

THE FIELD POLL

THE INDEPENDENT AND NON-PARTISAN SURVEY
OF PUBLIC OPINION ESTABLISHED IN 1947 AS
THE CALIFORNIA POLL BY MERVIN FIELD

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SEVEN IN TEN CALIFORNIANS CONTINUE TO SUPPORT CAPITAL PUNISHMENT.

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By Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field

The latest *Field Poll* finds seven in ten (70%) California voters continuing to support the death penalty as a punishment for serious crimes in this state. However, if given a choice, about as many voters would personally opt to impose a sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole (42%) as would choose the death penalty (41%) for someone convicted of first-degree murder.

While the death penalty has been on the books in California for many decades, it was temporarily halted in 1967. Executions resumed in 1992, but since 2006 they have been suspended. There are now 705 prisoners on Death Row in San Quentin State Prison. Their fate awaits the resolution of a number of legal challenges to the lethal injection procedures used to carry out the death sentence.

Trend of California public opinion on the death penalty

The Field Poll has been measuring public opinion toward the death penalty for over fifty years. In each measure there has been significantly greater support than opposition to the death penalty, although the size of the pluralities in favor have varied. In the period 1956-1971 supporters outnumbered opponents by margins ranging from 12 to 24 percentage points. Support for the death penalty expanded greatly in the late 1970's and continued throughout the decades of the 1980's and 1990's to where supporters outnumbered opponents by margins of five or six to one.

During the decade of the 2000's opposition to capital punishment increased somewhat. However, the current poll finds that support for the death penalty has again widened to a 70% to 24% margin.

Table 1
Trend of voter opinion toward the death penalty in California
(among registered voters)

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
July 2010	70%	24	6
2006	67%	29	4
2004	68%	26	6
2002	72%	25	3
2000	63%	30	7
1997	74%	20	6
1992	80%	14	6
1989	82%	14	4
1986	83%	14	3
1985	83%	15	2
1981	78%	17	5
1979	75%	20	5
1977	71%	23	6
1971	58%	34	8
1965	51%	39	10
1960	55%	35	10
1956	49%	29	22

Note: Surveys conducted prior to 2002 asked of all California adults, not just registered voters.

Support for the death penalty is broad-based

There is broad support for keeping the death penalty as a punishment for serious crimes in California across virtually all subgroups of the registered voter population. Only among voters who identify themselves as strongly liberal in politics, who account for 13% of the total electorate, does a majority (51%) oppose its continuation.

Capital punishment has been an issue in many past elections and could again become one in this year's election.

Voters who support Democrat Jerry Brown in the Governor's race endorse capital punishment 60% to 34%. Sentiment among Republican Meg Whitman for Governor voters is even more one-sided (81% in favor and 16% opposed).

A similar difference exists among voters in the U.S. Senate race. Those preferring Democrat Barbara Boxer favor the death penalty 58% to 35%, while Republican Carly Fiorina's supporters back it 83% to 15%.

Voters preferring Republican Steve Cooley for state Attorney General also favor the death penalty overwhelmingly (82% to 16%). Supporters of Cooley's rival, Democrat Kamala Harris, also side with maintaining capital punishment for serious crimes but by a much narrower 53% to 43% margin.

Table 2
Voter opinions toward the death penalty – by subgroup
(among registered voters)

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
Total – July 2010	70%	24	6
<u>Party</u>			
(.44) Democrats	63%	30	7
(.31) Republicans	82%	14	4
(.25) Non-partisans/others	69%	26	5
<u>Political ideology</u>			
(.19) Strongly conservative	87%	10	3
(.16) Moderately conservative	78%	18	4
(.42) Middle-of-the-road	70%	24	6
(.10) Moderately liberal	68%	27	5
(.13) Strongly liberal	41%	51	8
<u>Tea Party movement identification</u>			
(.12) A lot	87%	12	1
(.19) Some	78%	18	4
(.69) Not at all	65%	28	7
<u>Age</u>			
(.20) 18 – 29	73%	24	3
(.15) 30 – 39	72%	24	4
(.19) 40 – 49	70%	21	9
(.26) 50 – 64	70%	24	6
(.20) 65 or older	66%	27	7
<u>Gender</u>			
(.47) Male	72%	24	4
(.53) Female	69%	24	7
<u>Race/ethnicity</u>			
(.64) White non-Hispanic	71%	24	5
(.22) Latino	69%	24	7
(.06) African-American	63%	28	9
(.02) Chinese-American	76%	18	6
(.01) Korean-American	54%	39	7
(.02) Vietnamese-American	55%	35	10
<u>Religion</u>			
(.41) Protestant	76%	19	5
(.26) Catholic	69%	25	6
(.17) Other religion	53%	31	16
(.16) No religious preference	63%	31	6
<u>Likely voters in November (total)</u>			
	<u>70%</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>5</u>
(.33) Jerry Brown supporter for Governor	60%	34	6
(.33) Meg Whitman supporter for Governor	81%	16	3
(.35) Barbara Boxer supporter for U.S. Senate	58%	35	7
(.30) Carly Fiorina supporter for U.S. Senate	83%	15	2
(.25) Kamala Harris supporter for AG	53%	43	4
(.27) Steve Cooley supporter for AG	82%	16	2

Voters are divided when asked if they'd impose the death sentence for first degree murder

The possibility of imposing either the death penalty or life imprisonment without parole in cases of first degree murder was posed to voters in a follow-up question. In this context, 42% opt for life in prison and 41% for the death penalty, while 13% say it would depend on the circumstances of the case. Another 4% have no opinion.

