

FACTSHEET 02: Public opinion polls on voluntary euthanasia law reform in Australia

Since 1962 Roy Morgan Research has been polling the Australian population at regular intervals on the issue of voluntary euthanasia. The question posed is: 'If a hopelessly ill patient, experiencing unrelievable suffering, with absolutely no chance of recovering, asks for a lethal dose, should a doctor be allowed to give a lethal dose or not?'

- In 1962 47% said "yes" to a similar question and the percentage has steadily increased over the years.
- It was above 70% throughout the 1990s. In 1993, 1994, and 1995 78% said "yes", and 76% in 1996.
- In 2002 a Morgan Poll revealed that national support was 73% and 79% in South Australia. The percentages by religious persuasion saying "yes" in South Australia in June 2002 were: Anglican 81%, Methodist 87%, Presbyterian 66%, Roman Catholic 69%, Uniting Church 74%, Lutheran 74%, and Baptist 68%.
- In 2007 the same question was asked in a Newspoll survey, with 80% of Australians saying "yes" (81% in South Australia). Nationally 74% of respondents who stated that they had a religion gave an affirmative response to the question.
- In a 2009 Newspoll 85% of Australians gave an affirmative response (82% in South Australia).
- The 2010 survey by the Australia Institute (an independent "think tank" developing and conducting research and policy analysis, www.tai.org.au) had a 75% affirmative response to this question.
- In 2011 a Newspoll conducted in New South Wales showed an 83% affirmative response.
- In 2012 Newspoll surveyed 2521 Australian adults which showed 82.5% support for law reform (81% in South Australia). Voluntary euthanasia was cited as third out of eight 'burning' issues (after a National Disability Insurance Scheme and dealing appropriately with asylum seekers). Twenty nine per cent stated that they would change their vote over this issue; 23% if their candidate opposed law reform compared with 6% if they supported reform. Politicians are therefore more likely to lose votes by failing to support reform.
- In 2013 the ABC Vote Compass online tool had 75.1% agreeing and 15.5% disagreeing with the proposition 'Terminally ill patients should

be able to legally end their own lives with medical assistance’.

- In 2014 an Essential Media Communications poll posed the question ‘When a person has a disease that cannot be cured and is living in severe pain do you think he or she should or should not a doctor be allowed by law to assist the patient to commit suicide if the patient requests it?’ The response was 66% yes and 14% no.
- In 2015 an Ipsos Mori poll posed the question ‘What do you think of assisted dying? Do you think it should be legal or not for a doctor to assist a patient aged 18 or over in ending their life, if that is the patient’s wish, provided that the patient is terminally ill (where they think the patient has six months or less to live), is of sound mind, and expresses a clear desire to end their life?’. The response was 75% yes and 13% no.
- In 2015 Essential Media Communications repeated the 2014 poll using the same wording. The response was 72% yes and 12% no.
- In 2016 the ABC Vote Compass online tool had 201,404 respondents who participated from May 8 to May 19 The proposition was ‘Terminally ill patients should be able to legally end their own lives with medical assistance’. The response was 75% yes and 16% no.
- In 2016 Australian Election Studies (AES) ¹ conducted a survey including the following question: Euthanasia: “Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement? Terminally ill patients should be able to end their own lives with medical assistance.” The response was: Strongly agree (43.5%); Agree (34%) (or total support 77.5%); Neither agree nor disagree (13.1%); Disagree (5%); Strongly disagree (4.5%). This outcome reveals that, in addition to the strong overarching support, the ‘strongly agree’ category outweighs ‘strongly disagree’ ten-fold.

The above list is representative but not exhaustive. Although public opinion polls cannot be the only basis for law reform, there can be no doubting the widespread support for allowing a hopelessly ill and suffering patient legal access to a requested medically hastened death.

References:

1 Cameron, S & McAllister, I (2016) Trends in Australian Political Opinion Results from the Australian Election Study 1987– 2016. Australian National University. Sampling and methodology can be found at <http://www.australianelectionstudy.org/>

For a comprehensive overview of Australian polls see <https://theconversation.com/factcheck-qanda-do-80-of-australians-and-up-to-70-of-catholics-and-anglicans-support-euthanasia-laws-76079>