cast by this cultural sensibility seems to be long when compared with Americans at large, who are less supportive of capital punishment than Mormons at any given point in our study. Yet, the shadow cast by blood atonement seems to be fading with time, as Mormons today are less supportive on average of the death penalty than their predecessors from decades earlier.

To the degree that support for the death penalty persists, the social transmission of this ideological stance seems to be routed through congregational involvement via frequent worship service attendance. Interestingly, religious service attendance among conservative Protestants and Catholics is inversely related to capital punishment support. Conservative Protestants and Catholics who attend religious services at least once per week are less supportive of the death penalty than their infrequently attending co-religionists. For Catholics, this internal heterogeneity might be due to their consistent life ethic (i.e., Catholic teachings are pro-life/anti-abortion and opposed to capital punishment). Catholics who do not attend frequently likely have a diminished commitment to the consistent life ethic. Somewhat surprisingly, greater support for the death penalty is also evident among conservative Protestants who do not attend religious services weekly, which requires additional investigation but may be due to the mix of moral logics (justice and mercy) that is part of Christian theology, with both of these logics supported through scriptural passages.

It is possible that unusually high though, over time, diminishing Mormon support for the death penalty reflects a double cultural lag in ideological positioning and transmission. Mormon leaders were relatively late to adopt a neutral stance toward the death penalty, likely due to the legacy of blood atonement within this faith tradition and perhaps the LDS penchant to remain out of the political fray. It is also common for conservative faith communities, and especially their leaders, to exhibit suspicion toward emergent cultural

trends. This general reticence to embrace nascent trends is the first conduit of cultural lag. And then, once leaders disavowed the theological principle of blood atonement in the last couple of decades of the twentieth century, it was done in a rather tepid fashion (e.g., a neutral stance adopted on the death penalty that defers to local laws). To the extent that the position articulated by LDS leaders had shifted, the transmission and acceptance of such altered beliefs may lag considerably among members of this faith tradition. Ideological stasis at the grassroots would be the second conduit of cultural lag within Mormonism. Thus, there may be significant delays in having a societal transition like flagging death penalty support embraced and articulated by conservative religious leaders (first-order cultural lag) and then received, much less ideologically accepted, by those at the grassroots of a very conservative religious subculture (second-order cultural lag). It is, after all, the nature of conservatism to preserve tradition rather than cast it aside with changing societal tides. Entrenched resistance to change has been exhibited in Mormonism with respect to race/ethnicity, feminism, gay rights, and several other areas of social life. Moreover, the theological conservatism within Mormonism that privileges scriptural and doctrinal orthodoxy, even those that resonate with Old Testament principles of retribution such as “an eye for an eye,” can quickly give way to political conservatism. Political conservatism remains dominant in LDS circles and dovetails with supportive attitudes toward capital punishment.

One limitation of our study is that we are left to offer conjecture about the underlying moral logics and theological convictions concerning death penalty support (e.g., ideas about what constitutes the appropriate punishment of sinners). Future research could investigate these prospects but would need to use select years of GSS data to do so, which may be quite difficult where Mormon respondents are concerned given their relatively small numbers in any particular survey year. Additional lines of inquiry could be conducted to determine if there are U.S. regional differences in Mormon death penalty support, with LDS members highly concentrated in key parts of the Mountain West (especially Utah), while also considering if there are international variations in LDS capital punishment attitudes given the worldwide character of this faith today. Examinations of other possible internal variations in capital punishment attitudes among Mormons (by race, gender, etc.) could be promising. Contributions of other LDS “peculiarities” such as Mormon frugality and preferences for low government spending may also be worth exploring as possible contributors to death penalty support. This last consideration is especially intriguing given the relative costs of capital punishment versus life imprisonment without parole. Contrary to popular belief, the former is much more costly than the latter (Radelet 2000; Waldo 2017). Moreover, qualitative research (content analysis of church statements, interviews with LDS adherents and apostates) concerning this important policy consideration could highlight the underlying motives for various death penalty positions, including the diverse moral logics (justice versus mercy) that undergird sustained Mormon death penalty support. Until such research is conducted, our study has found that Latter-day Saints represent a distinctive yet dynamic religious subculture concerning death penalty attitudes.

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