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Catholics Similar to Mainstream on Abortion, Stem Cells

Catholics actually more liberal on some issues

by Frank Newport

PRINCETON, NJ -- Despite the Roman Catholic Church's official opposition to abortion and embryonic stem-cell research, a Gallup analysis finds almost no difference between rank-and-file American Catholics and American non-Catholics in terms of finding the two issues morally acceptable.

Moral Acceptability of Abortion and Embryonic Stem-Cell Research, Among Catholics and Non-Catholics

% Morally acceptable

■ Catholics ■ Non-Catholics



2006-2008 Gallup Values and Beliefs polls

GALLUP POLL

The stance of the Catholic church on moral issues has come into the spotlight in recent days with the announcement that President Barack Obama will be giving the commencement address and receiving an honorary degree at the University of Notre Dame in May. Notre Dame is one of the largest Catholic universities in the United States, and some Catholic officials, students, alumni, and others have objected publicly to Obama's appearance, pointing to the fact that Obama's positions on embryonic stem-cell research and abortion are at odds with the church's. Some of those objecting have argued further, for example, that there is "great concern among Catholics nationwide about President Obama's future impact on American society, the family, and the Catholic church."

The argument of those who protest the extension of the invitation to Obama is that Catholics have a distinctly conservative position on these moral issues. That is certainly the case as far as official church doctrine is concerned, but not when it comes to average American Catholics. The new Gallup analysis, based on aggregated data from Gallup's 2006-2008 Values and Beliefs surveys, indicates that Catholics in the United States today are actually more liberal than the non-Catholic population on a number of moral issues, and on others, Catholics have generally the same attitudes.

The accompanying chart shows the percentage of Catholics and non-Catholics who find each of nine moral issues morally acceptable. Catholics are at least slightly more liberal than non-Catholics on the issues of gambling (an issue to which the Catholic church is not totally opposed), sex between an unmarried man and woman, homosexual relations, and having a baby out of wedlock. Catholics are essentially tied with non-Catholics on the moral acceptability of abortion, divorce, and stem-cell research using human embryos. Only on the death penalty are Catholics slightly less likely than non-Catholics to find the issue morally acceptable.

Moral Acceptability of Issues, Among Catholics and Non-Catholics

% Morally acceptable

	Catholics	Non-Catholics
	%	%
Abortion	40	41
The death penalty	61	68
Sex between an unmarried man and woman	67	57
Divorce	71	66
Medical research using stem cells obtained from human embryos	63	62
Having a baby outside of marriage	61	52
Gambling	72	59
Homosexual relations	54	45

2006-2008 Gallup Values and Beliefs polls

GALLUP POLL

Committed Catholics

In general, Americans who are the most religious also tend to be the most conservative on moral issues. Catholics are no exception. Regular churchgoing Catholics (defined as those who attend church weekly or almost every week) are significantly *less* likely to find most issues measured in this research morally acceptable

than are Catholics who do not attend church regularly. These committed Catholics' views on all these issues are much more in line with the church's teachings than are the views of non-practicing Catholics. However, even among committed Catholics, a slim majority seem to be at odds with the church's positions on premarital sex, embryonic stem-cell research, divorce, and the death penalty.

Moral Acceptability of Issues, by Church Affiliation and Attendance

% Morally acceptable

	Catholics	Catholics	Non-Catholics	Non-Catholics
	Regular church attendance	Nonregular church attendance	Regular church attendance	Nonregular church attendance
	%	%	%	%
Abortion	24	52	19	56
The death penalty	52	67	66	69
Sex between an unmarried man and woman	53	77	30	75
Divorce	63	77	46	79
Medical research using stem cells obtained from human embryos	53	70	45	73
Having a baby outside of marriage	48	70	29	67
Gambling	67	75	40	72
Homosexual relations	44	61	21	61

2006-2008 Gallup Values and Beliefs polls

GALLUP POLL

The data show that regular churchgoing non-Catholics also have very conservative positions on moral issues. In fact, on most of the issues tested, regular churchgoers who are not Catholic are *more* conservative (i.e., less likely to find a given practice morally acceptable) than Catholic churchgoers.

The accompanying table shows that regular churchgoers who are Catholic are significantly more liberal than churchgoing non-Catholics on gambling, sex before marriage, homosexual relations, having a baby out of wedlock, and divorce. Committed Catholics are at least slightly more likely than devout non-Catholics to say that abortion and embryonic stem-cell research -- the two key issues highlighted by those protesting Obama's

appearance at Notre Dame -- are morally acceptable. Only on the death penalty are committed Catholics more conservative than regular churchgoers who are not Catholic.

Religious non-Catholics are certainly not adopting these positions because of official Catholic doctrine. It appears that the underlying dimension of religiosity -- as measured in this analysis by church attendance -- is most predictive of conservative positions on moral issues, not whether an individual is Catholic.

Implications

It is no doubt heartening to the Catholic hierarchy that devout Catholics, defined as those who attend church very frequently, are more likely than non-devout Catholics to adhere to the church's position on moral issues. But the data make it less clear whether practicing Catholics have adopted their positions as a result of adherence to church doctrine, or as a more natural function of their basic religiousness.

More generally, the data do not suggest that there is a uniquely conservative component to attitudes on moral issues based on the simple fact of being Catholic.

These data on the attitudes of rank-and-file Catholics in and of themselves do not speak directly to the issue of Notre Dame's invitation to President Obama. It is possible that Catholics who themselves do not adhere to Catholic church positions on moral issues could still object to Obama's being honored by Notre Dame. And Catholic leaders' objections to the Obama situation could themselves be at least partly a reflection of the leaders' awareness of and concern over the fact that in today's contemporary American culture, there is little differentiation between Catholics and non-Catholics in terms of adherence to conservative Catholic church positions on moral issues.

Survey Methods

Results are based on telephone interviews with an aggregated sample of 3,022 national adults, aged 18 and older, interviewed in polls conducted in May 2006, May 2007, and May 2008. For results based on the total sample of national adults, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 2 percentage points.

Interviews are conducted with respondents on land-line telephones (for respondents with a land-line telephone) and cellular phones (for respondents who are cell-phone only).

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.