



Focus Canada 2013 Canadian public opinion on assisted suicide

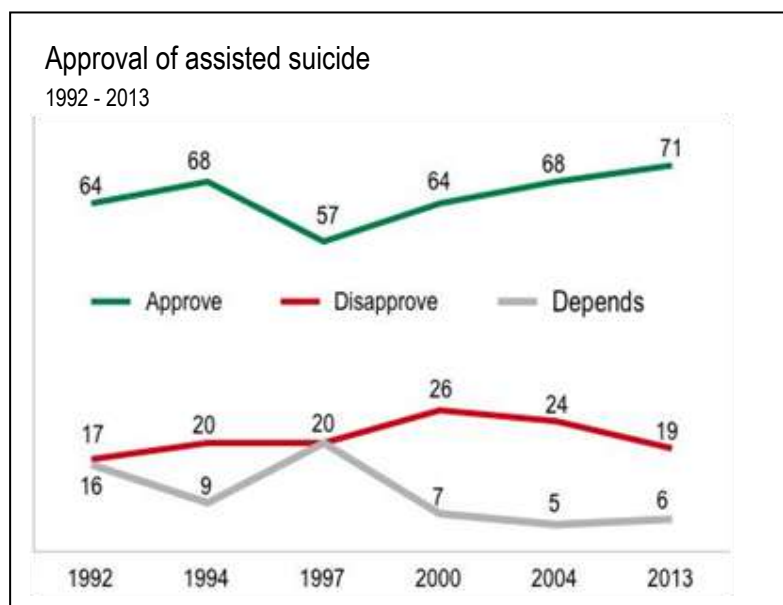
Seven in ten Canadians voice approval of assisted suicide, largely unchanged over the past two decades. Support for this policy is highest and rising in Quebec, Atlantic Canada and BC, and since 1994 has increased among Canadians 45 and older.

Background. Committing suicide, or assisting someone to do so, is illegal in Canada, despite being tested in the courts on several occasions over the past two decades. The Supreme Court’s 1993 Sue Rodriguez decision reaffirmed the prohibition, and just this month the BC Court of Appeals overturned an earlier BC Court decision that at the time ruled the ban on assisted suicide unconstitutional. But the issue is far from dead. Several US states and other countries (Netherlands, Switzerland) now allow assisted suicide (with no apparent problems or public backlash). Quebec is now looking at legalizing the practice, and for the first time it was on the agenda at the recent meeting of provincial Health Ministers.

The prohibition against assisted suicide is ostensibly because it goes against the value society places on the sanctity of life. But how do Canadians feel about this issue, and how have opinions evolved over the past two decades? These questions were addressed in a just-completed national public opinion survey conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research. This survey is part of the Institute’s ongoing Focus Canada research program, and draws upon comparable surveys and survey questions dating back over time. In this case, the survey repeated two questions on assisted suicide that were asked on previous surveys conducted in 1992, 1994, 1997, 2000, and 2004. The current survey was conducted by telephone October 1 to 17, 2013, with a representative sample of 2,003 Canadians (aged 18 and over). A sample of this size drawn from the population produces results accurate to within plus or minus 2.2% (at the 95% confidence level), but this margin is larger for sub-groups of the population.

Approval of assisted suicide. Seven in ten (71%) Canadians say they approve of “euthanasia – that is, allowing a terminally ill or severely disabled person to end their life”, compared with 19 percent who disapprove, and another one in ten who say this depends (e.g., on circumstances) (6%) or have no opinion to offer (4%).

Opinions on this issue have changed relatively little over the past 20 years, but support for assisted euthanasia is now the highest recorded over this time period, while disapproval is comparable to the level recorded in 1994-1997. Since 2004, approval has edged upward (up 3 percentage points), while disapproval has declined (down 5 points), and slightly more Canadians have no clear opinion (up 2).



The generally stable opinions about assisted suicide over the past decade at the national level mask age and region-specific shifts over this period. Across the country, approval levels have increased noticeably since 2004 in Atlantic Canada (up 12 points), Quebec (up 10) and B.C. (up 9), while declining in Ontario (down 7) where opinion has shifted to greater ambivalence (i.e. depends or don't know).

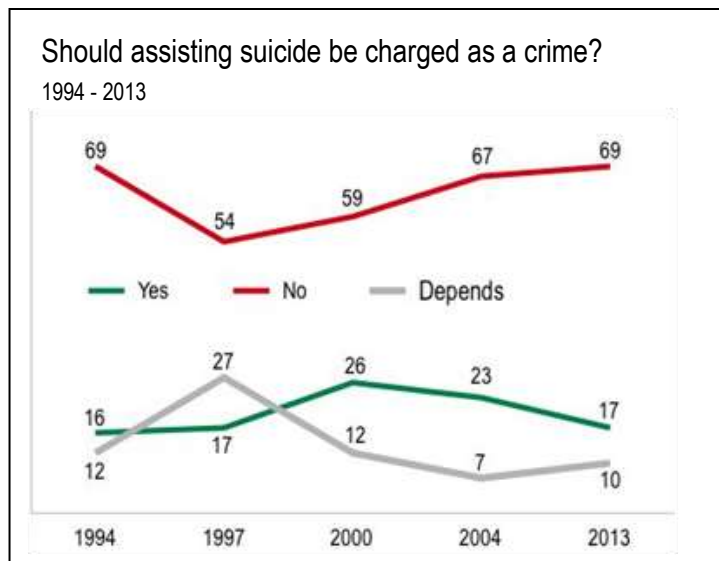
Across generations, approval of euthanasia has strengthened primarily among Canadians aged 45 and over, while holding stable among those in younger age cohorts.

In 2013, there is majority support for assisted suicide across all groups, but is most widespread among men (73%), residents of B.C. (80%) and Quebec (79%), those with higher incomes (78%), and those who support the Bloc Quebecois (85%). Support levels are least evident among residents of Ontario (63%), Canadians without a high school diploma (59%) and Federal Conservative Party supporters (63%).

Should euthanasia assistants be charged with a crime? Consistent with broad public approval of assisted suicide, only one in six (17%) Canadians believe “someone who assists in the suicide of a seriously ill patient should be charged with a crime”, and this proportion has declined since 2004 (down 6 points), returning to levels recorded in 1994 – 1997. Close to seven in ten (69%) say such actions should not result in a criminal charge (up 2 point), while an increasing number (10%, up 3 points) say it would depend on the circumstances.

Rejection of such assistance as criminal is the majority view across the country, but most widespread in Quebec (75%), among Canadians with higher levels of education and income, and those supporting the Federal NDP (79%) and Bloc Quebecois (82%). This view is least apt to be shared by Albertans (63%), Canadians without a high school diploma (58%) and Federal Conservative Party supporters (58%).

“The data show clearly that most Canadians would be open to at least some steps to make assisted suicide legal”, comments Institute Executive Director Keith Neuman. “But the strength of such opinions among most citizens is likely not sufficient to put pressure on lawmakers to lead on this issue, at least outside of Quebec.”



This release updates a previous one which was issued October 11, 2013 with a smaller sample of 1,002 interviews.

About the Environics Institute

The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established by Michael Adams as a non-profit organization in 2006 to promote relevant and original public opinion and social research on important issues of public policy and social change. The focus of the Institute’s mandate is to survey individuals and groups not usually heard from, asking questions not normally asked. For further information see www.EnvironicsInstitute.org, or contact Dr. Keith Neuman at 416-969-2457 or keith.neuman@environics.ca