When the same question was asked in a 2000 *Field Poll*, opinions divided 44% to 37% in favor of imposing the death penalty.

Democrats are more inclined to choose life imprisonment over the death penalty in this situation 56% to 30%. Non-partisans also narrowly prefer life in prison instead of the death penalty, 45% to 37%. However, a nearly three-to-one majority of Republicans (59% to 21%) would choose capital punishment over life imprisonment in cases of first degree murder.

There are differences on this issue between the supporters of Brown and Whitman for Governor, as well as between Boxer and Fiorina backers in the U.S. Senate race. Fifty-four percent of Brown voters and 57% of Boxer supporters would choose the life imprisonment sentence, while slightly less than one in three opt for the death penalty. Among voters who prefer Whitman, 49% would choose the death penalty and 30% life in prison, while Fiorina's supporters choose capital punishment 55% to 25%.

In the AG race, 57% to Harris' supporters choose life without parole and 30% would choose the death penalty. Among Cooley's supporters the division is reversed, with 55% favoring the death penalty and 25% life without parole.

Table 4
Which sentence would you personally prefer for
someone convicted of first-degree murder?
(among registered voters)

	Life in prison without parole	Death penalty	Depends	No opinion
July 2010	42%	41	13	4
August 2000	37%	44	15	4
<u>Party registration</u>				
Democrats	56%	30	11	3
Republicans	21%	59	18	2
Non-partisans/others	45%	37	12	6
<u>Likely voters in November (total)</u>				
Brown supporter for Governor	<u>41%</u>	<u>41</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>3</u>
Whitman supporter for Governor	54%	32	11	3
Whitman supporter for Governor	30%	49	18	3
Boxer supporter for U.S. Senate	57%	30	9	4
Fiorina supporter for U.S. Senate	25%	55	18	2
Harris supporter for AG	57%	30	9	4
Cooley supporter for AG	25%	55	18	2

Information About The Survey

Methodological Details

The findings in this report are based on a *Field Poll* survey completed June 22 – July 5, 2010 among a representative sample of registered voters in California. Interviewing was conducted by telephone using live interviewers working from Field Research Corporation’s central location telephone interviewing facilities. Voter opinions regarding the state laws about the death penalty was asked of 1,390 registered voters, while voter opinions about the preferred punishment for first-degree murder was asked of a random subsample of 485 registered voter.

To enable the survey to more closely examine the preferences of California’s growing ethnic voter populations, the survey was conducted in six languages and dialects – English, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean and Vietnamese. In addition, for questions asked of the total sample the main statewide sample was supplemented with additional interviews among Chinese Americans, Korean-Americans and Vietnamese-Americans.

Up to six attempts were made to reach, screen and interview each randomly selected voter on different days and times of day during the interviewing period. The overall registered voter sample was drawn from a listing of all registered voters, while the ethnic sample augments were drawn from listings of ethnic surnames of voters targeting Chinese-American, Korean-American and Vietnamese-American voters. All samples were provided by Voter Contact Services, a leading provider of registered voter samples to the survey research industry.

Interviewing was completed on either a voter’s landline phone or a cell phone depending on the source of the telephone listing from the voter file. After the completion of interviewing, results from the ethnic sample augments were weighted down to bring them into alignment with their proper shares of the state’s registered voter population. In addition, the overall registered voter sample was weighted to *Field Poll* estimates of the characteristics of the registered voter population in California by region, age, gender and party registration.

Sampling error estimates applicable to the results of any probability-based survey depend on sample size as well as the percentage distribution being examined. The maximum sampling error estimates for results based on the overall registered voter sample is +/- 2.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, while findings from the random subsample have a maximum sampling error of +/- 4.6 percentage points. The maximum sampling error is based on results in the middle of the sampling distribution (i.e., percentages at or near 50%). Percentages at either end of the distribution (those closer to 10% or 90%) have a smaller margin of error. Findings from subgroups of the overall sample have somewhat larger sampling error levels. There are other potential sources of error in surveys besides sampling error. However, the overall design and execution of the survey sought to minimize these other sources of error.

The Field Poll was established in 1947 as *The California Poll* by Mervin Field and has operated continuously since then as an independent, non-partisan survey of California public opinion. The poll receives annual funding from media subscribers of *The Field Poll*, from several California foundations, and from the University of California and California State University systems, who receive the raw data files from each *Field Poll* survey shortly after its completion for teaching and secondary research purposes.

Questions Asked

(ASKED OF ALL REGISTERED VOTERS) As you know, California has capital punishment – that is, execution – as a form of punishment for certain crimes. How do you personally feel about capital punishment? Would you be in favor of doing away with the death sentence, or do you feel that the death sentence should be kept as a punishment for serious crimes?

(ASKED OF A RANDOM SUBSAMPLE OF VOTERS) Which do you prefer as a penalty for someone convicted of first degree murder – the death penalty or life in prison without the possibility of parole?