Pope John Paul II and Catholic Opinion Toward the Death Penalty and Abortion*

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Objective. Research on opinion leadership examines the convergence of opinion between elites and masses on issues of public policy. I examine the confluence of opinion between Pope John Paul II and American Catholics on the death penalty and legalized abortion. Method. I use data from three nationally representative opinion surveys and one statewide survey conducted prior to John Paul’s death. Results. The results support the supposition that Catholics who esteemed the pope are more negative in their evaluations of the death penalty and abortion. Conclusions. John Paul II, as leader of the Catholic Church, may have influenced Catholic opinion on political issues.

Research on public opinion has demonstrated the influence of elites in shaping mass attitudes (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1944; Zaller, 1992). Elites may be especially influential in the domain of religion and politics, where clergy have the opportunity to shape the attitudes of congregants. Such influence may be particularly likely among Roman Catholics, who traditionally look to the church hierarchy to set Catholic “policy” on issues of faith and morals. To the extent this is true, the pope in particular stands in a position of strong potential influence. In contrast to the leadership of most other faith traditions, for Catholics, the pope has the power to speak for the whole church. To be sure, American Catholics are known for defying church teachings on issues such as contraception, and few Catholics are likely to accede blindly to papal pronouncements. Yet some Catholics at least may heed teachings of the church and the pope. A few studies (e.g., Welch et al., 1993) have addressed the influence of Catholic clergy, including American bishops (e.g., Wald, 1992), on lay Catholics. However, no study to date has looked at the potential influence of the pope on Catholic opinion. Catholics are almost one-quarter of the U.S. electorate. The influence of the pope on Catholic opinion may have consequences not only for Catholics but for American politics.

In this article, I use the unfortunate death of Pope John Paul II as an opportunity to begin to address the question of papal influence on Catholic political attitudes. Using data collected before the death of Pope John Paul,

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in the sections that follow I posit and test the hypothesis that certain Catholics—those who viewed John Paul II favorably—are more likely than otherwise to share the pope’s opposition to the death penalty and abortion. Controlling for a host of spiritual, political, and social factors, I show that Catholics who, before his death, esteemed the pope, tend to hold more negative views of these two issues. This study shows a convergence of opinion between John Paul II and certain Catholics, suggesting that for some Catholics the pope is a source of political cues.

**Religious Elites and Influence on Mass Opinion**

In recent years, scholars of the study of religion and politics have focused on the political activities of religious leaders. Several studies have investigated the political behavior of clergy themselves (e.g., Beatty and Walter, 1989; Crawford, Deckman, and Braun, 2001; Djupe and Gilbert, 2002b, 2003; Guth et al., 1997; Hunter, 1987; Jelen, 1993; Olson, 2000), including the political attitudes and behavior of Catholic priests (e.g., Jelen, 2003). However, “considerably less is known,” Jelen (2001:16–17) suggests, “about the consequences of political activity among clergy” (emphasis in original) because, as Djupe and Gilbert (2002a:5) note, the empirical evidence linking clergy to congregants is “very limited” (see also Welch et al., 1993). The role of religious elites as cue givers and opinion leaders may be, Guth (2001:41) concludes, “the most obdurate problem” of the study of religion and politics.

Scholars have attempted to tackle this problem in a variety of ways. Some (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert, 2003) have studied the political messages of clergy from the perspective of clergy themselves. Others (e.g., Welch et al., 1993) focus on churchgoers’ perceptions of political cues given by clergy. Although church members sometimes misperceive political messages delivered from the pulpit (Djupe and Gilbert, 2002a), the ability of clergy to speak to a “captive” audience provides a powerful means of potential influence.

**Catholic Priests and Bishops and Catholic Opinion**

Catholic clergy may be especially influential. In contrast to most other religions, the Catholic faith emphasizes doctrine and tradition over individual conscience on matters of faith and morals. Although many Catholics ignore church doctrine on issues such as divorce, the views of at least some Catholics may be influenced by church teaching. To the extent this is true, one would expect a convergence of opinion between clergy and certain congregants on religious issues that have political implications.

Studies of Catholic priests and parishioners support this supposition. Jelen’s recent (2003) study of Catholic priests shows that local pastors are
almost uniformly opposed to the death penalty and abortion. Studies (e.g., Welch and Leege, 1991) show that American Catholics who attend mass regularly, and who are thus more likely to be exposed to cues from the pulpit, are more likely to oppose legalized abortion (Perl and McClintock, 2001; Welch, Leege, and Cavendish, 1995) and the death penalty (Bjarnason and Welch, 2004), and to take conservative positions on values issues (Jelen and Chandler, 1996). Since these positions are consistent with those of the Catholic hierarchy, Welch and Leege (1991) suggest that where church leaders give clear and unambiguous cues, particularly religious Catholics take heed. For American Catholics, Leege (1992:203) suggests that “cue-giving by religious leaders makes some difference in the political position of the followers.”

