



Exploring the Association between Afterlife Optimism and Stance on the Death Penalty

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Introduction

- In order to avoid biased rulings, capital cases are tried by “death-qualified” juries. These jurors are neither entirely opposed to the use of capital punishment, nor in favor of its use on all capital murder cases.
- There are many potential sources of bias that could prevent a jury from being “death-qualified” (American Civil Liberties Union, 1973)
- Numerous studies have focused on how specific religious beliefs might bias a capital case jury (Applegate et al., 2000; Young, 1992).
- One study found that belief in Hell was associated with greater support for the death penalty (Bones et al., 2018).
- That study focused on the influence of Christian afterlife beliefs, rather than addressing how general perceptions of a potential afterlife might bias a capital case jury.

Research Questions

- Is there an association between **level of optimism about the afterlife** and **stance on the death penalty**?
- Is this association moderated or confounded when controlling for political party identification, race, or age?

Methods

Sample

- Adults who reported their perceptions of the afterlife (n=1,340) were drawn from the 1984 General Social Survey (GSS). This survey collected data by randomly selecting adults to interview from U.S. households.
- The GSS is nationally representative of non-institutionalized, English-speaking adults in the U.S.

Measures

- The categorical explanatory variable in this study was afterlife optimism. This was assessed on a constructed scale from 1-3 (1= no optimism, 2= some optimism, 3= high optimism), using eight questions that gauged positive or negative perceptions of a potential afterlife.
- The categorical response variable of stance on the death penalty was assessed on the binary of “favor” or “oppose.”
- For multivariate analyses, the categorical variables of political party identification and race, as well as the quantitative variable of age, were used.

Results

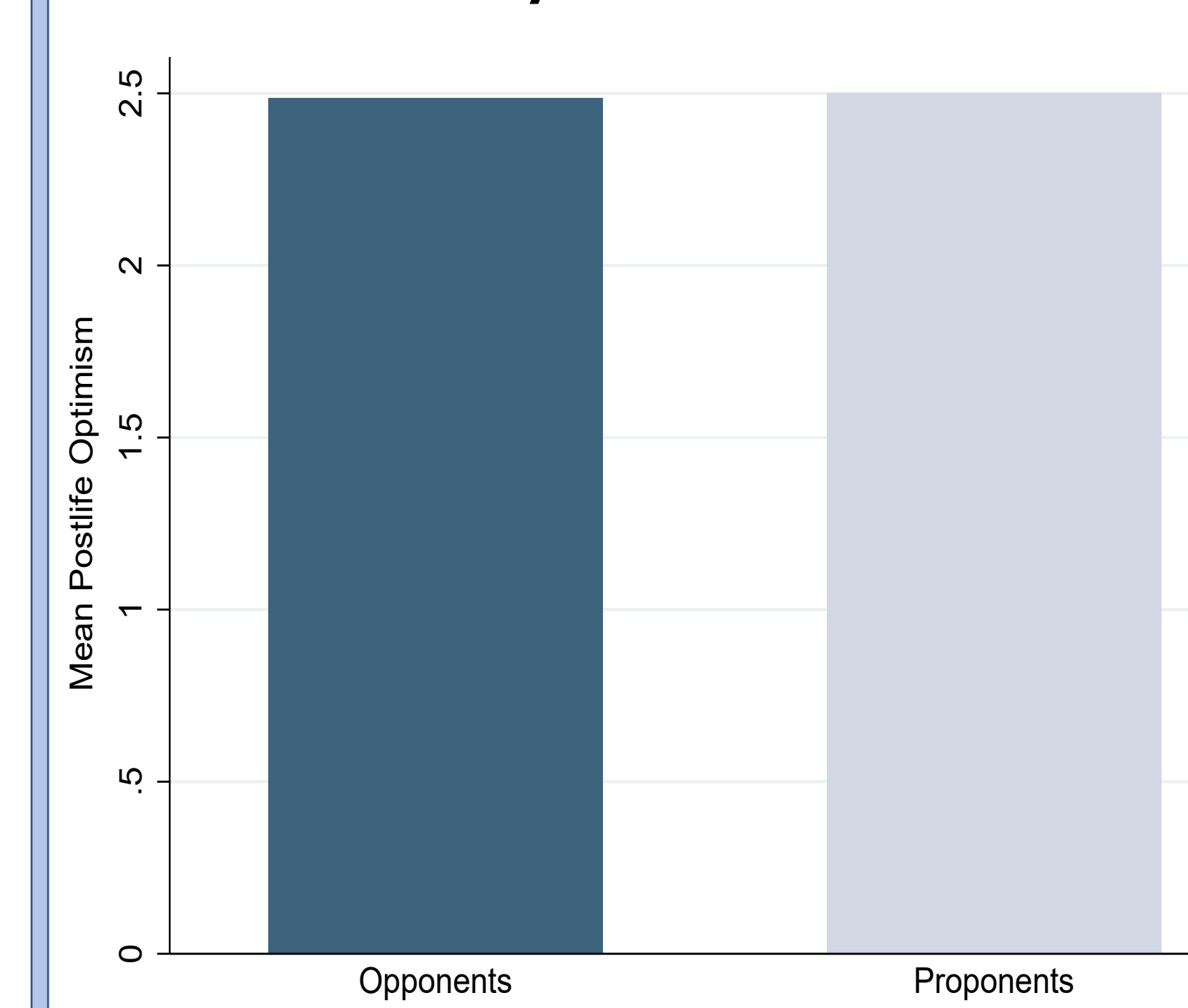
Univariate

- **74.8%** of respondents were in favor of the use of capital punishment, while the remaining **25.2%** were opposed.
- A large majority of respondents (**70.2%**) indicated highly optimistic perceptions of the afterlife.

