

# The Star-Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll

October 10, 1999

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A story based on the survey findings presented in this release and background memo will appear in the Sunday, October 10 Star-Ledger. We ask users to properly attribute this copyrighted information to "The Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll."

## JUMP-START THE CHAIR: NEW JERSEY FAVORS CAPITAL PUNISHMENT STATE HAS RESERVATIONS, BUT WANTS PACE OF EXECUTIONS MOVED UP

In 1989 John Martini kidnapped New Jersey businessman Irving Flax and, after being paid a \$25,000 ransom, killed him with three bullets to the head. Martini, who has confessed to two other murders, was scheduled to be executed September 22 before a new federal appeal gave him a reprieve. He would have been the first person executed in the state since 1963. Seven-in-ten New Jerseyans want him dead.

But while New Jerseyans favor the death penalty in the Martini case and are generally supportive of capital punishment for murder, they are far from bloodthirsty. In fact, there is slightly less support for the death penalty among Garden State residents than is found in the country as a whole.

New Jerseyans' views on capital punishment are complex and defy a simple description. Even though the majority say they would like to see more executions in the state on an annual basis, it is less than a majority--although still a plurality--who favor the death penalty over life in prison without the possibility of parole as a punishment for murder.

Moreover, significant numbers of New Jerseyans have qualms about capital punishment. Many feel it is applied discriminatorily, with poor people and blacks more

The Star-Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll • Eagleton Institute of Politics

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likely to receive the death penalty for the same crimes as others. Half don't think the death penalty is a significant deterrent to murder, and a sizeable minority believe there is a chance that an innocent person could be convicted and executed.

These are some of the findings of the latest Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll, conducted between September 15 and 22 with a statewide sample of 802 adult residents of the Garden State. The poll has a sampling error of  $\pm 3.5$  percent.

Statewide, 63 percent say they favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. Another 23 percent oppose capital punishment and 15 percent say it depends on the situation or offer no clear opinion.

However, opinions about the death penalty may depend quite a bit on the circumstances. When asked to choose between the death penalty and a guaranteed "life in prison with absolutely no possibility of parole," support for capital punishment drops to 44 percent, while 37 percent prefer life in prison and 19 percent have difficulty choosing.

But when told the circumstances surrounding the Martini case, 69 percent of New Jersey residents say the state should execute him, while 21 percent think his life should be spared and 10 percent offer no opinion.

Cliff Zukin, director of the Rutgers-based poll commented, "The different levels of support for capital punishment in different questions show how ambivalent many in the state are about the death penalty. There are probably only one-in-five or so who are philosophically opposed, but there are many--perhaps one-third--who are uncomfortable with it and favor it only in response to clear and extreme situations. Most of these people have no difficulty in the Martini case."

The poll shows that many in New Jersey have reservations about how fairly capital punishment is applied. By a margin of 56 to 37, far more agree than disagree that a poor person is more likely than someone else to receive the death penalty for the same crime. Forty-two percent also agree that a black person is more likely than a white person to receive the death sentence for the same crime. And one-third disagree that “the chance that an innocent person will be convicted and executed is small.”

Despite these reservations, the poll indicates that New Jerseyans would like to see the death penalty given more often as a sentence for murder, and more executions actually carried out in the state. About half—47 percent—say the death sentence is not given often enough in murder cases in New Jersey, compared to just 10 percent who say it is given too often.

And when told there were another 12 people beside Martini on death row 57 percent said it would be a “good thing” if executions became commonplace to the point where several were carried out each year. Only half as many—29 percent—felt this would be a “bad thing” for the state, with the remaining 14 percent offering no opinion.