Studies of the influence of Catholic bishops, however, do not support this view. Several studies looked at the influence of Catholic bishops following the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ high-profile apostolic letters on the economy and nuclear deterrence in the 1980s. These analyses showed that Catholic opinion at the aggregate level moved toward the bishops’ position of supporting a nuclear freeze (Gallup and Castelli, 1987), yet parish priests devoted little attention to the bishops’ pastorals in their communications with parishioners (Wald, 1997) and only about one-quarter of Catholics perceived their local clergy as having spoken out on these issues (Welch et al., 1993). Less than a third of American Catholics were aware of the pastoral letter on nuclear arms, and only a bare majority of those who were aware of it supported its message (Davidson, 1989). Studies (Davidson, 1989; Wald, 1992) suggested, moreover, that the change in Catholic opinion was short lived, as Catholic opinion merged with non-Catholic opinion on defense issues within two years of the peace pastoral. Addressing this issue experimentally, McKeown and Carlson (1987) found that Catholic college students were no more likely than evangelical Protestant students to adopt positions on a number of issues consistent with the bishops’ pastoral letters when the source was attributed to “the American Catholic Bishops” than otherwise. Overall, the research that addresses directly the influence of the U.S. bishops on Catholic opinion suggests that this influence is limited at best.

**Pope John Paul II and Catholic Opinion**

The pope, in contrast, is in a strong position of potential influence. During his tenure, the news media devoted substantial, even inordinate, attention to John Paul’s pronouncements on abortion, divorce, gay rights, the death penalty, euthanasia, human cloning, and other controversial topics (cf. Shaw, 1995). Catholics who paid even passing attention to print or television news during his papacy are likely to have been exposed to the pope’s pronouncements on some of these issues. For Catholics who received
these messages, the pope may have been a source of cues on policy judgments with direct linkages to church teaching because the pope, when speaking for the whole church, “judges and defines what is to be believed or rejected by all the faithful” (Hardon, 1981:229–30). For Catholics, schooled in the doctrine of papal infallibility, the exhortations of John Paul II on moral policy issues may have carried substantial weight.

But the pope’s influence is unlikely to have been uniform across all Catholics. Though he was highly regarded among majorities of Catholics and non-Catholics alike, John Paul II was controversial both within and without the church for speaking out on social issues. Catholics who viewed the pope favorably should have been more likely to take cues from him on these issues. I test the hypothesis that Catholics who held John Paul in high regard were more likely to take political cues from him and, in consequence, oppose the death penalty and abortion. I test the association between favorability toward the pope and attitudes on these two issues. Let me be clear that in testing the association between evaluations of the pope and attitudes toward the death penalty and abortion I infer, but do not test directly, papal influence. I do not, indeed cannot, given the limited available data, show definitive proof of the influence of John Paul II. Rather, this study is intended as a first step in exploring the possibility that the pope acts as a political cue-giver for American Catholics.

In the analysis I control for a number of spiritual, political, and social factors that may influence attitudes toward the death penalty and abortion. I include both Catholics and non-Catholics in order to compare the two and, among non-Catholics, differentiate among Protestants, evangelical Protestants, Jews, and “seculars.” I allow for the possibility that religiousness itself may affect these attitudes by controlling for religiosity. The two most influential political predispositions in public opinion research are party identification and ideology. I control for these as well. Finally, I control for potentially influential social characteristics, including race (specifically, whether respondents are African American or Hispanic), education, sex, and age.

In the next section, I present the data and method. Following that, in the analysis, I test my hypothesis that Catholics who viewed John Paul II favorably are more opposed to the death penalty and abortion. Finally, to the extent the data allow, I rule out the alternative hypothesis that the causal arrow points in the opposite direction—that Catholics who looked favorably on the pope did so because he agreed with them on the issues. Overall, the results, though explicitly an indirect examination of cue-giving, help to cast light on the possible influence of the pope on Catholic attitudes.
Data and Method

The data for this analysis come from four sources.

- A national RDD (random-digit-dialing) telephone survey of 1,536 Americans (including 423 Catholics) conducted by the New York Times (NYT) and CBS in September 1995.
- An RDD NYT telephone survey of 1,615 residents of New York State (including 567 Catholics) conducted in November 1999.
- A national RDD telephone survey of 852 Americans (including 413 Catholics) conducted by ABC News in August 1987.
- A national RDD telephone survey of 1,000 Americans (including 272 Catholics) conducted by ABC News in January 1998.

