

Capital Punishment & Prison Reform – Where Are We Going Wrong?
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In a time of reckoning for our justice system, are politicians doing enough to ensure humanity for their constituents?

Julius Jones, was convicted of first-degree murder in 2002, and ever since he waited on death row in Oklahoma until a date was set for his execution: November 18, 2021. His death sentence was only [commuted](#) by Governor Kevin Stitt after intense backlash from the public because of Jones’ suspected innocence and [only hours](#) before he was set to be killed. This would have been the second state-sanctioned execution to have taken place in Oklahoma in under a month, the first one being John Marion, who convulsed and vomited after receiving the lethal injection. Oklahoma has a long and concerning history with the death penalty. In fact, the execution of John Marion was the first one since 2015 after executions were halted following the revelation that the wrong drug had been administered to a death row inmate. One year earlier, a man named Clayton Lockett was administered a lethal cocktail of drugs but, due to complications, he struggled for over 40 minutes before [dying](#).

This issue is not specific to Oklahoma. [24 states](#) still resort to capital punishment, and there have been well over one thousand executions since 1976, even though it has proven to be [ineffective](#), a failed policy for deterring crime. Why is this inhumane and fruitless practice still practiced within our justice system? Why do so many public servants, including those who subscribe to progressive ideologies, shy away from rigorously pursuing the abolition of the death penalty in their political agendas?

Bernie Sanders had made it clear that he opposed capital punishment. He has spoken out on the [Senate floor](#), on his [website](#), and on various [social media platforms](#). In 2016 he tweeted, “We can’t properly reform our broken criminal justice system without ending the death penalty.”

Surprisingly though, Sanders has been more silent about his opposition, and has not yet spoken about Julius Jones’ commuted execution. Although he seems to care about the issue, it’s clear that it does not take up as much of his platform as many other initiatives that he pursues. The Julius Jones case is not unknown by any means, and the story was even told was even told in a [2018 documentary](#). Yet, Sanders has not spoken out and urged Governor Stitt to not follow through with the execution of a man who is thought to be innocent by so many people. In fact, various sports figures, celebrities, and religious leaders have spoken out about this case, but there has been a noticeable silence on this subject from government officials.

In my opinion, opposing the death penalty and advocating for its abolition is the first step towards a more equitable justice system. Sanders has ample experience with this issue, unlike most politicians. One interesting factor to examine in this regard is Sanders’ relationship to the [Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994](#), an act that Sanders himself voted for even though it actually allowed for the expansion of the death penalty by broadening the number of offenses that could be deemed eligible for the death penalty. What can account for his contradictory behavior related to state-sanctioned murder?

I suspect that Sanders, who has such an expansive platform can’t adequately address every policy issue. Furthermore, his home state of Vermont does not permit the death penalty sentence, so it may not be a worthwhile topic in relation to local elections and politics. However, because Sanders has managed to position himself as a national politician, or at least a politician who

regularly achieves national spotlight, a lot of the reason for this lack of rallying against capital punishment, must revolve around *electability*.

As a politician, Sanders has to find a (supposed) balance between furthering his own ideals, and securing the support of his constituents. Especially for a politician like Bernie Sanders, who has run in two presidential elections, there are many policy sacrifices that must be made in order to appeal to a wider audience.

Furthermore, even if elected, he knows that he couldn’t pass the kind of legislation he’d wish for all the issues. Returning to the, 1994 crime law, we find that Sanders seemed to have voted for it because even though it was incredibly unfavorable to many portions of the United States population, and led to a jump in mass incarceration, it nevertheless did contain the Violence Against Women Act, [which he supported](#). This example illustrates the ways in which an already-elected politician has to find compromise, while at the same time calling attention to the reasons why politicians make decisions that fly in the face of decent and humane treatment of Americans.

Whether this “electability” strategy is working is hard to tell. Sanders has been very successful in his local and state campaigns within Vermont, but even without following his own views on such issues as the death penalty, he still falls short of electability on the national stage. This is regrettable, because outspoken support for abolition of the death penalty by politicians like Bernie Sanders is necessary if we are going to change the culture surrounding incarceration and punishment. Abolishing capital punishment must be moved up on political agendas if we are to refocus our justice system not only on punishment and violence, but on rehabilitation and equity.