

# End of Life Choice



Newsletter on current debates

## Analysing religious opposition to assisted dying

**The Australian Election Studies (AES)\*** aim to provide a long-term perspective on stability and change in the political attitudes and behaviour of the Australian electorate. The surveys investigate the changing social and attitudinal bases of Australian politics as our society changes. The AES routinely collects data among a nationally representative sample of voters and among major party candidates standing for election. The studies have been running as a series of surveys since 1987, timed to coincide with Australian Federal elections. The 2016 Australian Election Study was conducted after the 2016 Australian federal election, as a mail-back questionnaire, completed by respondents at a time and place of their choice (Sheppard, 2017).

### AES AUSTRALIAN ELECTION STUDY

The 2016 Australian Election Study included 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%) (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.**

An analysis of the AES data by Francis (2017) establishes that even amongst the most religiously committed, only a minority oppose assisted dying; but of those who do, almost all have a religious affiliation. Those who attend religious services weekly are more likely to oppose assisted dying (46.1%) compared with those who attend only once a month (24%); those who attend less often (10%); and those who never attend (2.4%). Survey results show that religious identity in Australia is not strong overall:

- **48.3% of Australians never attend a religious service**
- **65.4% attend less than once a year or never**
- **74.8% attend once a year or less, including never**
- **16.2% regularly attend**
- **11.85% attend at least weekly**

Regular attenders represent a small minority (16.2%) of Australians and they disagree far more often with 'progressive' social policies than less religious Australians. For example, the AES survey also showed a stark difference between this group and the rest of society on marriage equality, abortion, and smoking marijuana. In respect of the AES studies Sheppard notes that where these questions have been asked in previous AES surveys (or in the Australian National Political Attitudes Surveys conducted between 1967 and 1979), there is a notable trend towards more liberal attitudes.

The AES survey revealed that support for assisted dying amongst Anglicans was 79.4% and Catholics 74.3%. Francis notes that a significant majority (70.5%) of Australians with any religious affiliation agree with assisted dying. Those who disagree are the most religious. **However, even amongst the most religious, being those who attend services at least weekly, less than half disagree with the right to assisted dying.** It is people from the minor religious denominations who are the most strongly opposed; almost three times more likely than Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Church members to not support assisted dying. In addition, people from non-Christian faiths are nearly twice as likely to oppose assisted dying.



The AES survey also tested the attitude towards political party affiliation; revealing that 87.4% of Greens, 80.4% of Labor, 76.9% of the Coalition and 69.1% of minor party supporters endorsed assisted dying. Age is not a major determinant, as support is in great majority across all age groups; while disagreement is highest amongst older Australians (70%+). This particular difference is

explained by older people's significantly higher religiosity. Results of this survey showed similar levels of support to the 80% cited in other polls which have returned slightly different results reflecting the methodology and variations in the questions asked.



There has been a decreasing religious affiliation amongst Australians; particularly since the 1970s. As Francis contends this trend is likely to continue as younger Australians are most likely to reject religion outright; to not identify with a specific religious denomination; and to only attend services for social rather than religious reasons. Religious commitment trends downwards from amongst older Australians (58%) to the youngest (34%). Francis' analysis of the AES data suggests that opposition to assisted dying is 'almost entirely' linked to religion, and as religious commitment and affiliation decreases in Australia, support is likely to increase even more from the current already very high levels.

**\*The AES has been run as a collaborative project between several universities, with its long-term home at the ANU.** (<http://www.australianelectionstudy.org/about.html>)

### References:

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/>

Francis, N (2017) 'Opposition to assisted dying in Australia is largely religious' <http://www.dyingforchoice.com/resources/fact-files/opposition-assisted-dying-largely-religious>. Full report available at <http://www.dyingforchoice.com/docs/OppositionToADisLargelyReligious2017.pdf>

Sheppard, J (2017) Moral politics, social permissiveness, and voting in Australia, Paper prepared for the Joint Quantitative Political Science Conference for Asia and Australasia, University of Sydney, Australia, 9-11 January 2017



Compassion for suffering  
The freedom to choose  
Add your voice to the call



SAVES was established in 1983 to campaign for legal, medically assisted choice in end-of-life arrangements. The aim is to relieve suffering by providing choice for people at the end of their life. SAVES works in the community and with Members of Parliament to achieve law reform.

To The Editor  
Saturday Paper

Two articles in the same edition of the Saturday Paper (17-23 June, 2017) report on continuing efforts by the Christian right to control Australia's political agenda by recasting it in their own image ('Hardline Christian hoping to replace Triggs' by Mike Seccombe, and 'A good ending' by Andrew Denton). The first highlights the thesis of powerful Christian lobbyists that Australia needs a biblical literalist to steer the Human Rights Commission back to the supremacy of a particular version of God's law; with implications for the human rights of others. The second article shows that Right to Life and other hard line religious opponents of assisted dying law reform are using an anonymous survey and the help of a high profile US spokesperson to convince Victorian MPs that voters will punish them at the polls if they accede to the will of the people on this issue.

However, the 2016 Australian Election Study reveals that religious identity is not strong in Australia, with 48.3% of Australians never attending a religious service and 65.4% attending less than once a year, or never. It is from within the 16.2% who regularly attend that the small minority of Australians are located who disagree far more frequently with 'progressive' social policies than less religious Australians. The AES study found that assisted dying was supported by 77.5% of Australians, with 13.1% uncommitted and only 5% opposed. Support by Anglicans was 79.4% and Catholics 74.3%.

Politicians would do well to take note of robust evidence on where the power of the vote truly lies. It is not in the turned up volume of the voice of church hierarchies and strongly committed affiliates. MPs should hold their nerve and act in the greater good – one that does not see virtue in suffering.

Yours sincerely

(Dr) Julia Anaf  
Norwood SA

Dr Anaf is Vice President of SAVES

## Voluntary Euthanasia Advocacy Groups

Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Euthanasia  
[christiansforve.org.au](http://christiansforve.org.au)

Doctors for Assisted Dying Choice  
[drs4assisteddyingchoice.org](http://drs4assisteddyingchoice.org)

South Australian Nurses Supporting Choices in Dying  
facebook: SA Nurses Supporting Choices in Dying  
My Body My Choice

facebook: [facebook.com/pages/MY-BODY-MY-Choice-VE](https://facebook.com/pages/MY-BODY-MY-Choice-VE)

Voluntary Euthanasia Youth Advocates  
facebook: Support SAVE-YA Law Reform

Lawyers for Death with Dignity  
[saves.asn.au/lawyers](http://saves.asn.au/lawyers)

## Resources

Andrew Denton's GoGentleAustralia website  
<http://gogentleaustralia.org.au>

SAVES End of Life Choice Newsletters  
<http://www.saves.asn.au/newsletters.php>

The Wheeler Centre podcasts Better Off Dead  
<http://www.wheelercentre.com/broadcasts/podcasts/better-off-dead>

The Voluntary Euthanasia Story: the epic journey to make it legal - Adelaide forum, June 2015  
<http://www.saves.asn.au/resources.php>

