

Whether it is a presidential or midterm election, when top of the ballot races start to heat up, it is easy to forget about the “down ballot” races for state legislature, mayor, county council, county prosecutor, and more. In these races, the opportunity for meaningful dialogue with candidates is much more likely.

Some of those candidates will have direct impact on death penalty policy. Plus, today’s mayor might be tomorrow’s state representative, who could one day vote on a death penalty bill in your state. If you have the opportunity to talk with these down ballot candidates, it’s a great chance to broach the topic of the death penalty.

What’s the best way to share your support for repeal? We’re so glad you asked!

The strategies you choose will depend on the issue you want to discuss with the candidates. Some issues - or personalities! - might suggest a more confrontational approach. With the death penalty, we’ve found that candidates and lawmakers respond well to education over time, rather than catching them in a knee-jerk moment. With this in mind, we’ve got a few suggested **dos** and **don’ts** for you...

Do have respectful, private conversations about the death penalty. Engaging in a one-on-one dialogue makes it easier to explore questions, share experiences, educate, and offer resources to help someone reach an informed conclusion about the issue.

Don’t ask a candidate his or her position in a public forum if they aren’t already well educated on the issue. Local candidates, especially, may not have spent any time learning about the death penalty. This can put a person on the spot before they’ve had a chance to think carefully and learn about the issue. We’ve learned that, with the death penalty, candidates (and elected officials) will often spend a long time considering their position before they come to support repeal.

You might only have a minute or two the first time you meet a candidate. Consider the “10-second intro + info” strategy. Here’s a sample of the 10-second intro part: “Hi, my name is Mona, and I care about improving the justice system, including repealing the death penalty. I would love the opportunity to talk more with you about your criminal justice priorities.”

Do share your specific reasons for supporting repeal: for example, you fear the risk of executing an innocent person; it is unfair in its application; its high costs waste valuable crime-fighting resources; your faith; government shouldn’t be able to take away the ultimate liberty; etc.

Don't shame someone for not sharing your beliefs. People don't generally change their minds out of shame. We need candidates to keep an open mind about this issue. Think about your interaction(s) as steps in your journey to educate candidates and elected officials about this broken government system.

Try pairing your personal experience or a fact with an open-ended question to get the ball rolling for the "info" part of your strategy: "I've read so many stories of men and women who have been wrongfully convicted and nearly executed. I can't help but think we shouldn't be in the business of putting people to death. How can we guarantee that we won't execute an innocent person?"

Do talk to candidates on both sides of the aisle. Opposition to the death penalty transcends party lines. Consider focusing on values you may share with a candidate such as public safety, fiscal responsibility, or support for the families of murder victims.

Don't assume to know a person's position on the death penalty because of how he or she might feel about another issue.

Do your research and be prepared to share information. Check out our Tough Questions or see "What Conservatives are Saying." You can even print out some of our fact sheets by downloading them from our website: ejusa.org/learn.

Don't tattle to the press about a candidate you hope to convince in the future. Once a candidate's position against repeal is "on the record," he/she may feel completely locked into that position. We want to create space for candidates to learn and for their positions to evolve.

Do listen to the response. Assume this won't be the only time you interact. Listen to how the candidates respond to your pitch and be prepared with new information for next time!

Remember, you don't have to wait for a knock at your door. Elections provide many venues for you to meet all your candidates: state fairs, summer festivals, parades, campaign events and rallies, events hosted by state/local non-profits, and even at your local coffee shop. No matter where you meet a candidate, listen to what they have to say but take time to talk about the issues that are most important to YOU.

There is always an election day around the corner, and we hope you use the time to talk to your candidates and educate them about the death penalty. Let us know how it goes!

This piece was adapted from a resource published by the Montana Abolition Coalition.