



## PUBLIC OPINION ON THE TOPIC OF EUTHANASIA

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## INTRODUCTION

Suicide is a topic that has been studied by members in our society for many generations. As a society, we are often baffled by this tragic occurrence and strive to understand everything we possible can about this phenomena. Through the advent of social science research, social scientists have been key players in uncovering suicide's dark mysteries. These individuals have also been vital in gathering and measuring public opinion on this topic and related topics of suicide as well.

Within the last century, another aspect of suicide has come to the public's attention. The issue is that of euthanasia, which is also known as "physician-assisted suicide." Euthanasia is defined as the voluntary termination of life through the assistance of another person. Euthanasia is most commonly practiced by the elderly, people with disabilities, or people who have terminal illnesses. The practice of euthanasia is one that has seen its fair share of social controversy. It has been said that this practice "inevitably provokes a moral dilemma for many Americans, because euthanasia gives individuals the freedom to choose whether to live or die."<sup>1</sup>

While euthanasia has been an issue of focus since the early 20th century, the 1990's saw euthanasia dramatically come to the forefront of American mass media. During this time, Americans witnessed "Oregonians voting to allow physician-assisted suicide and juries acquitting Dr. Jack Kevorkian of killing terminally ill patients."<sup>2</sup> Pro-euthanasia and anti-euthanasia groups were formed to cater to individual attitudes on this

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<sup>1</sup> J. Allen et al. "American's Attitudes Toward Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide, 1936-2002" in *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*. 33. (2006). 5.

<sup>2</sup> J. Hamil-Luker and C. Smith. "Religious Authority and Public Opinion on Right to Die" in *Sociology of Religion*. 59. (1998). 373.

subject.<sup>3</sup> During this time, more sociological focus was shifted to this topic, mainly focusing on whether these events had had any affect on public opinion. Results from these studies will be examined in later sections.

For this paper, I will be examining the relationship between several sociodemographic variables and public opinion on assisted suicide with the help of a doctor. It is widely known that to effectively measure the public opinion of a society you must look at a variety of demographics. In the research on public opinion of euthanasia, such variables ranging from age, sex, and race have be readily examined. For my research on this topic, I will be examining the following demographics: religion, political affiliation, income, and education level. These four demographics will serve as my independent variables. My dependent variable will be the variable LETDIE1. This variable examines the question of whether a person who has an incurable disease or their families should be allowed to request that the doctor end the patient's life through some painless means. Through literature reviews, methods, and results sections I hope to see whether these independent variables do indeed show statistical evidence of having an effect on public opinion of euthanasia.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Holden. "Demographics, Attitudes, and Afterlife Beliefs of Right-To-Life and Right-To-Die Organization Members" in *The Journal of Social Psychology*. 4. (1992). 521.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While looking for articles to satisfy the literature review portion of this paper, I was amazed to discover that there was an abundance of information on this topic. Many different journals in many different fields of academic study such as sociology, biology, and psychology have done extensive empirical research on euthanasia. Several of my articles examine public opinion of euthanasia from the 1970's to my year of focus, 1998. Others focus exclusively on attitudes of the late 1990's. All, however, include demographics that I feel are important in examining public opinion on euthanasia.

According to "American's Attitudes Toward Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide, 1936-2002", American's whose public opinion supports euthanasia has overall increased over the years.<sup>4</sup> Through public opinion polls from the Gallup Organization and *Public Opinion Quarterly*, it has been shown that a majority (6 in 10) of Americans feel that voluntary euthanasia is moral, acceptable, and "legal".<sup>5</sup> This information was collected through Gallup's standard of 1,000 face to face and telephone interviews. "The sample design for face-to-face surveys is a replicated area-probability sample that selects subjects based on demographics from block level in urban areas and segments of townships in rural areas."<sup>6</sup> Besides showing that a majority support voluntary euthanasia, the Gallup results also show that "the highest support for physician-assisted suicide occurred highest among Caucasian men, aged 50-55, who had some college education, had yearly incomes of \$35,000-\$60,000, and were Democrats, Protestants, and infrequent

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<sup>4</sup> Allen, 12

<sup>5</sup> Allen, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, 11.

church attendees."<sup>7</sup> The information presented in this article served as my starting point for which four demographics I wanted to analyze. After careful consideration, I finally decided to settle on religion, political affiliation, income, and education level.

