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Nebraska vote 'signals death knell' for US capital punishment

Anti-death penalty campaigners celebrate as ultra-conservative US state votes to abolish capital punishment

By Peter Foster in Washington and agencies

Death penalty advocates in America suffered another serious setback last night after one of the country's most conservative states voted to abolish the use of capital punishment.

By voting to end executions, the Midwestern state of Nebraska became the first conservative state in more than 40 years to vote to shut down its death row.

Abolitionists hailed the Nebraska vote as yet further evidence that the death penalty is now dying a slow death in America as even traditionally pro-capital punishment conservatives accept that enforcing executions is becoming increasingly impractical and expensive.

"Americans have been moving away from executions for more than ten years, but now we have a red [conservative] state turning that trend into law for the first time in 40 years," said Shari Silberstein, executive director of Equal Justice USA, a pressure group, said in a statement.

"Nebraska has shown the nation what happens when you put aside partisan politics and embrace simple common sense. The death penalty was already on its last legs,



Nebraska state Senator Ernie Chambers of Omaha, left, smiles at Senator Paul Schumacher of Columbus after lawmakers gave final approval to a bill abolishing the death penalty. Photo: AP

but it's hard to imagine that it has any staying power left after this."

James Clark, Amnesty International's lead death penalty campaigner, said the organization was "thrilled" by the Nebraska decision, which he said demonstrated that "the death penalty is broken beyond repair."

The decision means that 19 US states and the District of Columbia no longer have now banned the ultimate punishment, with a further 15 US states having a de facto moratorium on the practice.

Like many US states, Nebraska has struggled in recent years to obtain the cocktail of drugs needed to conduct lethal injections, finally losing its ability to execute inmates in December 2013, when one of the three drugs required by state law expired.

The vote to abolish came in dramatic circumstances, after the state's single-chamber legislature voted 30-19 to override a veto by the Nebraska's Republican Governor, Pete Ricketts, who is a hardline supporter of the death penalty.



Pete Ricketts, Nebraska governor

As a result of the vote Nebraska, which has ten inmates on death row, is the first traditionally conservative state to eliminate the punishment since North Dakota in 1973, and the seventh state to drop capital punishment in the last eight years.

Despite some high-profile cases, such as the death penalty

verdict served by a Boston jury this month on Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the Boston bomber, public support for the death penalty has been falling steadily in recent years across the US.

Since 1976, the US has executed some 1,408 people, with the state of Texas executing almost five times the next two leading

states – Oklahoma and Virginia – with 525 executions. Nebraska has executed only three people since 1976, the last back in 1997.

The national change of heart in American has been driven by the discovery of several high-profile wrongful convictions thanks to new DNA evidence which have sapped confidence in the system.

The increasing cost of clearing the legal hurdles to execution now laid down by a series of US Supreme Court rulings, has won over many fiscal conservatives to argue for abolition.

Support for the death penalty from 80 per cent 20 years ago, to 63 per cent today according to Gallup, but even that apparently still-healthy support is flakier than it first appears.

When pollsters offer the alternative of life without parole, only 42 per cent of Americans prefer the death penalty, with 52 per cent against, according to a recent ABC News/Washington Post poll.