Bivariate

- Chi-square analysis revealed that **US adults with optimistic perceptions of the afterlife were not significantly more likely to support the death penalty** than those with more negative perceptions of the afterlife ($\chi^2=0.0004$, $p=0.984$).
- Bivariate logistic regression reiterated this finding, showing that afterlife optimism (O.R. 1.02, CI 0.88-1.19) was positively and insignificantly associated with support for the death penalty.
- Figure 1 illustrates the lack of association between death penalty support and afterlife optimism.

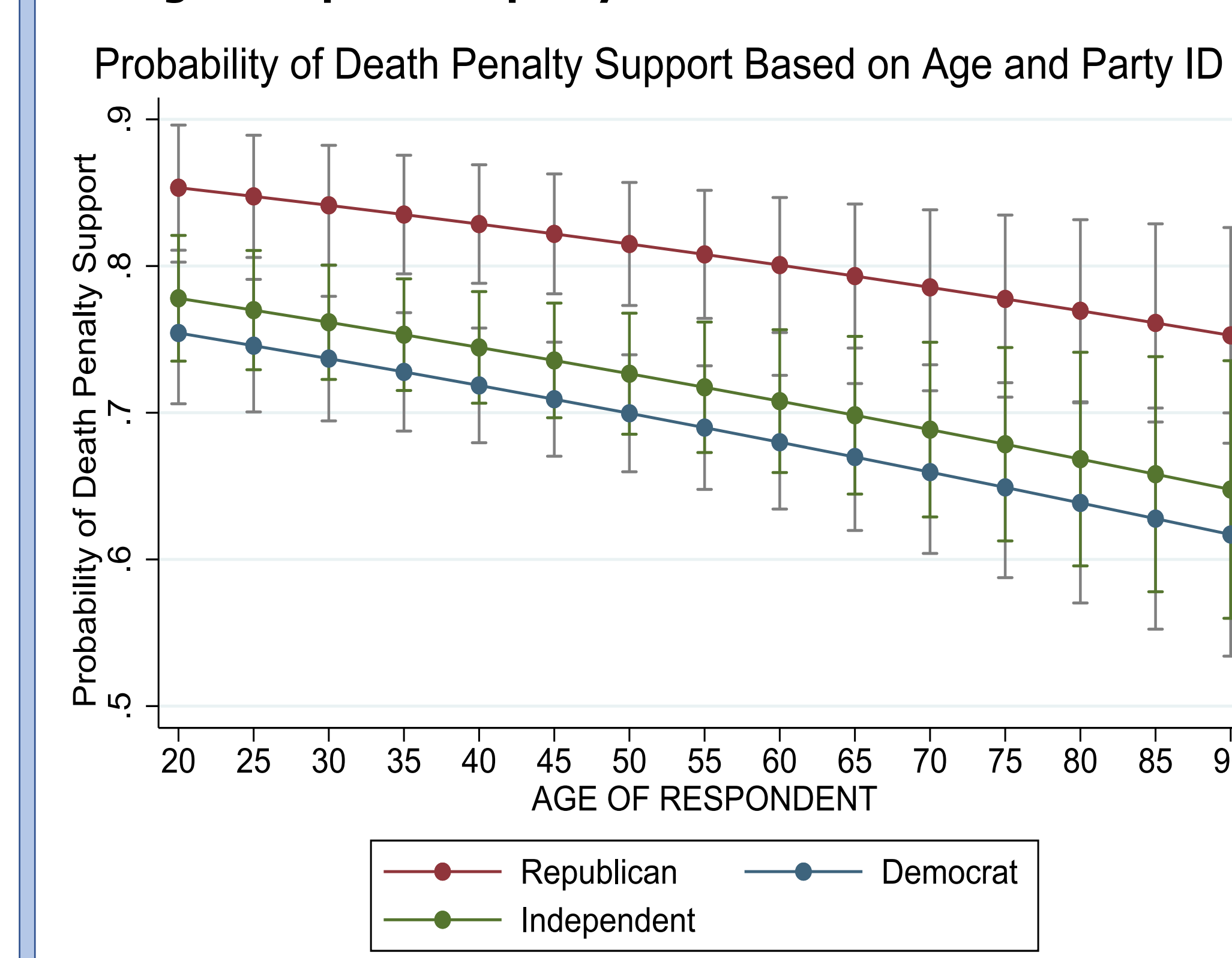
Figure 1. Average Afterlife Optimism among Opponents and Proponents of the Death Penalty



Multivariate

- Multivariate logistic regression found that **political party identification, race, and age** were significantly associated with stance on the death penalty.

Figure 2. Probability of death penalty support based on age and political party identification



- Specifically, **black** (O.R.=0.27, $p<0.00$), **older** (O.R.=0.99, $p<0.008$), and **Democrat** (O.R.=0.51, $p<0.00$) or **Independent** (O.R.=0.59, $p<0.004$) respondents had lower odds of supporting the death penalty than white, younger, or Republican respondents, respectively.
- **Afterlife optimism remained insignificantly related** ($p<0.408$) even when controlling for political party identification, race, and age.

Discussion

- **There is no evidence of a significant relationship between afterlife optimism and stance on the death penalty**, even when controlling for political party affiliation, race, and age.
- Statistical analyses based on this sample suggest that a respondent’s age, race, and political party identification are all associated with stance on the death penalty, with individuals who are white, younger, and Republican having the highest odds of supporting the death penalty.
- Afterlife optimism does not appear to preclude someone from being an unbiased, “death-qualified” juror.
- Potential sources of juror bias which merit further exploration in terms of capital case jury selection include race, age, and political affiliation.