Religion is the first demographic and independent variable I chose to examine. Common wisdom would suggest that people who are part of a strong religious institution would be opposed to the idea of euthanasia. This statement, through the examination of my journal articles, seems to be accurate in some ways. A study, titled "Religious Authority and Public Opinion on the Right to Die" looks in depth at the opinions that church-going or people of strong faith have concerning euthanasia. Using data from the 1996 NORC General Social Survey (which included a sample of 2,904), the researchers in this study concluded that non-religious people are three times more likely to support euthanasia than religious people. The study also concluded that there are some significant differences in terms of how separate religions feel about religion as well.<sup>8</sup>

As expected, the non-religious had the highest percentage of approval for allowing incurable patients to chose to die, nearly 90 percent. Liberal Protestants, Catholics, and mainline Protestants followed closely behind with 79.1, 73.3, and 71.3 percent approving, respectively. Only evangelical Protestants had a higher disapproval rating than an approval rating, with just 42.4 percent of the sample choosing to allow incurable patients to die.<sup>9</sup>

An examination of the 1998 GSS results of religion and public opinion will occur later in this paper. With the results presented above from the journal article, it seems that religious affiliation, as in which faith you claim to be (Catholic, Protestant, etc.) are not as

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<sup>7</sup> Allen, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Hamil-Luker, 380.

<sup>9</sup> Hamil-Luker, 382.

strong of a factor as previously thought. Though a significant relationship is said to exist in this study, it is nowhere near as drastic as I would have imagined it would be. In, "The Journal of Social Psychology", researchers examining the same phenomenon as previously stated concluded that "religious affiliation had little apparent effect on euthanasia attitudes. Rather than a particular religious affiliation, "the style of morality" is a major determinant of euthanasia attitudes."<sup>10</sup> Researchers who had a hand in writing "Religious Authority and Public Opinion on Right to Die", "suggest that future studies examine possible ambivalent attitudes toward euthanasia that we cannot measure with survey data."<sup>11</sup> They feel that standard "yes or no" replies do not fully capture respondent's beliefs. In the future, they believe that qualitative studies would increase society's understanding of the relationship between right to die beliefs and religious authority immensely.<sup>12</sup>

The second demographic I choose to examine was political affiliation. Politics is major institution in the United States and has been known to have a huge impact on how people base their opinions. Since euthanasia is such a controversial topic, I felt that looking at political affiliation may be very fruitful in my studies of public opinion on euthanasia.

When doing my research, I found that out of all my variables, this one was the hardest to find a <sup>(much)</sup> ~~plethora~~ of information on. One source, "Public attitudes toward euthanasia and suicide for terminally ill persons: 1997 and 1996" presented a lot of

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<sup>10</sup> Holden, 522.

<sup>11</sup> Hamil-Luker, 389.

<sup>12</sup> Hamil-Luker, 389-390.

material that I felt would be helpful in my examination of political affiliation. Using data from both the 1977 and 1996 GSS, the researchers aimed to see if any major change had occurred in political affiliation and public opinion on euthanasia. The results of their examination found that only a weak correlation between political views and euthanasia existed.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, it was discovered that even though a weak correlation existed, it did show that "a greater proportion of liberal than moderate or conservative respondents expressed approval of both euthanasia and suicide."<sup>14</sup>

The researchers seemed to have determined that since politics did not play as big of a role as previously thought, then maybe another factor was in play. Through much analysis and retesting of the variable, the researchers seemed confident that approval of freedom of expression seemed to play a bigger role than political affiliation. After testing this new variable empirically, results did show "that those who approve freedom of expression are much more likely to approve of euthanasia."<sup>15</sup>

The third variable that I choose to examine is income. Since class is a major descriptor in American society and since class is mostly determined by one's income, I felt that it might be important to analyze this variable. Every year, when the GSS is conducted, income is one variable that is consistently measured. While respondent's income today is often larger than it was in the 1970's, inflation rates has kept the amounts pretty consistent.

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<sup>13</sup> M. A. DeCesare. "Public attitudes toward euthanasia and suicide for terminally ill persons: 1977 and 1996" in *Social Biology*. 47.(2000). 264.

