Californians vote to keep the death penalty

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Voters in California rejected a proposition on their ballots that would have ended the death penalty in the state by 53% to 47%. Three former California governors—one Democrat and two Republicans—said they were in favor of keeping the death penalty.

Seventeen states and the District of Columbia have ended the death penalty. The most recent was Connecticut, which ended the penalty in April of this year.

Proposition 34, as the ballot initiative was called, would have replaced the death penalty with life in prison without parole. Prisoners already on death row would have had their sentences converted to life imprisonment.

California has 725 prisoners on death row, the most of any state. The Death Penalty Information Center says that there were 3170 prisoners on death row in the US as of April 2012.

Since 1978 when California’s death penalty was reinstated, the state has executed 13 prisoners. It has not carried out any executions since 2006, when a court found flaws in the execution process. Prisoners on death row are more likely to die of natural causes than to be executed because of the slow appeals process. Groups in favor of ending the state’s death penalty said that it would save the state $100m (£62m; €78m) to $130m a year and the money would be used to help local police departments. Much of the cost is for prisoners’ appeals of their death sentences that continue for a decade or more. Proposition 34 would have let prisoners appeal their sentences in state courts but they would not usually be allowed to appeal in federal courts.

A group in favor of keeping the death penalty called “No on 34” issued a statement thanking voters for sending a message that the death penalty should be kept for “those who commit the most heinous and unthinkable crimes.”

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