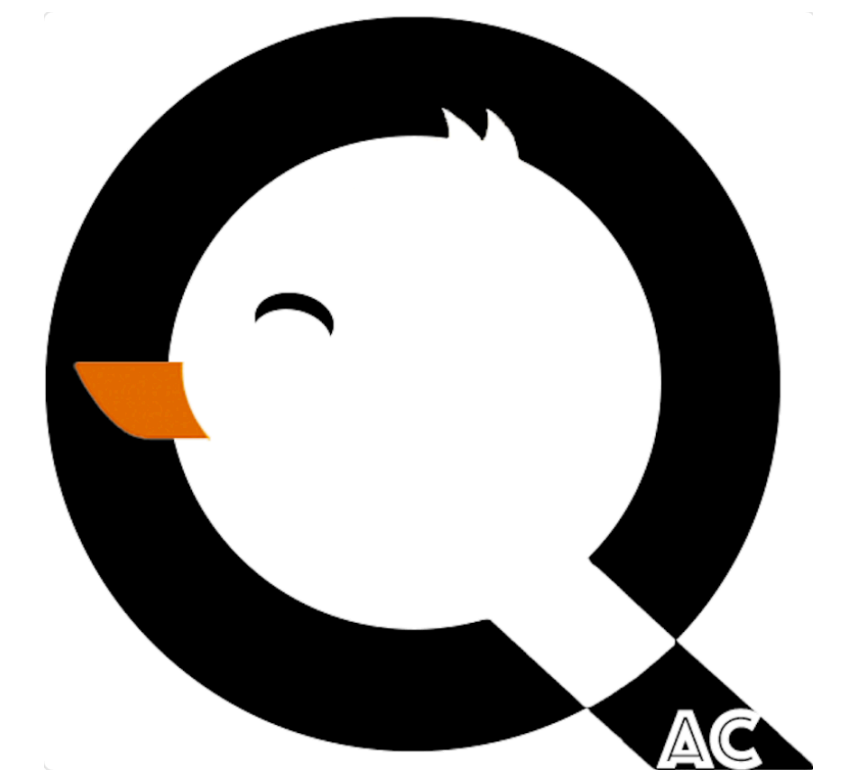




# Racial Differences in the Association between Religious Affiliation and Support for Capital Punishment among U.S. Adults

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## Introduction

- Capital punishment remains a central and contested feature of the U.S. criminal justice system. Public support for the death penalty matters because elected officials respond to voters when considering reforms and limits on capital punishment.
- Prior research shows that religion and race both shape punitive attitudes: punitive images of God, biblical literalism, and religious fundamentalism are linked to higher support for the death penalty, while trusting the criminal justice system and being White are also associated with greater support. Much of this work, however, focuses on religiosity or religious orientation rather than formal affiliation categories and often uses older data.
- This project uses the 2024 General Social Survey to examine whether support for the death penalty differs across religious affiliation categories and whether those differences vary across racial groups. Together, these questions ask whether denominational affiliation has a uniform effect on death penalty support, or whether religion only matters for capital punishment in specific racial contexts.

## Methods

### Sample

- Data come from the 2024 General Social Survey, a nationally representative survey of adults living in non-institutionalized U.S. households. The GSS uses multistage probability sampling and interviews one randomly selected adult (18+) per household. The analytic sample includes 3,309 respondents with non-missing values on religious affiliation, race, and attitudes toward the death penalty.

### Measures

- Religious affiliation:** recoded into Christian (all non-Catholic Christian denominations), Catholic, Jewish, NonAff (no religious affiliation), and Other Faith (all remaining groups combined)
- Race:** recoded into White, Black, and Other, with the Other category combining all non-White and non-Black respondents.
- Support for the death penalty:** based on "Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?" recoded into Favor versus Oppose; non-substantive responses are treated as missing.

## Research Questions

- Is religious affiliation associated with support for the death penalty among U.S. adults?
- Does the relationship between religious affiliation and support for the death penalty differ across racial groups (White, Black, Other)?
- After accounting for race, does religious affiliation still help explain variation in support for capital punishment, or is its influence concentrated within particular racial groups?