<sup>14</sup> DeCesare, 267.

<sup>15</sup> DeCesare, 264.



In the article, "The Polls: Changing Attitudes Toward Euthanasia", researcher John Ostheimer aims to determine which variables have significant effects on public opinion of euthanasia. He presents his findings of public opinion on euthanasia in a state-by-state analysis as well as a national analysis. In analyzing all of these findings, there seems to be a significant relationship between income and opinion on euthanasia.<sup>16</sup> The findings also suggest that upper and middle class individuals are far more likely to support euthanasia than lower class individuals.<sup>17</sup> The researcher is quick to point out however that other factors that determine income may actually be the variables in play, not income by itself. The previously mentioned article by DeCesare also reports that "those with higher income are more likely to approve of euthanasia than those with lower incomes."<sup>18</sup> This correlation will be tested later to see if it still holds true in the 1998 GSS data.

The last demographic and last independent variable I chose to examine is education level. This variable, like political affiliation, is one that was hard to find a lot of information on. In the research that I did find, I felt like the social science community finds the results of comparing education level and opinion on euthanasia to be intuitive. That means that they feel that there will always be a positive correlation between education and approval of euthanasia. In "Demographics, Attitudes, and Afterlife Beliefs of Right-To-Life and Right-To-Die Organization Members", author J. Holden also claims

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<sup>16</sup> J. M. Ostheimer. "The Polls: Changing Attitudes Toward Euthanasia" in *Public Opinion Quarterly*. (1980). 124.

<sup>17</sup> Ostheimer, 128.

<sup>18</sup> DeCesare, 264.

that a positive correlation between education and approval of euthanasia exists.<sup>19</sup> In the public attitudes article by DeCesare, approval of euthanasia also shows a positive correlation between education and euthanasia. Of respondent's with less than a high school degree, 57.6 percent approved of euthanasia. Also, 71.5 percent of high school graduates approved of euthanasia with 74.8 percent of college-educated individuals also approving of this practice.

## METHODS

For the data analysis portion of this paper, I decided to use the 1998 version of the "unabridged" General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS, as touched on before, is a national survey that is administered annually in the United States. It is described as "using an independently drawn random sample of English-speaking people, 18 years of age or older, living in non-institutional settings within the United States."<sup>20</sup> The survey asks many demographic questions and aims to map opinions and trends in the United States. Many social scientists in the U.S. and around the world then use this valuable information for their statistical studies.

I have chosen five variables to study in my data analysis. The first one is related to the topic of euthanasia. The variable is LETDIE1 and it will serve as my dependent variable. My independent variables will be as follows: religion (RELIG16), political affiliation (POLVIEWS), income (INCOME98), and education (DEGREE). Of my five variables, opinion on euthanasia, religion, and political affiliation are all nominal level

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<sup>19</sup> Holden, 521.

<sup>20</sup> DeCesare, 265.

variables. Income and education, even in there recoded forms, are ordinal level variables.

Given what I know from my literature reviews, I have formulated hypotheses that I believe are relevant to the data. The hypotheses are as follows:

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-The more religious a person claims to be, the more likely, they will oppose euthanasia.

-Conservatives are more likely than Liberals to oppose euthanasia.

-Individuals with higher incomes will more often support euthanasia than lower income individuals.

-Individuals with higher education levels will more often support euthanasia than individuals with lower education levels.

For examining the significance of variable relationships, the most appropriate statistical method of my hypotheses is chi square since all are categorical (nominal or ordinal). I will also be examining my data through measures of association. For comparing my nominal level variables, lambda, a PRE measure, will be utilized.

The following table lists an overview of all relevant information presented in this methods section.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Level of Measurement</b>	<b>Test</b>	<b>Measure of Association</b>
LETDIE1	Nominal	Chi-Square	Lambda
INCOME98	Ordinal	Chi- Square	-
RELIG16	Nominal	Chi-Square	Lambda
POLVIEWS	Nominal	Chi-Square	Lambda
DEGREE	Ordinal	Chi-Square	-

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To analyze my 1998 GSS statistics I used the SPSS program. This program is used in social science research to make finding statistical correlations in data really easy. I first started off by running frequencies of all my variables. To make my analysis of some variables easier, I recoded two of my variables. The first variable I recoded was income. Usually a 25 category variable, I recoded it to only be three categories. I did this by dividing the 25 categories in to what would commonly be class dividers. My new recoded variable now has the three categories: low, medium, and high. The next variable I recoded was political affiliation. The variable usually covered nine categories but I simplified the case by only having three categories. The new categories were described as Liberal, Moderate, and Conservative.

