

New polls show rising support for gay marriage, little change on abortion

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WASHINGTON (ABP) - Abortion and gay rights appear to be decoupling as important dividing lines among Americans when it comes to social issues, according to recent surveys on values, faith and public life.

Rising support for legally recognized same-sex unions and other gay-rights issues alongside relatively steady numbers regarding support for legalized abortion confirm the findings of other studies. And the cleavage between the two issues as indicators of social or religious conservatism is particularly apparent among younger voters.

“The survey reveals a decoupling of the social issues of same-sex marriage and abortion, which have traditionally been mentioned in the same breath in the public discourse,” said Robert Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, which released the [second set of findings](#) from its biennial American Values Survey Oct. 13.

They show an eight-point increase in support for same-sex marriage since 2008 as well as massive generation gaps between older and younger voters in their relative support for gay unions.

The poll showed that 37 percent of respondents favored full civil marriage rights for same-sex couples, up from 29 percent who supported them in 2008. Another 27 percent said they believe gay couples should be allowed to enter into civil unions short of marriage. Only 33 percent opposed any sort of legal recognition for same-sex couples.

The generation gap on the issue was stark. Among the youngest group surveyed (ages 18-29), a full three-quarters supported full same-sex marriage rights (52 percent) or civil unions (23 percent). But among those age 65 and over, only a small majority voiced support for same-sex marriage (22 percent) or civil unions (29 percent).

The survey also showed that white evangelicals are the major religious group most opposed to same-sex marriage. While nearly six out of 10 white evangelicals said they oppose gay marriage and a slight majority of African-American Protestants did, majorities of mainline Protestants and Catholics were supportive.

The generation gap in support of gay marriage held across all religious groups, including among white evangelicals.

And while nearly a fifth of respondents said they had become more supportive of gay rights in the last five years, only 6 percent said they had become less supportive.

Meanwhile, when it came to abortion, 55 percent of all respondents said it should be legal in all or most cases, while 42 percent said it should be illegal in all or most cases — reflecting proportions of the population that have held fairly steady for decades. More tellingly, 7 percent said they had become more supportive of abortion rights in the last five years. In the same period an identical percentage said they had become less supportive of legalized abortion.

While support for abortion rights was fairly similar across age groups, figures on other social questions also reflected a generation gap.

“Our survey found that nearly two-thirds of Americans under 30 say that one of the biggest problems in the country is that not everyone is given an equal chance in life. Less than half of adults age 65 and older see this as one of the biggest problems,” said Dan Cox, the institute’s director of

research.

The findings of increasing support for gay marriage reflect other recent studies. [A study](#) released Oct. 6 by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found 42 percent of Americans supported gay marriage, while 48 percent opposed it. It was the first time in the Pew Forum's 15-year history of asking the question that opposition to same-sex marriage had fallen below 50 percent. Unlike the Public Religion Research Institute survey, the Pew Forum study did not ask respondents about their support for civil unions.

[The poll](#) of 3,013 adults was conducted the first two weeks of September. The margin of error is plus or minus 2 percentage points. A first set of findings, released the week before, [found](#) that there was much more overlap between the Tea Party movement and the Religious Right than many pundits suggest.

-Robert Marus is managing editor and Washington bureau chief for Associated Baptist Press.

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