## Results

### Univariate

- Christians form the largest religious group in the sample, followed by NonAff respondents and Catholics; Jewish and Other Faith categories are much smaller. The sample is majority White, with smaller proportions of Black and Other race respondents.
- Among valid responses, about 60% favor the death penalty and about 40% oppose it, indicating that support remains more common than opposition, although the death penalty item also contains substantial missing data that should be noted.

### Bivariate

- In the full sample, support for the death penalty clearly differs across religious affiliations. Christians and NonAff respondents show a higher proportion of supporters than opponents, Catholics appear more evenly split, and Jewish and Other Faith groups are small with no strong pattern. When race is added as a third variable, the relationship becomes conditional.
- Among White respondents, Christians and NonAff individuals show substantially higher support for capital punishment and clear denominational differences. Among Black respondents, overall support is lower and there is much less variation by affiliation. For respondents in the Other race category, small cell sizes limit interpretation, but there is no evidence of the large denominational gaps seen among Whites.

### Multivariate

- Logistic regression analyses confirm that religious affiliation is associated with death penalty support, but that relationship is strongly shaped by race. As shown in the faceted bar chart, White respondents display clear variation across religious groups — Christian and Catholic respondents show the largest gaps between Favor and Oppose — while Black and Other respondents show far more similar counts across all affiliations, indicating that denominational differences in support are concentrated among White respondents.
- When race is added to the model, it emerges as the dominant predictor. The forest plot shows that the Race: White (OR = 2.91) and Race: Other (OR = 3.04) coefficients sit far to the right of the reference line with tight confidence intervals, dwarfing the religion coefficients in both size and precision (both  $p < .001$ ). By contrast, Christian and Jewish respondents show no significant difference from Catholics, and NonAff (OR = 0.69) and Other Faith (OR = 0.64) actually become less likely than Catholics to favor capital punishment once race is controlled — a reversal from the religion-only model.

