

## **Assisted Suicide Divides the Public, Even Under the Oregon Rules**

The courts are considering whether Oregon has found acceptable middle ground with its four-year-old assisted suicide law. But in terms of broader public opinion, an ABC News/Beliefnet poll finds the issue as contentious - and as unresolved - as ever.

When it's posed in broad strokes, 48 percent of Americans oppose legalizing assisted suicide, while 40 percent support it. And when Oregon's restrictions are described, opinion moves only slightly, to an even split - 48 percent opposed, 46 percent in favor.

A variety of factors inform these views, and religious belief is central among them. Non-Christians and people who profess no religion overwhelmingly support assisted suicide. But it's opposed by most Christians, who account for eight in 10 Americans, and especially by evangelical Christians, who oppose assisted suicide by a 2-1 margin.

OR - Oregon has sued to block the U.S. Justice Department from taking legal action against doctors in the state who participate in assisted suicides by prescribing fatal drugs to terminally ill patients who request them. A federal court ruling is expected this spring.

The voter-approved Oregon law says patients seeking assisted suicide must be diagnosed as having less than six months to live, get a second opinion from another doctor, ask for fatal drugs three times and wait 15 days before the prescription can be filled. Ninety-one people have used it to end their lives since it took effect in October 1997.

Public opinion, however, looks to be based mainly on fundamental views of life and death - not the specifics of this law. Half the people in this poll were asked simply if it should be legal for doctors to help terminally ill patients commit suicide with fatal drugs. The other half were given the Oregon details. Yet, as noted, opposition was stable, and support ticked up only slightly in the latter version.

	Legal	Illegal
Doctor-assisted suicide, general terms	40%	48
Doctor-assisted suicide, Oregon specifics	46	48

**GROUPS** - One change is among women. Just 34 percent of women support the general proposition of doctor-assisted suicide; given the Oregon system this rises to 44 percent. The shift is even bigger among Republicans, who oppose the general proposition by 61-28 percent, but the Oregon system by a closer 52-41 percent.

Doctor-assisted suicide garners most support in the West – the only region where majorities favor the idea. The general proposition is backed by 53-36 percent in the West; the Oregon law, by 59-34 percent.

And there's an age gap: This poll finds support for doctor-assisted suicide lowest among older Americans, those age 65 and up. One reason may be that older adults are more apt to be religious – and religiosity plays a strong role in these views.

RELIGION – Opposition to doctor-assisted suicide in general terms is strongest among Catholics, Christian women and evangelical Christians. The Oregon system engenders a little more support from the first two groups – but not from evangelical Christians, who remain very broadly opposed.

Non-evangelical Christians are more flexible: They oppose doctor-assisted suicide in general by a 15-point margin, but actually support the Oregon system, 53-39 percent. A bit under half of Christians in this survey, 45 percent identified themselves as born-again or evangelical Christians.

METHODOLOGY - This ABC News/Beliefnet survey was conducted by telephone March 13-17, 2002, among a random national sample of 1,021 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:  
<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

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Here are the full results:

1. (HALF SAMPLE A) Do you think it should be legal or illegal for doctors to help terminally ill patients commit suicide by giving them a prescription for fatal drugs?

	Legal	Illegal	No opinion
3/17/02	40	48	12

2. (HALF SAMPLE B) Imagine a law that would make it legal for doctors to help terminally ill patients commit suicide by giving them a prescription for fatal drugs. To be eligible, patients would have to be diagnosed as having less than six months to live, get a second opinion from another doctor, and ask for the drugs three times. And, there would be a 15-day waiting period before the prescription could be filled.

Under this system, do you think it should be legal or illegal for doctors to help terminally ill patients commit suicide by giving them a prescription for fatal drugs?

	Legal	Illegal	No opinion
3/17/02	46	48	6

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