

The debate about assisted suicide has tremendous complexity—complexity that turns conventional political wisdom on its head.

Let's go back to June 2012. It is five months before the November elections, and Massachusetts has assisted suicide on the ballot. Polls indicate overwhelming support in that liberal state: 68 percent support legalizing it, while 19 percent favor its remaining illegal. But then something remarkable happened.

Support of assisted suicide is thought to be a liberal idea, but arguments in support sound remarkably conservative. Personal autonomy. Government staying out of my life. Individual rights trumping the common good. And the summer of 2012 saw Massachusetts liberals calling this out. Victoria Reggie Kennedy, wife of the late Edward Kennedy, published an opinion piece she titled "Question 2 Insults Kennedy's Memory." E.J. Dionne also wrote a piece arguing against the measure in the Washington Post titled "Why Liberals Should be Wary of Assisted Suicide." Many disability rights and physicians groups were also fundamentally opposed.

The result? In a mere five months the liberal case against assisted suicide managed to turn the tables. The measure was defeated 51 percent to 49 percent. Appeals to "autonomy" were replaced with careful analysis about what legalization would do to common good.

Virtually everyone is sympathetic in cases of extreme and unbearable pain, but palliative care and terminal sedation can now keep a patient from feeling it. Assisted suicide is therefore more about control over how one dies rather than controlling pain. But especially in a culture which prizes autonomy, it just isn't clear how—once we open the door—we can put limits on this choice. Why, as in the case of Oregon, limit it to those who will die within six months? Why not six years? Why must they be terminally ill at all? If it's simply "their choice," it's not clear there can be any limitation.

Think this is scaremongering? Consider the Netherlands—a country with a similar love for individual autonomy—that has had euthanasia for two generations. They first permitted it only in a case of "hopeless and unbearable suffering." But just last year they euthanized an otherwise healthy woman who asked to die because she was going blind. Thousands of Dutch have also called for euthanasia for people over 70 who are "tired of life." Along with those who argue for assisted suicide in New Jersey, the dominant value in the Netherlands is personal freedom and choice. Who are we to judge?

Against this individualist approach, liberals focus on the common good and how policies impact vulnerable people. In a youth-worshiping and capitalist culture, older people are pushed to the margins, understood as a drain or burden on their families and society. Hardly surprising, then, that older people would feel "tired of life" and seek a way out. But it is diabolical to respond to this unjust situation by making it easier for vulnerable people on the margins to kill themselves. We must instead absolutely affirm the goodness of their existence.

Cracks are already starting to form in the policies of states with legalized assisted suicide. In Oregon, for instance, physicians have witnessed depressed patients receiving deadly drugs. It is true that our health care system has terrible gaps in care that lead to tremendous suffering for patients and their families. But the proper response, especially from liberals, should be to work to reform our unjust system. Let's kill the pain rather than patient. Care and accompaniment must win over violence and abandonment.

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