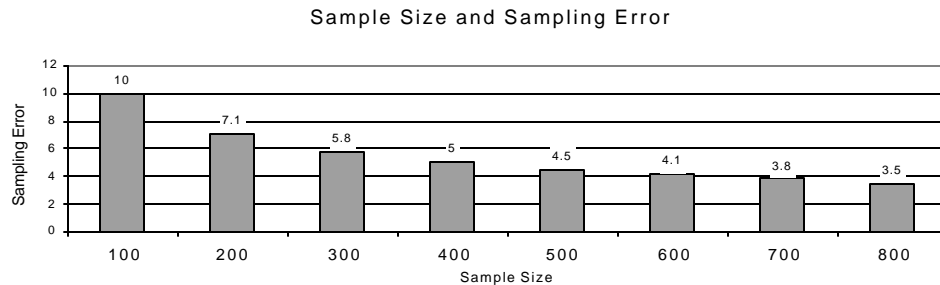
The state is fairly evenly split over whether capital punishment is an effective deterrent to murder—45 percent believe that it stops other people from killing, 50 percent that it does not. But 72 percent of those who favor capital punishment believe that it is an effective deterrent.

Among other reasons given by those who favor capital punishment are that “it is a fit punishment for people who have committed murder” (78%) and it removes “evil and dangerous people from society” (68%). Far fewer (37%) believe a rationale for capital punishment is “to provide emotional relief to the suffering of friends and family of the murder victim.”

The poll reports a number of differences in responses to the set of capital punishment questions by various demographic groups. For example, a greater number of men (70%) than women (56%) say they favor the death penalty, as do a greater number of whites (69%) than non-whites (44%). Conservatives (72%) are more likely to favor capital punishment than are moderates (61%) or liberals (58%). And support for capital punishment is highest in South Jersey (72%), lowest in North Jersey (55%), and in-between in the Central region of the state (66%).

**BACKGROUND MEMO — RELEASE (EP123-4) SUNDAY OCTOBER 10, 1999**

The latest *Star-Ledger/Eagleton* Poll was conducted between September 15 and 22 with a scientifically selected random sample of 802 New Jersey adult residents interviewed by telephone. All surveys are subject to sampling error, which is the expected probable difference between interviewing everyone in a population versus a scientific sampling drawn from that population. The sampling error for the total sample size of 800 is  $\pm 3.5$  percent, at a 95 percent confidence interval. Thus if 50 percent of New Jerseyans were found to have a favorable opinion of the Governor, one would be 95 percent sure that the true figure would be between 46.5 .and 53.5 percent ( $50 \pm 3.5$ ) had all New Jerseyans been interviewed, rather than just a sample. Sampling error increases as the sample size decreases, so statements based on various population subgroups, such as separate figures reported for men and women, are subject to more error than are statements based on the total sample. The following chart shows the relationship between sample size and sampling error. The sampling error for the racial grouping reported in this release is as follows:



Sampling error does not take into account other sources of variation inherent in public opinion studies, such as non-response, question wording or context effects. The verbatim wording of all questions asked is reproduced in this background memo. The sample has been stratified based on county and the data have been weighted on age and education to insure an accurate proportional representation of the state. The questions referred to in this release are as follows:

I'd like to ask you a few questions about your views of the death penalty here in New Jersey. Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder? (DP1)

	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>No Opinion</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
<b>September, 1999</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>101%</b>	<b>(802)</b>
<i>Washington Post-August, 1998</i>	69	27	4	100	(2025)
<u>By Gender</u>					
--Male	70	20	10	100	(390)
--Female	56	25	19	100	(412)
<u>By Region</u>					
--North	55	25	19	99	(352)
--Central	66	21	13	100	(218)
--South	72	18	9	99	(216)
<u>By Race</u>					
--White	69	19	12	100	(593)
--Non-White	44	33	23	100	(193)
<u>By Ideology</u>					
--Liberal	58	34	8	100	(143)
--Conservative	72	15	14	101	(151)
--Moderate	61	22	17	100	(479)

## ASKED ONLY OF THOSE WHO FAVOR THE DEATH PENALTY (63%)

I'm going to read you some reasons given by those who support the death penalty. For each one I read please just tell me if you think it is a reason why YOU support the death penalty, or not: (RANDOMIZE REASONS, READ FIRST ONE, "Is this a reason you support the death penalty or not?" (DP2)

