

American white evangelicals hold minority view on abortion

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Several polls in recent days have shown a majority of Americans think abortion should be legal, and a new Pew Research survey is no exception.

The large survey of 11,044 Americans, released May 6, shows 61 percent of respondents said abortion should be legal in most or all cases—little changed from 1995 when 60 percent said the same.

But contrary to what many may assume, those opposed to abortion are not necessarily all religious. In fact, the country's many religious groups have wide-ranging opinions on the legality of abortion.

The only religious group that overwhelmingly opposes abortion is white evangelicals, 73 percent of whom say abortion should be illegal. Many white evangelicals celebrated when a leaked draft opinion showed a majority of Supreme Court justices are ready to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and eliminate women's right to abortion. The actual ruling is expected in June.

White evangelicals also are far more likely than other religious groups to say life begins at conception, the survey found. An overwhelming number of white evangelicals—86 percent—said the assertion that the fetus is a person with rights reflects their beliefs “extremely well” or “somewhat well.”

Black Protestants and white

evangelicals differ

But other Christian groups, including Black Protestants, are far more supportive of abortion rights. Among Black Protestants, only 23 percent said abortion should be illegal most or all of the time; 66 percent said they thought abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

On the question of when life begins, Black Protestants stood out from white evangelicals, too. Only 38 percent of Black Protestants said human life begins at conception.

“They’re both highly religious groups,” said Besheer Mohamed, a senior researcher at Pew Research referring to white evangelicals and Black Protestants. “But their views on abortion are very different.”

But perhaps the biggest misconception about religious groups is the widely held view that Catholics universally oppose abortion rights.

While the Catholic Church consistently has opposed all forms of abortion—and the U.S. bishops have made it a defining teaching of the church—the Pew survey shows 56 percent of Catholics say abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Only 44 percent of Catholics said they were “extremely” confident that life begins at conception.

“The bishops have been trying to convince their own people and have failed,” said Thomas Reese, a Jesuit priest and senior analyst for Religion News Service. “Catholics don’t listen to the bishops.”

Religious “nones”—U.S. adults who describe themselves, religiously, as atheists, agnostics or “nothing in particular”—were most supportive of legal abortion. Eight-in-10 “nones” said abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Atheists, a small subgroup among the “nones,” were the only group where a majority said abortion should be legal in all cases, no

exceptions.

Majority of Jews and Muslims favor legal abortions

The Pew survey did not break down religion for minority faiths, such as Jews and Muslims. But a new study issued May 5 from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding finds 75 percent of American Jews and 56 percent of American Muslims believe abortion should remain legal.

The survey, conducted among 2,159 respondents (807 of whom were Muslim), asked a similar question to Pew: Do you think abortion should be legal in all cases, legal in most cases, illegal in most cases or illegal in all cases?

The survey found younger Muslims were more likely than Muslims aged 50 and older to believe abortion should be legal in all cases.

“The wider society may think Muslims are less supportive of legalized abortion, but that’s clearly not the case from this data,” said Meira Neggaz, executive director of the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding.

That said, among all religious groups, as among all Americans, few took an absolutist view on the legality of abortion. Even those most opposed to abortion said there are some cases when abortion should be legal, and even those most supportive of legal abortion said there are times when abortion should not be allowed.

“One commonality across these groups is that sizable numbers in all of them see the issue of abortion in shades of gray,” the Pew survey found.

For example, a majority of all religious groups, including white evangelicals, said abortion should be legal if the pregnancy threatens the

life or health of the woman. And all religious groups, including 56 percent of white evangelicals, said that how long a woman has been pregnant should matter in determining when abortion should be legal.

Americans broadly are more likely to favor restrictions on abortion later in pregnancy than earlier in pregnancy.

The Pew survey had a 1.5 percentage point margin of error for the entire study.