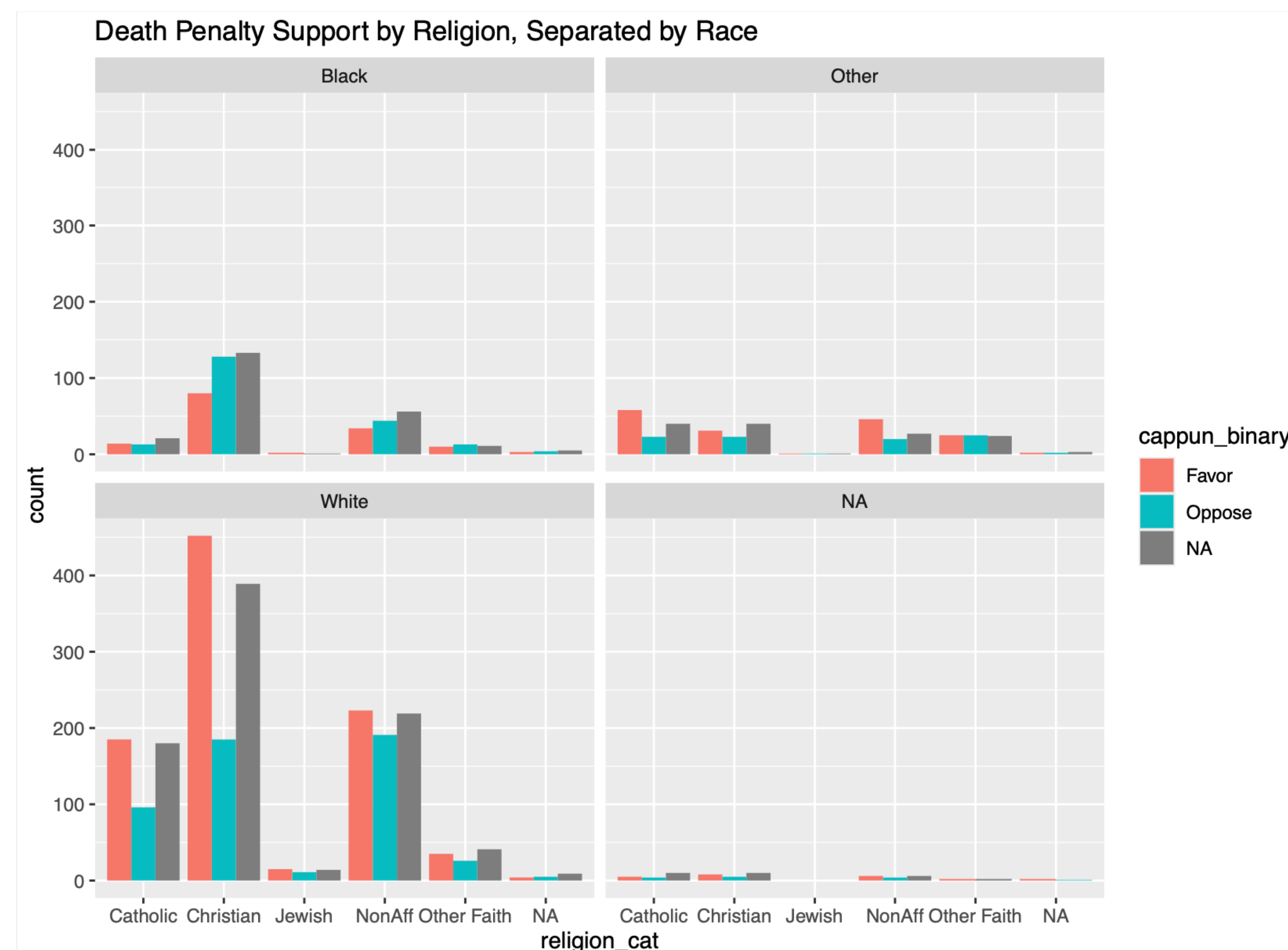


Fig. 1. Death penalty support by religion, separated by race.

