

# Most americans agree with right-to-die movement

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74 percent now believe terminally ill should have choice to end their lives, *HealthDay/Harris Poll* finds.

(HealthDay)—Already-strong public support for right-to-die legislation has grown even stronger in the days since the planned death of 29-year-old brain cancer patient Brittany Maynard, a new *HealthDay/Harris Poll* has found.

An overwhelming 74 percent of American adults now believe that terminally ill patients who are in great pain should have the right to end their lives, the poll found. Only 14 percent were opposed.

Broad majorities also favor [physician-assisted suicide](#) and physician-administered euthanasia.

Only three states—Oregon, Washington and Vermont—currently have right-to-die laws that allow physician-[assisted suicide](#).

"Public opinion on these issues seems to be far ahead of political leadership and legislative actions," said Humphrey Taylor, chairman of The Harris Poll. "Only a few states have legalized physician-assisted suicide and none have legalized physician-administered euthanasia."

People responded to the poll in the weeks after Maynard took medication to end her life in early November.

Maynard moved from California to Oregon following her diagnosis with late-stage [brain cancer](#) so she could take advantage of the state's "Death With Dignity Act." Her story went viral online, with a video explaining her choice garnering nearly 11.5 million views on YouTube.

A "poster child for the movement," Maynard helped spark conversations that allowed people to put themselves in her shoes, said Frank Kavanaugh, a board member of the Final Exit Network, a right-to-die advocacy group.

"I think it is just a natural evolution over a period of time," Kavanaugh said of the *HealthDay/Harris Poll* results. "There was a time when people didn't talk about suicide. These days, each time conversations occur, people think it through for themselves, and more and more are saying, 'That's a reasonable thing to me.'"

The poll also found that:

- Support for a person's right to die has increased to 74 percent, up from 70 percent in 2011. Those opposed decreased to 14 percent from 17 percent during the same period.
- Physician-assisted suicide also received increased support, with 72 percent now in favor, compared with 67 percent in 2011. Opposition declined from 19 percent to 15 percent.
- Sixty-six percent of respondents said doctors should be allowed

to comply with the wishes of dying patients in severe distress who ask to have their lives ended, up from 58 percent in 2011. Opposition decreased from 20 percent in 2011 to 15 percent now.

"The very large—more than 4-to-1 and increasing—majorities in favor of physician-assisted suicide, and the right of [terminally ill patients](#) to end their lives are consistent with other liberal social policy trends, such as support for same-sex marriage, gay rights and the decriminalization of marijuana, seen in the results of referendums and initiatives in the recent mid-term elections," Taylor said.

Support for the right-to-die movement cut across all generations and educational groups, both genders, and even political affiliation, the poll found.

Democrats tended to be more supportive of right-to-die legislation, but 56 percent of Republicans said they favor voluntary euthanasia and 63 percent favor physician-assisted suicide.

Kavanaugh was not surprised. "People think of this as a liberal issue. But I find that as I talk to [conservatives], you can appeal to them on the basis of 'get the government the hell out of my life,'" he said.

But the public is split over how such policies should be enacted, with 35 percent saying that the states should decide on their own while 33 percent believe the decision should be made by the federal government, the poll found.

"Most of the people I know in the field whose opinion I put stock in don't feel there's ever going to be federal movement on it," Kavanaugh said. "You're just going to have to suffer through a state-by-state process."

Kavanaugh does believe this overwhelming public support will result in steady adoption of right-to-die laws.

"I think this will become the ultimate human right of the 21st century, the right to die with dignity," he said. "There are good deaths and bad deaths, and it is possible to have a good death."

Despite increasing public support for assisted suicide, stiff opposition remains in some quarters.

"Assisted suicide sows confusion about the purpose of life and death. It suggests that a life can lose its purpose and that death has no meaning," Rev. Alexander Sample, archbishop of the Archdiocese of Portland in Oregon, said in a pastoral statement issued during Maynard's final days.

"Cutting life short is not the answer to death," he said. "Instead of hastening death, we encourage all to embrace the sometimes difficult but precious moments at the end of life, for it is often in these moments that we come to understand what is most important about life. Our final days help us to prepare for our eternal destiny."

Todd Cooper, a spokesman for the Portland archdiocese, said the debate over assisted suicide touches him on a very deep level because of his wife, Kathie.

About 10 years ago, she also was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. She endured two brain surgeries, two years of chemotherapy and six weeks of radiation therapy, and remains alive to this day.

"If she'd given up the fight for life, she wouldn't be here," Cooper said. "That doesn't necessarily happen in every case, but it gives hope for those who struggle to the very end."

The *HealthDay/Harris Poll* was conducted online in the United States between Nov. 12-17 among 2,276 adults 18 and older. Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted, where necessary, to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

**More information:** For more on the debate over right-to-die advocacy, visit [Debate.org](http://Debate.org).

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