

Nebraska abolishes death penalty

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The US state of Nebraska abolished the death penalty Wednesday, overriding the governor's veto and making it the 19th state in the country to ban capital punishment.

The vote came after Republican Governor Pete Ricketts vetoed the bill the day before, claiming that it "sends a message to criminals that Nebraska will be soft on crime."

Nebraska's unicameral legislature requires 30 of the 49 senators to override the governor's veto, with the final vote Wednesday being 30-19—the narrowest possible margin for the measure to pass. Sixteen Republicans joined with 13 Democrats and one independent voted in support of the override. The bill will effectively replace capital punishment with life imprisonment in the state.

Governor Ricketts issued a statement condemning the Legislature declaring, "My words cannot express how appalled I am that we have lost a critical tool to protect law enforcement and Nebraska families." Proponents of the death penalty have announced that they intend to place the issue on a statewide ballot in 2016.

Nebraska joins six other states and the District of Columbia in abolishing the death penalty since 2007: Maryland in 2013; Connecticut in 2012; Illinois in 2011; New Mexico in 2009 and New Jersey in 2007. North Dakota was the last conservative-dominated state to ban capital punishment in 1973.

Senator Ernie Chambers, an Independent who sponsored the bill, had introduced it 38 times. "I've been pushing this for 40 years, but of all this time it's never been done," he said. "If it could be done by one man, it would have been done a long time ago."

Nebraska has not executed an inmate since the 1997 electrocution of Robert E. Williams. In 2009, the state adopted lethal injection as its method of execution but has been unable to obtain the chemicals required for executions as European manufacturers have refused to

sell them to prisons in the United States.

Legislators voting to abolish the death penalty cited arguments that capital punishment is ineffective in deterring crime and expensive compared to serving a life sentence. Others have cited religious or moral reasoning, quoting biblical references.

"I've said frequently, if any other program was as inefficient and as costly as this has been, we would've gotten rid of it a long time ago," said Senator Colby Coash, a Republican and death penalty opponent. According to a report by the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice, it costs \$90,000 a year more on average to keep an inmate on death row than to give him a life sentence without parole.

Nebraska's decision comes amid a growing opposition to capital punishment following a series of botched executions and as several states are seeking more barbaric methods of execution.

Gallup public opinion polls show that there is a steady nationwide decline of support for capital punishment since the 1990s. Public support for capital punishment was at its all-time high of 80 percent during the Clinton administration.

Support in favor of the practice had dwindled down to 64 percent in 2010 with nearly 30 percent opposed. Moreover, according to a 2010 poll by Lake Research Partners, 61 percent of voters would choose a punishment other than the death penalty for murder.

Most recently, a series of "botched" executions have revealed to public view the barbarity of capital punishment. In January 16, 2014, Dennis McGuire was injected with midazolam and hydromorphone; as it slowly took effect, he gasped for air for some 25 minutes. McGuire's family filed a lawsuit alleging that he experienced "repeated cycles of snorting, gurgling and arching his back, appearing to writhe in pain."

April 29, 2014, Clayton D. Lockett suffered an agonizing execution after being injected with an

untested lethal concoction of three drugs. The Oklahoma inmate shook uncontrollably for 15 minutes when authorities called off the execution. He died 45 minutes later of a heart attack.

As of May 13, 2015, according to the Death Penalty Information Center, 1,408 inmates have been executed since 1976. Since that time, over 140 people have been released from death row based on new evidence.

Internationally, the US stands at fifth place for most executions carried out annually, after China—which executes more people than the rest of the world combined—and Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, according to Amnesty International.

Despite growing opposition to capital punishment, states are finding alternatives to lethal injections in order to continue executions. In March, the Utah governor signed a bill reinstating execution by firing squad. Arkansas, Wyoming and Idaho have also considered reinstating firing squads. Next month, the United State Supreme Court is expected to rule on the legality of lethal injections.



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