

Attitudes to euthanasia

Opposition and support

Euthanasia, though illegal in Australia, is a hotly contested issue which religious groups have frequently weighed in on. Conservative churches have voiced their opposition to decriminalising euthanasia, claiming the right to give and take life belongs to God alone. Other Christian groups, such as Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Euthanasia, support euthanasia as providing compassionate, dignified death for the terminally ill. The Australian population largely supports voluntary euthanasia, with 85% in favour of it.¹ How does this compare to the opinions of church attenders?

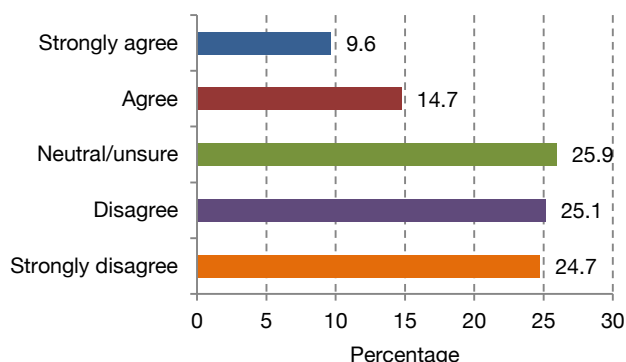
In late 2011 as a part of the 2011 National Church Life Survey, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant church attenders were asked the following question:

Do you agree or disagree: 'People suffering from a terminal illness should be able to ask a doctor to end their life'?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral /unsure
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Overall results

Figure 1: Attitudes to euthanasia



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2 (n=1,381).

¹ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/latest-news/per-cent-support-voluntary-euthanasia-poll/story-fn3dxiwe-1225791455181>

About half of church attenders either disagreed (25%) or strongly disagreed (25%) that people suffering from a terminal illness should be able to ask a doctor to end their life (see Figure 1). Only 24% of church attenders showed support for euthanasia. This shows a great departure from national trends. More than a quarter of attenders indicated they were unsure about this issue, highlighting the complex moral implications of euthanasia.

Demographics

Overall, age groups didn't differ significantly in their attitudes to euthanasia. The idea that older church attenders may be more sympathetic towards euthanasia, due to them being more susceptible to terminal illness, wasn't supported. One age-related finding of note, however, was the high proportion of 15-29 year olds who indicated they were 'neutral/unsure' (40% compared to 24% of other age groups). There were also no differences by level of education.

Women were more likely to oppose euthanasia than men, with 55% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing compared to 44% of men. For men, 12% strongly agreed that those with a terminal illness should be able to ask a doctor to end their life, and 16% agreed. For women, 8% strongly agreed and 14% agreed. Men were more likely than women to be 'neutral/unsure' (29% versus 24%).

