

# Marylanders support replacing death penalty

By more than a 2-1 margin, Maryland voters support replacing the state's death penalty with a life without parole prison sentence, according to the results of a poll commissioned by the Maryland Catholic Conference and released Feb. 28.

While 56 percent of those surveyed said they support the death penalty, 61 percent said they believed life without parole was an acceptable substitute for capital punishment. Only 27 percent said it was not.

The poll also found that legislators who vote for repeal would not likely face repercussions at election time. Nearly 30 percent of voters said they would be more likely to support such a legislator and 42 percent said it would not impact their vote.

Conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research, Inc., the poll surveyed 625 registered voters statewide Feb. 6-8. The margin for error is plus or minus 4 percent.

Support for life without parole over the death penalty has jumped by nearly 20 percentage points in less than a decade. Six years ago, a statewide poll by Gonzales/Arcott Research & Communications found that when asked which was the more appropriate sentence for murder, 45 percent favored execution, while 43 percent supported life without parole.

"The death penalty is not the powerful issue for voters that it might have been in the past," said Richard J. Dowling, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference.

"Clearly, the voters realize that the system needs to be reformed, and they will support their legislators who decide it makes the most sense to end the death penalty."

The poll suggests that as people learn more about how the death penalty works, they are less supportive, according to Dr. Trudy Conway, a philosophy professor at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg.

Dr. Conway leads an anti-death penalty movement at the Frederick County university and many of her students correspond with death row inmates.

Quoting Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J., a noted anti-death penalty activist, Dr. Conway said support for the death penalty is “a mile wide and only half an inch deep.”

“In the last three years, I’ve seen increasing opposition exactly for the reason Sister Helen says,” Dr. Conway said.

At the end of a class she offers on the death penalty, the professor said she asks her students if their views on the issue have changed once they learn how capital punishment is practiced. While some still support the death penalty, she said everyone inevitably opposes the way it is practiced.

Questions have been raised in Maryland about whether the death penalty is unfairly applied on the basis of race and geography.

“Some people still theoretically support it, but not once they are sufficiently informed about the details of how it’s practiced,” she said.

Jane Henderson, executive director of Maryland Citizens Against State Executions, said Marylanders “now understand that the system is broken beyond repair.”

“While about half of all Marylanders still like the death penalty in theory, the numbers clearly indicate that voters have given up on trying to implement it in practice,” she said. “The death penalty has failed, and that’s why even death penalty supporters are ready to get rid of it.”

The new poll showed that 72 percent of Democrats favor replacing the death penalty with life without parole, while 43 percent of Republicans and 56 percent of Independents favor that option. Nearly 80 percent of blacks and 56 percent of whites favored replacing the death penalty.

The Maryland General Assembly is considering a bill that would replace the death penalty with life without parole. Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar, and Gov. Martin J. O’Malley both testified in favor of the measure on Feb. 21.