

# THE FIELD POLL

THE INDEPENDENT AND NON-PARTISAN SURVEY  
OF PUBLIC OPINION ESTABLISHED IN 1947 AS  
**THE CALIFORNIA POLL BY MERVIN FIELD**

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**BY A LARGIN MARGIN CALIFORNIANS  
STILL SUPPORT THE CONCEPT OF  
DOCTOR-ASSISTED SUICIDE.**

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by Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field

Consistent with previous *Field Polls* measures taken during the past twenty-five years, large majorities of Californians continue to endorse the concept of doctor-assisted suicide and say that they themselves would want this option if they were terminally ill and expected to die within six months.

In a statewide survey completed February 8-17, 70% of Californians support the idea that “incurably ill patients have the right to ask for and get life-ending medication.” In addition, 68% of the public, including 62% of seniors age 65 or older, would personally want to have this option if they themselves were terminally ill.

These views are held by large margins of voters regardless of party affiliation and by residents of all religious persuasions.

**Trend of public opinion**

*The Field Poll* first began measuring California public opinion in 1979 about the right of an incurably ill patient to ask for and obtain life-ending medication, and has updated its measurements intermittently six times since then. The results show that public support for this right has remained consistent, with between 64% and 75% in each survey favoring it.

The current poll finds support at 70%, with 22% opposed. There are no large differences in opinion about this by voter registration status, party, or religious affiliation.

**Table 1**  
**Should incurably ill patients have the right**  
**to ask for and get life-ending medication?**  
**(among California adults)**

	<u>Should</u>	<u>Should not</u>	<u>Undecided</u>
February 2005	70%	22	8
1999	75%	20	5
1997	70%	26	4
1995	70%	22	8
1987	64%	27	9
1983	68%	24	8
1979	64%	27	9
<u>Voting status and party</u>			
Not registered	71%	23	6
Registered to vote	<u>70%</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>9</u>
Democrats	77%	16	7
Republicans	64%	27	9
Non-partisans/others	65%	22	13
<u>Religion</u>			
Protestant	63%	26	11
Catholic	65%	30	5
Other religions	83%	13	4
No preference	83%	8	9

**Personally choose assistance in dying?**

Large majorities of the public also maintain that if they themselves were terminally ill and expected to die within six months, they would want their doctor to be able to assist them in dying if they requested it. These findings are similar to sentiments expressed in 1999 and 1997.

This opinion is expressed two to one by Californians age 65 or older, and nearly three to one by younger residents under age 40. Majorities of Protestants and Catholics also would like this option. It is overwhelmingly endorsed by residents affiliated with other religions or those with no religious preference.

**Table 2**  
**If you yourself were terminally ill and expected to die within  
 six months, would you want your doctor to be able to  
 assist you in dying, if you requested it?**  
**(among California adults)**

	<u>Should</u>	<u>Should not</u>	<u>Undecided</u>
February 2005	68%	28	4
1999	72%	24	4
1997	67%	29	4
<u>Age</u>			
18 – 39	69%	25	6
40 – 64	68%	29	3
65 or older	62%	32	6
<u>Religion</u>			
Protestant	58%	38	4
Catholic	64%	31	5
Other religions	78%	18	4
No preference	85%	11	4

**Pro and con arguments**

Doctor-assisted suicide has been a profound social and political issue, encompassing debates in medical ethics, religious teachings, personal privacy, state and federal drug laws, and the balance of legal power between states and the federal government.

In this survey, *The Field Poll* posed a series of four pro and con arguments related to doctor-assisted suicide. The results underscore some of the reasons Californians favor allowing doctor-assisted suicide.

By a 67% to 31% margin residents agree that doctor-assisted suicide is a good idea because mentally competent patients should have the right to make the decision to die for themselves and this will enable doctors to respect their wishes.

There is also agreement by a 64% to 32% margin that doctor-assisted suicide is a good idea because it would end the prolonged suffering of terminally ill patients and allow them to die with dignity.

There is not much support for two of the arguments against doctor-assisted suicide. The survey finds that the public disagrees 56% to 39% that doctor-assisted suicide is a bad idea because it would put doctors in the position of deciding who lives and dies, which goes against the basic medical principle that doctors should save and extend life.

And, by 64% to 32% Californians disagree with the argument that doctor-assisted suicide devalues life and makes it too easy for people to save time and money by encouraging death instead of prolonging a patient's life.

<b>Table 3</b>			
<b>Reaction to pro and con statements relating to doctor-assisted suicide (among California adults)</b>			
	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
<b>Doctor-assisted suicide is a good idea because...</b>			
Mentally competent patients should have the right to make the decision to die for themselves and this will enable doctors to respect their wishes	67%	31	2
It would end the prolonged suffering of terminally ill patients and allow them to die with dignity	64%	32	4
<b>Doctor-assisted suicide is a bad idea because...</b>			
It would put doctors in the position of deciding who lives and dies, which goes against the basic medical principle that doctors should save and extend life	39%	56	5
It devalues life and makes it too easy for people to save time and money by encouraging death instead of prolonging a patient's life	32%	64	4

**Background**

Oregon passed a "Death with Dignity " law in 1997 and is currently the only state permitting doctor-assisted suicide. By contrast, a large number of states (43) have passed laws that specifically ban any euthanasia practice.

Despite the California public's long standing support for the idea of doctor-assisted suicide, California voters rejected in 1992 by a 54% to 46% margin Proposition 161, an initiative that would have allowed doctors to end the lives of terminally ill patients.

In a series of pre-election surveys taken during that campaign *The Field Poll* found voter awareness and interest in the initiative remained at relatively low levels. However, in the campaign's final stages, opponents of the measure became quite active and were able to rally enough voters to their side to defeat it.

Last week the United States Supreme Court agreed to take up a challenge to Oregon's physician-assisted suicide law, although on it is not expected until next October. High Court deliberations in previous cases have ruled that while there is no constitutional right to assisted-suicide, it did not declare the practice illegal.

Last month California Assemblywoman Patty Berg (D-Eureka) introduced a bill in the state legislature that would allow doctor-assisted suicide in California. The Assembly has not yet acted on the bill.

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### **Information About The Survey**

#### **Sample Details**

The findings in this report are based on a telephone survey of Californians conducted in English and Spanish. Interviews were completed during the period February 8 – 17, 2005 among a representative sample of 503 California adults.

Households were sampled using a random digit dial methodology, which includes all operating telephone exchanges within all area codes serving California households in proportion to population. Within each exchange a random sample of telephone numbers are created by adding random digits to the selected telephone exchange. This permits access to all landline telephone numbers both listed and unlisted.

According to statistical theory, 95% of the time results from the overall adult sample have a sampling error of +/- 4.1 percentage points.

There are other possible sources of error in any survey other than sampling variability. Different results could occur because of differences in question wording, sampling, or sequencing or through undetected omission or errors in interviewing or data processing. Extensive efforts were made to minimize such potential errors.

#### **Questions Asked**

Do you think an incurably ill patient should have the right to ask for and get medication that would painlessly end his or her life?

If you, yourself, were terminally ill and were expected to die within six months, would you want your doctor to be able to assist you in dying if you requested it?

A bill is being discussed in the state legislature to allow adults with less than six months to live the right to obtain lethal drugs from a doctor and take them themselves to end their own lives. I am going to read some statements that have been made about this bill and for each tell me whether you agree or disagree.

**(STATEMENTS READ IN RANDOM ORDER) (SEE RELEASE FOR STATEMENTS READ)**