

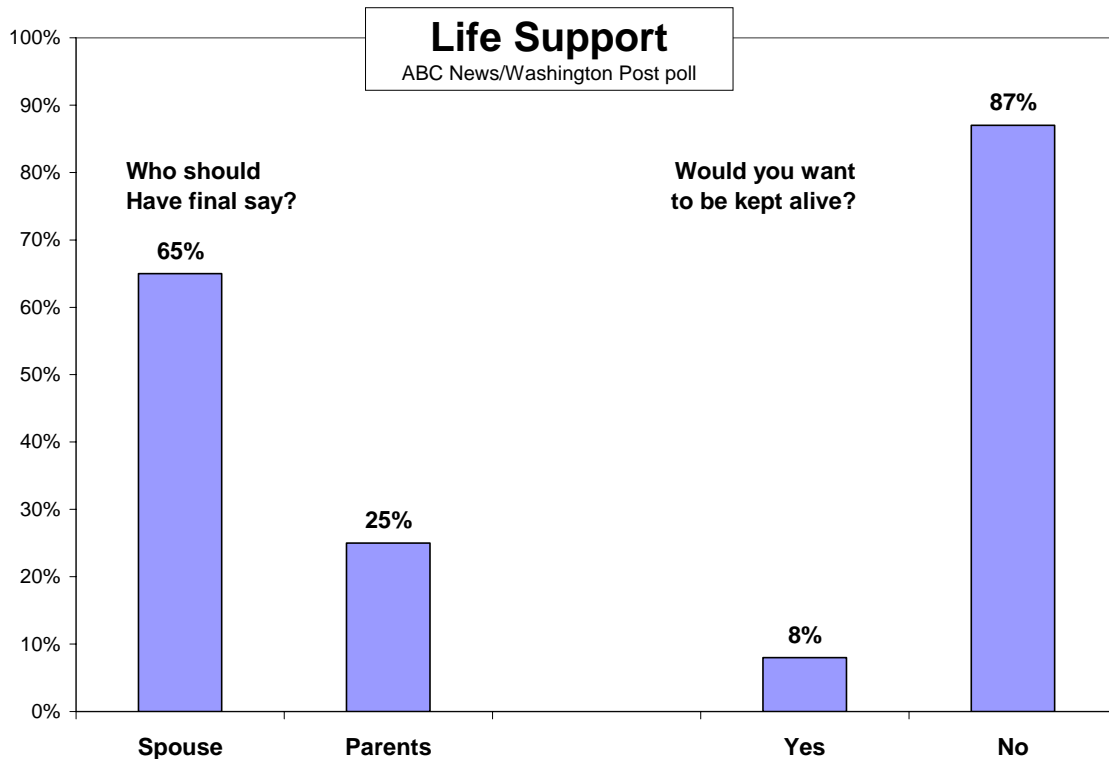
Two-Thirds Back Spouse in Right to Die Cases

In family disputes over life support, Americans by a broad margin think final say should go to a patient's spouse rather than his or her parents – placing the public firmly on the side of Terri Schiavo's husband and the Florida courts that have ruled in his favor.

Schiavo has been in a persistent vegetative state after suffering extensive brain damage brought on by heart failure in 1990, when she was 26. She left no living will, and her parents and husband have been locked in a dispute on whether to continue life support. Her feeding tube is to be removed Friday, though legislators may intervene.

In this ABC News/Washington Post poll, 65 percent of Americans say the spouse rather than the parents should have final say in such disputes; 25 percent say it should be the parents.

In Schiavo's case the husband, Michael, wants to discontinue life support, saying that would be her wishes, while her parents want it continued. Here, too, the husband's position is in line with what most Americans would want for themselves: Eighty-seven percent say that if they were in this condition, they would want life support terminated.



LIVING WILL – A living will or health care proxy is intended to avoid disputes like the Schiavo family’s. But, like Schiavo, most Americans lack such a document: Fifty-seven percent say they don't have a living will or health care proxy, unchanged from an ABC News poll in 2002. Such documents can include instructions for care if the patient is unable to express his or her wishes, and designate a person to make medical decisions.

As Schiavo's case illustrates, brain damage can afflict people of all ages. But older Americans are far more likely to plan for such instances. Seven in 10 senior citizens say they have a living will or health care proxy; that declines to just 25 percent of people under 30, Schiavo’s age group when she was stricken.

Better-educated Americans are also more likely to have living wills.

GROUPS – While majorities of all demographic groups in this poll say spouses rather than parents should have the final say on life support, there are some differences in degree.

Religion is one factor: Evangelical Protestants side with the spouse over the parents by 55-33 percent, but among non-evangelical Protestants it’s a much broader 75-16 percent. However, big majorities of evangelical and non-evangelical Protestants alike say they themselves would not want to be kept alive – 83 and 93 percent, respectively.

There’s also some difference among ideological groups. Seventy-three percent of liberals and 69 percent of moderates think it should be up to the spouse; that declines to 58 percent of conservatives. Again, though, there’s less of a difference on what people in these groups would want for themselves: anywhere from 82 percent of conservatives to 94 percent of liberals would not want life support.

	Final say:		Would you want life support?	
	Spouse	Parents	Yes	No
All	65%	25	8%	87
Evangelical Protestants	55	33	13	83
Non-evangelical Protestants	75	16	6	93
Liberals	73	19	5	94
Moderates	69	23	7	89
Conservatives	58	30	12	82

Michael Schiavo has won a series of court rulings to gain permission to remove his wife’s feeding tube. These were blocked by “Terri’s Law,” passed by the state legislature and signed by Gov. Jeb Bush in late 2003; the state Supreme Court subsequently ruled that law unconstitutional. The latest court ruling allows the feeding tube to be removed Friday; however, both state and federal legislators have said they’ll seek to intervene.

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone March 10-13, 2005, among a random national sample of 1,001 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Dalia Sussman and Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com at <http://abcnews.com/pollvault.html>.

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Full results follow (*= less than 0.5 percent).

40. Do you personally have a so-called living will or health care proxy to deal with your wishes for medical treatment if you're unable to do so, or not?

	Yes	No	No opinion
3/13/05	42	57	1
8/04/02	42	57	1

41. As you may know, a woman in Florida named Terri Schiavo suffered brain damage and has been on life support for 15 years. Doctors say she has no consciousness and her condition is irreversible. Her parents and her husband disagree on whether or not she should be kept on life support. In cases like this who do you think should have final say, (the parents) or (the spouse)?

	Parents	Spouse	Other (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	No opinion
3/13/05	25	65	2	2	6

42. If you were in this condition, would you want to be kept alive, or not?

	Yes	No	No opinion
3/13/05	8	87	4

END