I used these four surveys because each had the relevant variables needed to do the analysis and because each was conducted during the papacy of John Paul II and before the pedophilia scandal among Catholic priests began to make regular headlines in the news. I excluded data collected after the scandal emerged to avoid the possibility that views of the scandal, or the pope’s handling of the scandal, might confound the results presented here.

Dependent Variables

Opinions of the Death Penalty and Abortion. The 1995 survey included a standard question on the death penalty: “Do you favor [coded 1] or oppose [coded 0] the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?” The other three surveys included one or more questions on abortion. The abortion question on the 1999 survey asked whether “abortion should not be permitted” (coded 1), “abortion should be available but under stricter limits than it is now” (coded 2), or “abortion should be generally available to those who want it” (coded 3). The 1998 survey included seven questions that asked whether abortion should be legal or illegal, each in a particular circumstance or situation, ranging in severity from “when the woman’s life is endangered” to “when the woman is not married and does not want the baby.” For these seven items I created an additive scale of support for legalized abortion across the seven situations, coded to range from 1 (all seven situations should be illegal) to 8 (all seven should be legal). Finally, the 1987 survey included a dichotomous question that asked whether respondents agree (coded 1) or disagree (coded 0) with the statement that “a woman should be able to get an abortion if she decides she wants one no matter what the reason.”
Independent Variables

To facilitate comparing the effects of the independent variables to one another, I coded all independent variables to range from 0 to 1.

Evaluations of John Paul II. Each of the four surveys included a dichotomous question that asked whether respondents had an overall “favorable” (coded 1) or “unfavorable” or “not favorable” (coded 0) view of John Paul II.

Catholic Identification. In the analysis, I divided the sample by Catholic identification to assess, separately for Catholics and non-Catholics, the effect of papal evaluations on attitudes toward the death penalty and abortion.

Spiritual Control Variables. I included dummy variables for Protestant, evangelical Protestant,2 Jewish, and “no religion.” For the religiosity index, the 1995 data set included five items, including questions that asked whether respondents would describe their feelings about their religion as “strong” or “not so strong,” the importance of religion in their lives, frequency of church attendance, frequency of prayer, and frequency with which they use their religious beliefs “to help [them] decide what to do.” The 1999 data set included three of the same items: religious strength, importance, and frequency of church attendance. The 1987 questions asked about church attendance and whether respondents are “very religious, somewhat religious, or not religious at all.” For the 1995 and 1999 data sets, which included five and three religiosity items, respectively, I created religiosity scales based on the factor scores of confirmatory factor analyses.3 For the 1987 data set, I created the religiosity scale by averaging together the standardized values of the two items.4

2The “evangelical” question actually asked whether or not respondents think of themselves “as evangelical, fundamentalist, or charismatic,” and did not appear in the 1998 or 1987 data sets.
3I estimated both CFAs using Browne’s (1984) asymptotic distribution-free (ADF) method of estimation. This involves estimating the models based on the polychoric correlations (rather than covariances) and an asymptotic weight matrix using weighted least squares (see Bollen 1989:ch. 9). The religiosity scale of the 1995 data set showed a good fit: chi-square (5) = 21, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 1.0, AGFI = 0.99. The religiosity scale for the 1999 data set, with only three items, did not have enough information in the model to estimate fit statistics. An additive scale based on the standardized values of these three items had an alpha of 0.75. I generated an additive scale for the two religiosity items in the 1987 data set because a CFA of the model would be unidentified.
4The 1998 data set did not include religiosity items.
Political Control Variables. Party identification: 0 = Democrat, 0.25 = lean Democrat, 0.50 = independent, 0.75 = lean Republican, 1 = Republican.5 Ideology: 0 = liberal, 0.5 = moderate, 1 = conservative.6

Social Characteristics Control Variables. Race: Dummy variables for African American and Hispanic. Education: 0 = did not finish high school, 0.5 = HS graduate, 1 = some college or more. Sex: 1 = female, 0 = male. Age: 0 = under 18–29, 0.3333 = 30–44, 0.6666 = 45–64, 1 = over 64. Income: 0 = under $15,000, 0.25 = $15,000–30,000, 0.50 = $30,000–50,000, 0.75 = $50,000–75,000, 1 = over $75,000.7

To test the hypothesis that Catholics who esteemed the pope are more likely to oppose the death penalty and abortion, for each of these four data sets I regressed opinion of the death penalty (or abortion) on evaluation of the pope and the control variables. Using probit (1987 and 1995 data sets) or ordered probit (1998 and 1999 data sets), I estimated two models for each data set—one for Catholics and one for non-Catholics—in order to demonstrate that the stipulated influence of John Paul occurs for Catholics but not non-Catholics. In the next section, I briefly discuss descriptive statistics of Catholic and non-Catholic opinions toward the death penalty and abortion. Following that I present the results of these eight models.

