



## **OUR VIEW: A national poll shows Americans are increasingly supportive of alternatives to the death penalty, for all the right reasons**

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The death penalty still has plenty of fans, and those who want to see it abolished would be fools not to acknowledge that fact. But there is a growing awareness on the part of many Americans that capital punishment may not be worth the risks or costs it carries.

That much is clear in the results of a national poll released last week by the Death Penalty Information Center in Washington, D.C.

Billed as one of the most comprehensive surveys of American views on the death penalty, the poll involved 1,500 registered voters, was conducted by Lake Research Partners and had a margin of error of 2.5 percent.

It found 61 percent of respondents would choose a punishment other than death for defendants convicted of murder. Most of those polled favored a sentence of life in prison with no chance for parole, which in Alabama is the only choice other than death for those found guilty of capital crimes.

Further, the poll suggests the solid reasoning behind the retreating support for the ultimate, most unforgiving form of punishment.

Among the chief points troubling poll respondents were valid concerns about how fairly and accurately the death penalty is applied. Advanced scientific techniques such as DNA testing have shown that our justice system, with all its fine attributes, doesn't always get it right.

In just one example, the Innocence Project recently used DNA tests to prove a hair that was the only physical evidence linking Claude Jones to a murder in Texas was not, in fact, his. So, great, right? Wrong. Jones was executed in 2000 for the crime he insisted he didn't commit. Americans rightly understand the risk of executing the wrong person can't be tolerated, especially when there is a reasonable alternative like life without parole.

The poll also reflected Americans' awareness that the extra legal scrutiny demanded by death-penalty cases adds to the suffering experienced by victims' families. The cycle of appeals, reversals and retrials is

necessary to avoid an unthinkable miscarriage of justice, but it is excruciating for those waiting for the case to come to an end.

In addition, the poll results show Americans are troubled by the costs involved with pursuing death sentences, especially at a time when public services are being cut because of budget shortfalls.

As strange as it sounds, it's cheaper to lock killers away for the rest of their lives than to execute them. And not just a little cheaper, either, based on studies conducted around the country. A newspaper found Florida could save \$51 million a year by sentencing killers to life without parole rather than death.

It's no wonder, then, that many Americans aren't sold on the death penalty. Although capital punishment surely has strong support in Alabama and elsewhere, a number of us would just as soon see killers locked away for life than put to death.

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