### Logistic Regression: Odds Ratios

Model controls for Religion, Race, Age, Education, Degree | Ref: Catholic, Black

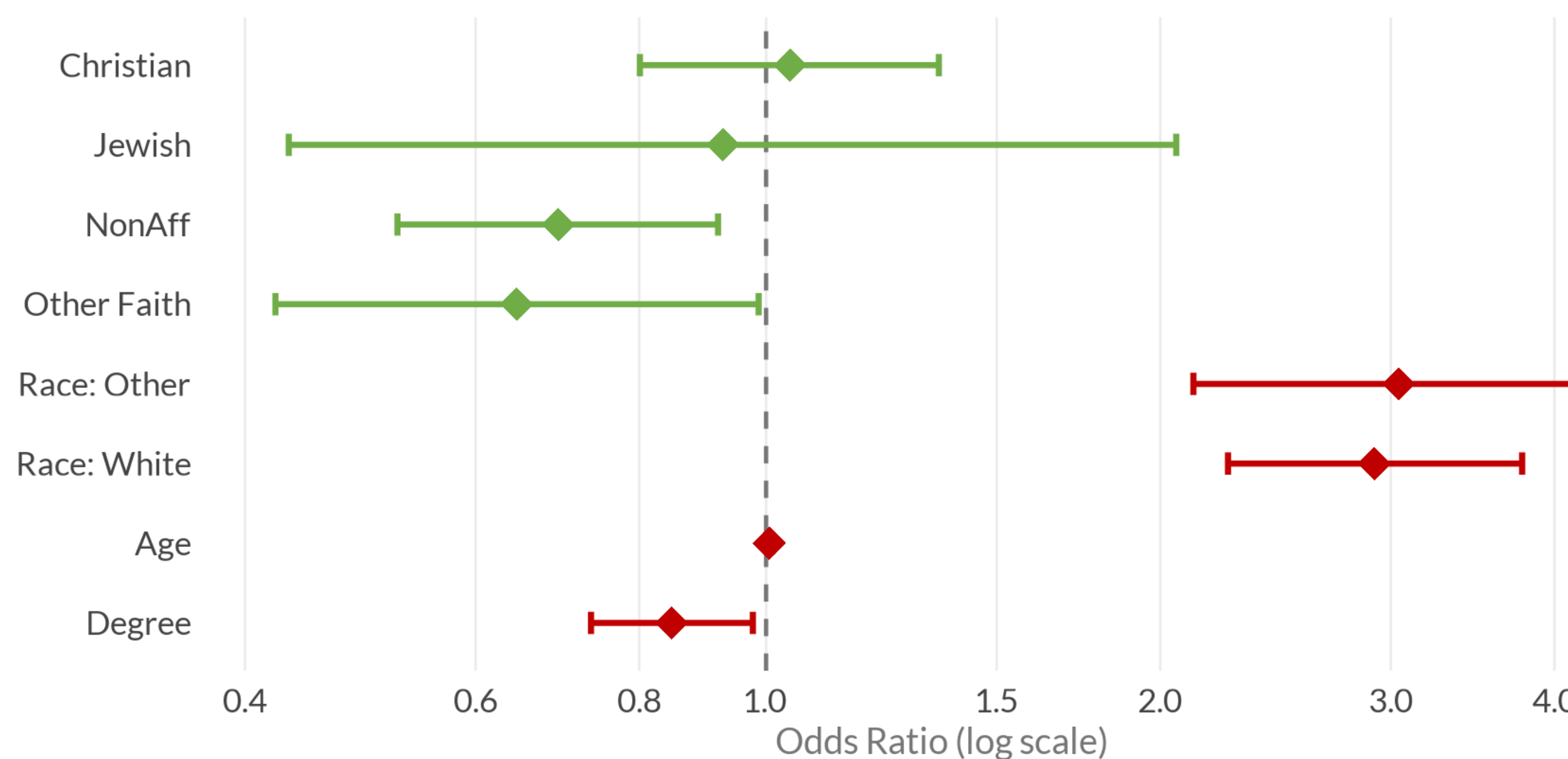


Fig. 2 Logistic regression odds ratios for death penalty support by religion, race, age, and degree

### Multivariate (cont.)

- These multivariate findings reinforce the descriptive and bivariate results and support the conclusion that race moderates the relationship between religious affiliation and support for capital punishment. Religious affiliation clearly matters for predicting death penalty support among White respondents, but much less so among Black and Other respondents, where the Favor-Oppose distribution remains relatively flat across all affiliations. Rather than religion exerting a uniform effect across all groups, the pattern of coefficients is most consistent with race as the primary structuring force in shaping punitive attitudes.

## Discussion

- Across descriptive, subgroup, and regression analyses, religious affiliation is significantly associated with death penalty support ( $X^2(4) = 18.44, p = .001$ ), but this relationship is strongly shaped by race — once race is controlled, the direction of the NonAff and Other Faith effects reverses, indicating the initial religion signal was substantially confounded by the racial composition of those groups.
- Denominational differences are most pronounced among White respondents, who show both higher overall support and larger contrasts across religious groups ( $X^2(4) = 33.91, p < .001, r = .111$ ), with NonAff and Other Faith showing meaningfully lower support than Christians and Catholics.
- Black respondents show lower overall support and little differentiation by religious affiliation ( $X^2(4) = 4.98, p = .289, r = -.051$ ), suggesting that religion does not structure death penalty attitudes the same way across racial groups.
- Race is the strongest independent predictor in the full model — White and Other-race respondents are nearly three times more likely than Black respondents to favor capital punishment (OR = 2.91 and 3.04, respectively, both  $p < .001$ ) — supporting the argument that race moderates religion's effect on punitive attitudes rather than religion exerting a uniform influence across all groups.
- These findings extend prior research by using recent 2024 GSS data and focusing explicitly on affiliation categories, and align with previous work showing persistent racial divides in death penalty support alongside religious influences on punitive ideology.
- Future research should incorporate political ideology, region, and more detailed measures of religiosity and spirituality to provide a fuller account of how intersecting identities shape attitudes toward capital punishment. Limitations include the cross-sectional design (no causal inference can be drawn), substantial missingness on the death penalty item (37.5%), and an unstable Jewish subsample ( $n = 46$ ).

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