Results

In these data, Catholic and non-Catholic opinions toward the death penalty and abortion are consistent with prior research. On the death penalty, there is essentially no difference between Catholics and non-Catholics. In the 1995 data set almost three-quarters (74 percent) of both groups said they “favored” the death penalty “for persons convicted of murder.” However, more recent data suggest this support has waned among members of both groups (Bendyna and Perl, 2000; Duin, 2005). On abortion, Catholic respondents to the 1999 New York State survey were twice as likely as non-Catholics (25 percent vs. 12 percent) to take the position that “abortion should not be permitted” and one-third less likely (29 percent vs. 59 percent) to adopt the position that abortion should be “generally available.” Although these data show a clear difference between Catholics and non-

5The PID question from the 1999 NYT New York State data set was coded 0 = Democrat, 0.50 = independent, 1 = Republican.
6The 1987 data set did not include party ID or ideology questions.
7Income items on the 1998 and 1987 ABC News surveys differ slightly from the other two. Income in the 1998 data set is coded 1 = over $75,000, 0.75 = $50,000–75,000, 0.50 = $30,000–50,000, 0.25 = $12,000–30,000, 0 = under $12,000. Income in the 1987 data set is coded 1 = over $50,000, 0.6666 = $30,000–50,000, 0.3333 = $12,000–30,000, 0 = under $12,000.
Catholics, abortion attitudes are often complex and contingent on circumstance (Hunter, 1994), so no single opinion item can be expected to do justice to attitudes toward this issue. Moreover, the abortion questions on the 1998 survey, as well as other studies (e.g., Bendyna and Perl, 2000), suggest that a substantial proportion of Catholics favor legalized abortion under more difficult circumstances, such as when the pregnancy is the result of rape or the baby is likely to be handicapped.

The results of the eight models are presented in Table 1. Consistent with the supposition that Catholics who evaluated John Paul II favorably may have been likely to take cues from him, the results show that Catholics favorable toward the pope were significantly more likely to oppose the death penalty (Column 1) and abortion (Columns 3, 5, and 7). The results contrast with those of non-Catholics, who should be less likely to take cues from the pope. The results of these four models (in Columns 2, 4, 6, and 8) show that non-Catholics who evaluated the pope favorably were not more likely to oppose the death penalty or abortion. This difference between Catholics and non-Catholics is significant at \( p < 0.05 \) for each of the four pairs of models. In fact, in the non-Catholic death penalty model (Column 2) and the 1998 non-Catholic abortion model (Column 8), non-Catholics who evaluated the pope favorably were significantly more likely to favor the death penalty and abortion—the opposite of the association we would expect to find if non-Catholics were taking political cues from the pope. These associations among non-Catholics are not robust, since they are significant in only two of the four models. Taken together, the models show that different processes are at work for Catholics and non-Catholics. Catholics who evaluated John Paul II favorably are more likely to oppose the death penalty and abortion, but the same is not true for non-Catholics.

**Controlling for Reciprocal Effects**

This analysis does not rule out the possibility that the causal relation flows in the opposition direction—that Catholics formed their evaluations of John Paul II based on whether or not he agreed with them on these issues. To test for this, I identified a nonrecursive model in the 1995 data set that estimates the reciprocal relation between favorability toward the pope and opinion of the death penalty. Unfortunately, in the other three data sets I was unable to identify models that would allow me to test for reciprocal causation between evaluations of the pope and attitudes toward abortion. I estimated the reciprocal effects in LISREL separately for Catholics and non-Catholics, regressing opinion toward the death penalty and evaluation of the pope on each other, controlling for the effects of partisanship, ideology, religiosity,

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8The effect of papal evaluation on abortion attitudes among Catholics in the 1998 data set (Column 7) is marginally statistically significant at \( p = 0.08 \).
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<td>0.25* (0.12)</td>
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## TABLE 1—continued

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+ *p ≤ 0.10; **p ≤ 0.05; ***p ≤ 0.01 (two-tailed tests).  
† No evangelical question in the 1987 or 1998 data sets.  
‡ No religiosity questions in the 1998 data set.  
§ No ideology or party identification questions in the 1987 data set.  
NOTES: Entries are probit (1987 and 1995 data sets) or ordered probit (1998 and 1999 data sets) estimates. Standard errors in parentheses. Cutpoints omitted from ordered probit models. All predictors coded to range from 0 to 1.
evangelical identification, race (Hispanic), education, sex, and age on both opinion toward the death penalty and evaluations of the pope. A portion of the model is presented in Figure 1.

