

Public Policy Center Sponsored Politician Debate at UNL on Death Penalty

October 25, 2016 By Noah Johnson/Daily Nebraskan



While the presidential election is the most popular item on this year's ballot, Nebraska voters will also decide whether to repeal or retain legislation that banned the death penalty.

LB 268, the bill that eliminates capital punishment in Nebraska, was passed in May 2015 and was quickly vetoed by Gov. Pete Ricketts. After the Legislature overrode his veto, a petition circulated the state and gathered the necessary signatures to get the issue on the ballot for Nov. 8.

Voters now have the choice to either repeal or retain LB 268. Voting to repeal the legislative bill supports reinstating the death penalty, while voting to retain supports upholding the ban on the death penalty.

On Tuesday the Public Policy Center sponsored a debate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln between two Nebraska senators, Beau McCoy and Colby Coash. Serving as a senator since 2008, Coash opposes the death penalty and was instrumental in getting LB 268 passed. McCoy has also served since 2008, but supports the death penalty.

The debate was moderated by NET reporter and producer, Fred Knapp.

Both senators were given a chance to begin the debate with an opening statement.

Coash said an execution has not taken place in Nebraska in over twenty years.

"If you support the death penalty, you never see justice," Coash said. "We have a system that isn't fair to either side of the issue."

McCoy said the issue on the death penalty is of peak importance to Nebraskans and that "this is an issue that a lot of Nebraskans care greatly about."

One question asked of both senators was whether the death penalty deters crime, or if deterrence is the same in states without the death penalty.

McCoy opened his response by stating, "Justice first, deterrence second."

McCoy said he believes that without the death penalty, there would be no deterrence in the corrections system since the ultimate decision would only be life in prison.

Coash likened Nebraska's situation regarding the death penalty to punishing a child.

"It's like if I told my child that if they disobey then they will be punished in 20 years. We say these things, but we never do anything," Coash said. "The deterrence isn't there."

The senators were also asked about what would be required to change to make death penalties more feasible. According to the Lincoln-Journal Star, the last execution that took place in Nebraska happened in 1997, when Robert Williams was executed for the murders of Catherine Brooks and Patricia McGarry.

“I have full faith and confidence that [the] legislature will figure out a method of justice that will prove that our system is not broken,” McCoy said. “I have full faith that Nebraskan’s will overwhelmingly agree to keep the death penalty, preserving punishment for the worst crime.”

Coash responded by saying that Nebraska has had an abundance of chances to execute criminals sentenced to death.

“We had people sitting on death row,” Coash said. “I just don’t see how anything will change in the next legislative session.”

The next question, directed at McCoy, asked him about his opinion on the current system implemented for death row.

McCoy dispelled the idea that innocent people have been executed in Nebraska, saying “there is no evidence that we executed anyone innocent.”

McCoy also said that it should be difficult to carry out the death penalty.

“Our responsibility is to only put to death those who are guilty,” McCoy said. “I firmly believe that no one on death row in Nebraska today is innocent.”

Coash responded by stating that “we are getting what we pay for,” noting the fact that nobody has been executed in close to 20 years.

Finally, each senator was given the opportunity to provide a closing statement.

“Disagree, but maintain civility and respect for one another,” McCoy said.

Both candidates also emphasized the importance of voting on Nov. 8.