Next, after performing the necessary recode of variables, I finally ran frequencies of all of my variables. I did this to include information on descriptive statistics in my analysis. Descriptive statistics such as central tendency and dispersion were included. The following two tables lay out these statistics for my variables.

VARIABLE	HIGHEST VALID PERCENT
LETDIE1	65.7% (Yes)
INCOME98	62.7% (Medium)
RELIG16	59.3% (Protestant)
POLVIEWS	36.2% (Moderate)
DEGREE	52.8% (High School)

VARIABLE	MEAN	MEDIAN	MODE	RANGE
LETDIE1	1.73 (Yes)	1	1	7
INCOME98	1.8468 (Middle)	2	2	2
POLVIEWS	2.0650 (Moderate/Liberal)	2	2	2
RELIG16	1.82 (Protestant)	1	1	97
DEGREE	1.5 (High school)	1	1	4

After running frequencies and recording the information, it was now time to perform appropriate statistical methods tests. Again, since all of my variables were categorical- chi square was the most appropriate test to perform in cross-tabulation. If a significant relationship was found, it was then my job to perform the correct measure of association test. Lambda would be the one utilized in nominal variables. Below outlines the results of these tests variable by variable.

In regards to LETDIE1 (opinion on euthanasia) and RELIG16 (religion), the Chi Square value obtained was 23.762. In examining the significance of this relationship, I found that since .163 is greater than my alpha of .05, a significant relationship DOES NOT exist between these two variables. I did not have to perform a measure of association test because of the occurrence of no significant relationship.

In examining LETDIE1 and POLVIEWS-recoded (political affiliation), the Chi Square value obtained was 19.056. In examining the significance of this relationship, I found that since .001 is less than my alpha of .05, a significant relationship DOES exist. In this case, I next performed a lambda test since both of the variables are nominal. The lambda value obtained was .037. This means that knowledge of a person's political affiliation improves our ability to predict whether or not a person supports euthanasia. (only slightly)

Next, I examined the variables LETDIE1 and INCOME98-recoded (income for 1998). The Chi Square value obtained was 12.512. Looking at whether or not a significant relationship existed, I found that .014 was less than my alpha of .05. A significant relationship between these two variables DOES indeed exist. However, since LETDIE1 is nominal and INCOME98-recoded is ordinal, a measure of association test could not be performed.

Lastly, I examined the variables LETDIE1 and DEGREE (education level). The Chi Square value obtained for these variables was 13.100. To see whether or not a significant relationship existed between these two variables, I again looked at 2-sided sig. number and the alpha level. The 2-sided sig. number turned out to be .008 which is less than my alpha level of .05. A significant relationship DOES exist between these two variables as well. Again, as was a previous case, LETDIE1 is nominal while DEGREE is ordinal. A measure of association test cannot be performed.

Looking back at all of the relationships between these variables, it is apparent to me that three of my hypotheses were validated through my research while one was invalidated. The assumption that religion has a effect on public opinion of euthanasia was proven wrong. This conclusion seems to mirror some of the conclusions I found in the literature review on this subject. Also, it seems that the hypotheses that were proven significant also mirrored the results of the literature review as well. Though in some cases different methods were used to obtain data, it seems that the GSS is just one reliable way of examining social issues in our society. I believe that analysis of this data was consistent with other methods and should be viewed as a reliable source in future studies.

In the end, I believe that I found sufficient information in my attempt to study

public opinion on euthanasia. Through my literature review and data analysis, I feel that the variables I examined are only <sup>some of the</sup> several demographics that influence public opinion of euthanasia. I hope to take the knowledge I gained in my research and apply it to different studies of this subject in the future. Until then, I believe that the research on this subject already is sufficient and should be studied more by society as a whole. Perhaps after some education, more people will realize what an important right that assisted suicide is for a person to have.

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