The results show that among Catholics there is no reverse causation between evaluations of the pope and attitudes toward the death penalty. Controlling for a host of factors, the model suggests that, among Catholics, evaluation of the pope drives opinion of the death penalty, but opinion of the death penalty does not drive evaluation of the pope. Among non-Catholics, neither relation is statistically significant. In the case of the death penalty at least, these results are consistent with the hypothesis that John Paul II was a political cue-giver for Catholics who held the pope in high regard, and would seem to cast doubt on the alternative hypothesis of reverse causation.

To identify the model, I allowed age to predict attitudes toward the death penalty but not toward the pope, and the item that asked whether or not “it’s appropriate for religious leaders to take a position on what the government should do for the poor” to predict attitudes toward the pope but not toward the death penalty. I excluded the indicator of whether respondents were African American because there were very few black Catholics in the sample and the model did not converge when this racial indicator was included. Because both endogenous variables are categorical, I estimated the model using Browne’s (1984) asymptotic distribution-free procedure. The model showed a good overall fit: RMSEA = 0.05; CFI = 0.98; NNFI = 0.96; chi-square = 209.

A test of the significance of the interaction between Catholic identification and the parameter estimates displayed in Figure 1 was statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$ (chi-square difference $(2) = 8.73$).
causation—that people formed their evaluations of the pope based on whether or not he shared their position on this issue.

Discussion

The passing away of Pope John Paul II in April 2005 brought forth an outpouring of affection from his many admirers. Obituaries noted his influence in international affairs, efforts to promote religious and political freedom around the world, and role in hastening the demise of Soviet communism. Did he also influence Catholic opinion in the United States? The purpose of this article was to begin to address this question.

I posited and tested the hypothesis that Catholics who esteemed the pope were more likely to take cues from him, opposing issues that he himself opposed in his public pronouncements. The results reported here are consistent with this supposition. Controlling for a host of other factors and, in the case of the death penalty, reverse causation, I showed that Catholics who had a favorable view of John Paul II were more likely to oppose the death penalty and support restrictions on abortion.

The data are consistent with this hypothesis, but they hardly provide ironclad proof of papal influence. This study has at least four limitations. First, it provides indirect, not direct, support the hypothesized causal relation between papal cue-giving and influence on Catholic opinion. Future research might establish a more direct causal relation between papal influence and Catholic opinion experimentally, presenting Catholic respondents with a persuasive message on a fictitious issue, manipulating the direction of the message (either favoring or opposing the issue), and its attribution to the pope (either attributing or not attributing the message to the pope), and then determining whether the message is more persuasive when attributed to the pope than otherwise. If Catholic participants who evaluate the pope positively are more persuaded by the message when it is attributed to the pope than otherwise, this will help to establish causation. This analysis would be complicated by the fact that there is a new pope, Benedict XVI. Even so, such an analysis would go a long way in testing papal influence.

Second, the results reported here do not rule out the possibility that the demonstrated relation between evaluations of the pope and Catholic opinion toward the death penalty and abortion may have occurred through respondents’ implicit projection of their own opinions toward these issues onto the pope. Projection occurs when a person projects his or her view of an issue onto a liked target, or the opposite view onto a disliked target (Krosnick, 1990). In this case, respondents who viewed the pope favorably may have implicitly assumed that the pope shared their views on these issues, and respondents who viewed the pope negatively may have implicitly perceived the pope as disagreeing with them on the issues. However, if this were true, it would negate the results presented here, as respondents who
evaluated the pope favorably and support the death penalty and abortion would project those views onto the pope as much as respondents who evaluated the pope favorably and oppose these issues. Projection, then, would seem to pose less of a problem.

Third, this analysis assumes, but does not demonstrate, that Catholics heard and correctly perceived John Paul’s messages on the death penalty and abortion. Future research might investigate in greater detail media coverage of the pope, Catholic attentiveness to it, and its influence on Catholic perceptions and attitudes. Finally, the analysis presented here was limited to available measures in commercial surveys. Future data-collection efforts might develop more nuanced measures of perceptions of the pope and Catholic beliefs.

Despite these limitations, this study casts light on the role of the pope as a likely political influence on American Catholics. Opposition to the death penalty and abortion differ in their ideological alignments, yet they shared the outspoken opposition of Pope John Paul II. The results of this study suggest that Catholics heard the pope’s exhortations on these issues, and those who viewed him favorably heeded the call.

REFERENCES


