

Evangelical political scientist explores shift in values

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NASHVILLE (BP)—An evangelical political scientist says recent trends reveal the culture is quickly shifting on issues such as adultery, pornography and abortion.

Ryan Burge, an associate professor at Eastern Illinois University, led a study determining Americans' views on adultery, abortion, homosexuality, pornography and marijuana usage.

“The share of Americans who wanted to make pornography completely illegal was stuck at about 40 percent for decades, even into the mid-2000s,” Burge said. “But in the last few years, that portion of the sample who favors a ban on porn has noticeably dipped down to 30 percent in 2010 and then to just 25 percent in 2021.”

He points to the rise of access to pornography through smartphones and tablet devices as a potential reason for the shift.



(RNS File Photo by Adelle M. Banks)

Americans' view of same-sex marriage has also shifted significantly, Burge noted.

“In 1988, just 12 percent of Americans were in favor of same-sex marriage. When the question was asked again in 2006, that share had risen to 35 percent. It reached a majority by 2014, and in the most recent data it’s right around 73 percent,” he said.

Americans’ desire to see marijuana usage legalized also is on the rise. Burge reported more than 70 percent of those surveyed want to see marijuana legalized. That’s up from less than 20 percent in the mid-1970s.

Burge, who is also an American Baptist pastor in Illinois, believes the survey reveals an overarching shift in how American values are created.

“I can only hazard a guess that culture plays a bigger role in the lives of most Americans than religion,” he said.

Dan Darling, director of the Land Center for Cultural Engagement at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, does not question the accuracy of the data, but he voiced concerns about how evangelicals view it.

“Framing our faithful witness in terms of wins and losses in a culture war might not be the best way to look at evangelical engagement,” Darling said.

“While it is true that methods and problems change, timeless truths, for instance, about the goodness of God’s design for gender and sexuality don’t change, regardless of their purchase in the wider culture.”

Christians need to remember even though the culture’s view toward abortion access might have changed, it may not tell the full story, he asserted.

“You can argue that the long and difficult fight for the unborn has yielded real results with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and the dramatic reduction in abortions in the states that have restricted it,” Darling said.

Since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in June 2021, half of the states have put abortion-restricting measures in place.

Darling said the study's overall discouraging news should not keep Christians from standing for their convictions.

"This report comes out 60 years after the March on Washington. Imagine if Martin Luther King Jr. had listened to the voices who told him to avoid confronting divisive cultural issues?" he asked.

And as believers speak, Darling encouraged them to speak in ways aimed at reaching the soul, not just winning an argument.

"Christians should speak in distinctly Christian tones and should gently but firmly speak out against injustices and work to persuade our neighbors of the goodness of God's design for human flourishing. This will bear fruit, even if the politics of the moment don't often reward us for it."