	<u>Is a Reason</u>	<u>Not a Reason</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
It is a fit punishment for people who have committed murder	78%	14%	7%	99%	(621)
To remove evil and dangerous people from society	68	26	5	99	(621)
To deter others from committing murder	72	24	4	100	(621)
To provide emotional relief to the suffering of friends and family of the murder victims	37	57	6	100	(621)

What do you think should be the penalty for murder-the death penalty, or life imprisonment with absolutely no possibility of parole? (DP3)

	<u>Death Penalty</u>	<u>Life in Prison</u>	<u>No Opinion</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
<b>September, 1999</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(802)</b>
<i>Gallup-February, 1999</i>	56	38	6	100	(1054)
<u>By Gender</u>					
--Male	51	30	19	100	(390)
--Female	37	44	19	100	(412)
<u>By Region</u>					
--North	35	43	22	100	(352)
--Central	48	36	16	100	(218)
--South	53	29	18	100	(216)
<u>By Race</u>					
--White	49	32	20	101	(593)
--Non-White	30	55	16	101	(193)
<u>By Ideology</u>					
--Liberal	37	46	17	100	(143)
--Conservative	49	35	16	100	(151)
--Moderate	44	36	19	99	(479)

Not all murder cases result in a sentence of death for offenders. In New Jersey do you think the death sentence is used too often, not often enough, or is the use of the death sentence about right? (DP4)

	<u>Too Often</u>	<u>Not often enough</u>	<u>About Right</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
<b>September, 1999</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>101%</b>	<b>(802)</b>

I'm going to read you a few brief statements about the death penalty. For each one please just tell me if you agree or disagree (CATI: RANDOMIZE ITEMS A THROUGH E) READ FIRST STATEMENT... do you agree or disagree?

	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
A poor person is more likely than a person of average or above average income to receive the death penalty for the same crime	56%	37%	7%	100%	(397)
<i>Gallup-February 1999</i>	65	32	3	100	(1054)
A black person is more likely than a white person to receive the death penalty for the same crime	42	49	9	100	(397)
<i>Gallup-February 1999</i>	50	46	4	100	(1054)
The chance that an innocent person will be convicted and executed is small. This is not a good reason for opposing the death penalty	60	32	8	100	(397)
The death penalty is an effective deterrent to murder-it stops others from killing	44	50	6	100	(397)
The death penalty is immoral	29	63	8	100	(397)

New Jersey was scheduled to execute its first person since 1963 this month, although this has now been postponed. The person, John Martini was convicted of kidnapping and killing a businessman even though a ransom had been paid. He also confessed to two other murders. Do you think New Jersey should or should not execute Martini? (DP6)

	<u>Should</u>	<u>Should Not</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
<b>September, 1999</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(802)</b>
<u>By Gender</u>					
--Male	76	18	6	100	(390)
--Female	63	24	14	101	(412)
<u>By Race</u>					
--White	73	18	9	100	(593)
--Non-White	57	31	11	99	(193)
<u>By Ideology</u>					
--Liberal	63	29	8	100	(143)
--Conservative	74	15	11	100	(151)
--Moderate	68	21	10	99	(479)

There are another 12 people on death row in New Jersey. Suppose executions become more commonplace, so that several murderers were executed each year. Do you think this would be a good thing or a bad thing for the state? (DP7)

	<u>Good Thing</u>	<u>Bad Thing</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
<b>September, 1999</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(802)</b>
<u>By Gender</u>					
--Male	62	26	12	100	(390)
--Female	52	32	16	100	(412)
<u>By Race</u>					
--White	60	25	15	100	(593)
--Non-White	46	42	12	100	(193)
<u>By Ideology</u>					
--Liberal	48	42	10	100	(143)
--Conservative	69	18	14	101	(151)
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