

Idaho GOP candidate backs death penalty to stop abortions, then softens stance

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By Kimberlee Kruesi, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — A Republican lieutenant governor candidate on Tuesday softened his stance that women who get an abortion should be punished if it is ever criminalized in Idaho, a day after saying the punishment should include the death penalty.

"Prosecutions have always been focused on the abortionist," said Bob Nonini in a statement. "There is no way a woman would go to jail let alone face the death penalty. The statute alone, the threat of prosecution, would dramatically reduce abortion. That is my goal."

Nonini first raised eyebrows on the divisive social issue during a Monday candidate forum in Moscow hosted by the conservative Christian podcast CrossPolitic.

"There should be no abortion and anyone who has an abortion should pay," Nonini said.

Pressed by moderators on the nature of the punishment, Nonini nodded in agreement when asked if he supported the death penalty as a possible outcome for abortion.

Nonini, a three-term state senator from Coeur d'Alene, confirmed that position in a phone interview with The Associated Press.

However, several hours later, Nonini issued a statement seeking to take back his strict stance.

"I strongly support the overturning of Roe v. Wade," Nonini said. "That would allow states like Idaho to re-criminalize abortion as a deterrent. However, it is my understanding that in the history of the United States, long before Roe was foisted

upon this country; no woman has ever been prosecuted for undergoing abortion. That is for practical reasons, as well as for reasons of compassion."

Actually, an Idaho woman, Jennie Linn McCormack of Pocatello, was prosecuted for having an abortion in 2010; her case was thrown out by a judge, and she sued in a lawsuit that successfully overturned the abortion law under which she was charged.

Nonini added that his wife, Cathyanne, does not share his endorsement of the death penalty for abortion; both are devout Catholics.

It's common for Republican candidates to express their anti-abortion positions in GOP-dominant Idaho. Typically, many stress the importance of educating women on alternative options to an unplanned pregnancy or making access to abortion clinics more difficult rather than focus on possible punishment for the woman.

A handful of anti-abortion advocates have begun increasing their call for stricter penalties for women and providers.

Last year, Abolish Abortion Idaho launched a ballot initiative seeking to charge both abortion providers and women with first-degree murder – but it is unclear if the group will have enough signatures to make it on the ballot in November.

Meanwhile, Republican state Sen. Dan Foreman attempted to introduce legislation that would also classify abortion as first-degree murder for mothers and doctors, but the proposal never received a hearing.

Nonini was joined at Monday's forum by two other Republican candidates: Idaho Falls businesswoman Janice McGeachin and former Idaho Republican Party Chairman Steve Yates.

Five Republicans are running in the May primary election after incumbent GOP Lt. Gov. Brad Little announced he would run for governor, but only Nonini, Idaho Falls businesswoman Janice McGeachin and former Idaho Republican Party Chairman Steve Yates were invited to attend the forum.

Both McGeachin and Yates say abortion is murder, but stopped short of supporting charging women with first-degree murder for undergoing the procedure.

"No, I cannot support a woman facing the death penalty for having an abortion," said McGeachin. "What we should do is prevent that."

Yates downplayed that criminalizing abortion would result in fewer women seeking the procedure.

"In terms of criminalizing things, I have no problem with that except that doesn't always solve the problem," Yates said.

Nonini's comments echo similar rhetoric said by Donald Trump during the presidential campaign. In 2016, Trump came out in support of "some sort of punishment" for women who get abortions, but the campaign later backtracked that he believes abortion providers should be the ones punished.