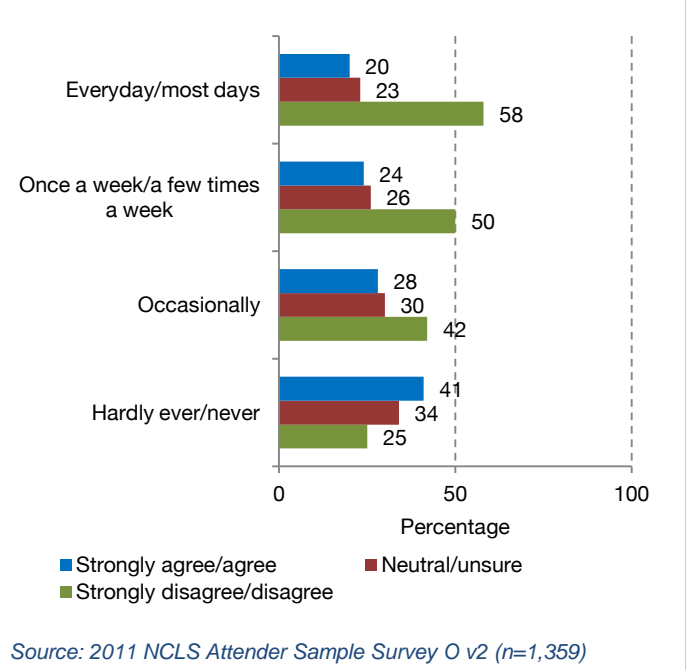
Religious practice

Church attenders' attitudes towards euthanasia varied according to church attendance history. Newcomers to church life in the last five years were most likely to support euthanasia (39% in agreement versus 23% of other attenders), and church visitors were most likely to oppose it (59% versus 49% of other attenders). For long-term attenders (more than 5 years), 25% agreed or strongly agreed that the terminally ill should be able to ask a doctor to end their life, and 48% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The more frequently a church attender attended church, the more likely it was that they opposed euthanasia. Of

those who attended services weekly or more often, 54% disagreed or strongly disagreed with euthanasia. This compares to 27% of those who attended less than weekly. Frequency of private devotions was also related to opposition to euthanasia (see Figure 2). The more frequently an attender spent time in private devotion, the more likely they were to disagree or strongly disagree with the terminally ill asking a doctor to end their life (58% of those who practiced devotions everyday or most days, versus 25% of attenders who never or hardly ever spent time in private devotions).

Figure 2: Attitudes to euthanasia by devotional practice



Denominational differences

Attendees from every denomination were more likely to oppose euthanasia than support it, except for Uniting Church attendees (see Table 1). They had 42% of attendees either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the terminally ill should be able to ask a doctor to end their life, and only 28% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. The Baptist/Churches of Christ grouping had the

Table 1: Attitudes to euthanasia by denomination

	Angli- can	Baptist/ Church- es of Christ	Cath- olic	Luth- eran	Pente- costal	Unit- ing	Other Prot- estant
	Percentage						
Agree	25	15	28	23	14	42	14
Neutral/unsure	36	22	22	25	33	29	24
Disagree	39	63	50	52	53	28	62

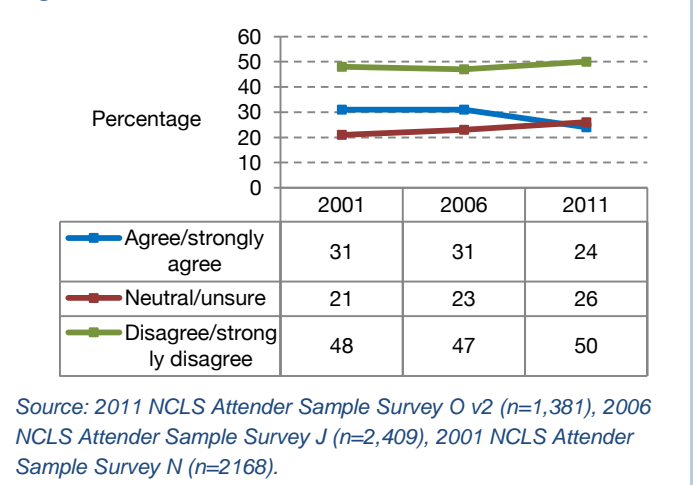
Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2 (n=1,381)

highest proportion of attendees opposing euthanasia, with 63% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Change over time

The proportion of church attendees who are in favour of euthanasia has declined over time, from 31% in 2001 to 24% in 2011. Church attendees in 2011 were also more likely to select 'neutral/unsure' than attendees 5 or 10 years ago. Similar proportions of attendees opposed euthanasia in each of the three time waves.

Figure 3: Attitudes to euthanasia, 2001-2011



Summary

Church attendees are more likely to oppose euthanasia or remain unsure about the issue than they are to support it. This differs from the views of the Australian population. Attendees' attitudes towards euthanasia vary as a function of their gender, attendance history, frequency of religious practice, and denomination.

Data sources

Castle, K., (2001) [computer file], 2001 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N. Sydney, Australia: NCLS Research.

Castle, K., (2006) [computer file], 2006 NCLS Attender Sample Survey J. Sydney, Australia: NCLS Research.

Powell, R., (2014) [computer file], 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2. Sydney, Australia: NCLS Research.

Citation

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