

# US public opinion turns against capital punishment

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A recent study by the Pew Research Center documents a steep fall in support for the death penalty, one of America's most barbaric and anti-democratic institutions.

The survey conducted between late August and early September found that only 49 percent of Americans favor the death penalty for people convicted of murder, the lowest such figure in four decades, and a full seven-point decline since 2015 (from 56 percent). The decline is even more drastic when considering that 22 years ago the figure stood at a robust 80 percent.

At that time, 1994, only 16 percent of Americans opposed the death penalty, in contrast with the 2016 figure of 42 percent.

The decline spans all three categories of political identification in the survey: Democrat, Republican and Independent. Even among self-described Republicans, who tend to favor the death penalty, the decline in support is significant, starting with a high of 87 percent in 1996, down to 77 percent in 2015 and 72 percent in 2016.

The decline is even more precipitous for Independents (79 percent to 44 percent) and Democrats (71 percent to 24 percent).

The Pew Research Center study on the same topic from 2015 found that 71 percent of those polled felt that the death penalty would result in killing innocent people, while only 26 percent believed there were adequate safeguards in place to prevent the execution of innocent persons. Thirty-one percent thought that the death penalty was unjustified under any circumstances.

This general change in attitudes towards capital punishment finds expression in the judicial system as well, with fewer juries sentencing people to death. As the end of 2016 approaches, there have been only 30 people sentenced to death in the United States, the

lowest number since the early 1970s. Twenty people were executed in the US this year, the fewest since 1991, when the figure was 14. At its highest in 1999 the figure was 98 executions.

One cannot attribute the sea change in public sentiment regarding capital punishment to any single factor. However, the 2014 botched executions of Dennis McGuire, Clayton D. Lockett and Joseph R. Wood certainly horrified broad sections of the populace. These and similar cases exposed the cruel and unusual character of the lethal injection combinations of midazolam, vecuronium bromide and potassium chloride, which tend to result in seizure-like writhing and other obvious symptoms of the most intense human suffering.

It is likewise hard to imagine that recent artistic productions showing the plight of the accused and/or imprisoned have no impact on this change. The popular NPR podcast *Serial*, for example, detailed the wrongful murder conviction of a Maryland high school student, in part due to racist, anti-Muslim overtones from the prosecution as well as bogus testimony from a cell phone expert who placed the defendant at the murder scene based on cell tower “pings.”

An even more gruesome tale of prosecutorial and police misconduct was the subject of the recent Netflix documentary series *Making a Murderer*, where Wisconsin law enforcement officials planted and modified evidence to frame a man, Steven Avery, who had a previous malicious prosecution claim against them. While a full discussion of this documentary is beyond the scope of this article, the series reveals the horrifying lengths through which the criminal justice system goes to destroy an innocent person.

Finally, the near daily occurrence of police killings of innocent people has taken its toll, undermining

confidence in the entire justice system, particularly as prosecutors bend and break the law to shield law enforcement officials from the legal consequences of their brutality.

An interesting aspect of the change in popular sentiment toward capital punishment is that it has happened against the political current, rather than drawing inspiration from it. In other words, no politician of any stature, from any bourgeois party has made a political issue of state-sponsored killing. Rather, Democrats and Republicans spar over who is the more reliable supporter of bourgeois law and order, including capital punishment.

Also worth noting is that the decline in support for the death penalty moved in *inverse proportion* to the successive US military assaults over the past 25 years in Panama, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Libya, Syria, Pakistan and Yemen.

One should not underestimate the meaning of this shift in sentiment against capital punishment, long a staple of American politics. It accompanies other leftward changes in popular consciousness, including growing signs of opposition to social inequality and the capitalist status quo as well as an increasingly positive view of socialism.



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