



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

## Political Rift over Coakley's Shift

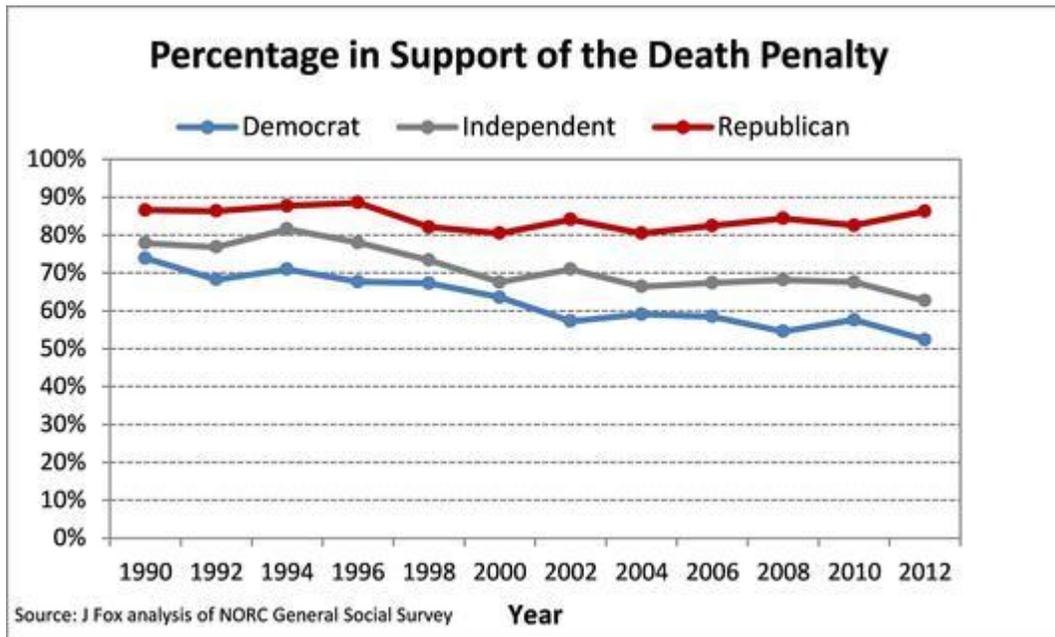
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Notwithstanding the recent decision by the U.S. Department of Justice to pursue the death penalty in the upcoming Marathon bombing trial, it is abundantly clear that the tide of public opinion regarding capital punishment has been shifting. The latest poll, taken by the Pew Research Center, shows that the percentage of Americans who are in favor of executing those convicted of first degree murder has fallen from 78% in 1996 down to 55% in 2013. In recent years, moreover, several states have either established a moratorium on executions or abolished the practice outright.

This collective change of heart hardly reflects a kinder and gentler approach to punishment. Rather, many Americans and their legislators have become increasingly concerned about the hundreds of exonerations of condemned prisoners because of faulty evidence or faulty prosecutions. In addition, the murder rate in America is half what it was in the early 1990s when, according to survey data from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), support for capital punishment had reached its highest level at nearly 80%.

Change is good, they say. But according to one Democratic contender for Governor of Massachusetts, change shows weakness of conviction. Staring up in the political polls at front-runner Martha Coakley, Steve Grossman has criticized Coakley for flipping from pro-death penalty to anti-death penalty, the same change in outlook that has come over millions of Americans. Actually, as shown in the figure below, the decline in support for capital punishment has been shown among Democrats and Independents, but not Republicans.



As a long-standing opponent of capital punishment, I welcome any and all converts with total amnesty for their prior misguided views. Unlike Grossman, I applaud anyone who has been educated about the evils of execution. The death penalty debate has long been stubbornly polarized. It is a healthy sign when people are willing to listen to contrary arguments with a genuinely open mind, and to reassess their point of view. In fact, were I ever to switch my stance on capital punishment (which, frankly, isn't at all likely), I would hope that my new allies would not criticize me for the flip.

One of the more important qualities of an effective leader is the willingness to listen to opposing points of view and change approach, if warranted. Although I disagreed with Coakley when she was in support of capital punishment, I commend her for having considered the alternatives. After all, change is good.