

# The State of the Death Penalty

WILLIAMS: Governor Perry, a question about Texas. Your state has executed 234 death row inmates, more than any other governor in modern times. Have you ...

(INTERUPTED BY APPLAUSE FROM THE AUDIENCE)

Have you struggled to sleep at night with the idea that any one of those might have been innocent?

PERRY: No, sir. I've never struggled with that at all. The state of Texas has a very thoughtful, a very clear process in place of which — when someone commits the most heinous of crimes against our citizens, they get a fair hearing, they go through an appellate process, they go up to the Supreme Court of the United States, if that's required. But in the state of Texas, if you come into our state and you kill one of our children, you kill a police officer, you're involved with another crime and you kill one of our citizens, you will face the ultimate justice in the state of Texas, and that is, you will be executed.

WILLIAMS: What do you make of ...

(INTERRUPTED AGAIN BY APPLAUSE FROM THE AUDIENCE)

What do you make of that dynamic that just happened here, the mention of the execution of 234 people drew applause?

PERRY: I think Americans understand justice. I think Americans are clearly, in the vast majority of — of cases, supportive of capital punishment. When you have committed heinous crimes against our citizens — and it's a state-by-state issue, but in the state of Texas, our citizens have made that decision, and they made it clear, and they don't want you to commit those crimes against our citizens. And if you do, you will face the ultimate justice.

<http://historymusings.wordpress.com/2011/09/12/campaign-buzz-september-12-2011-rick-perry-vs-republican-candidates-cnn-tea-party-express-gop-republican-presidential-debate/>

A Gallup Poll from October, 2010 of 1,025 adults nationwide found 64% favored the death penalty for a person convicted of murder, 29% opposed and 6% were unsure. Sixty-four percent support is the lowest level ever demonstrated in the poll, although it has gone that low several times since 1991, when the poll was first conducted. At the other end, the level of support has gone as high as 80%. (Polls may be viewed at <http://www.pollingreport.com/crime.htm>. The margin of error on all these polls is between

4% and 5%.)

"If you could choose between the following two approaches, which do you think is the better penalty for murder: the death penalty or life imprisonment with absolutely no possibility of parole?"

49% said the death penalty, 46% said life imprisonment and 6% were unsure.

"In your opinion, is the death penalty imposed too often, about the right amount, or not often enough?"

18% said too often, 26% said about right. 49% said it was not imposed often enough and 7% were unsure.

"How often do you think that a person has been executed under the death penalty who was, in fact, innocent of the crime he or she was charged with? Do you think this has happened in the past five years, or not?"

59% believe that it indeed had. 31% believed it had not. 10% were unsure.

This last question was asked by Gallup in 2003, 2005, 2006 and 2009. The percentage believing we had executed an innocent man has run as high as 73%.

Thus, the numbers shake out like this: as of last October, 64% of Americans favor the death penalty. At the same time, and extrapolating from 2003-09, somewhere around 60% of Americans believe we have executed an innocent man in the last five years.

For many of that 64%, perhaps even a majority, I suspect that their comfort with the death penalty depends upon their ability to cling to Perry's promise that "the state of Texas has a very thoughtful, a very clear process in place of which — when someone commits the most heinous of crimes against our citizens, they get a fair hearing, they go through an appellate process, they go up to the Supreme Court of the United States, if that's required."

But with 64% supporting the death penalty, and 60% believing we have executed an innocent man in the last five years, there can't help but to be some overlap between these two groups.

One of them might quickly say, "No, sir. I've never struggled with that at all."

Especially if he were trying to appeal to his base.

(NO APPLAUSE FROM THE AUDIENCE)