

Support for Abortion Slips

Issue Ranks Lower on the Agenda



Oct. 1, 2009

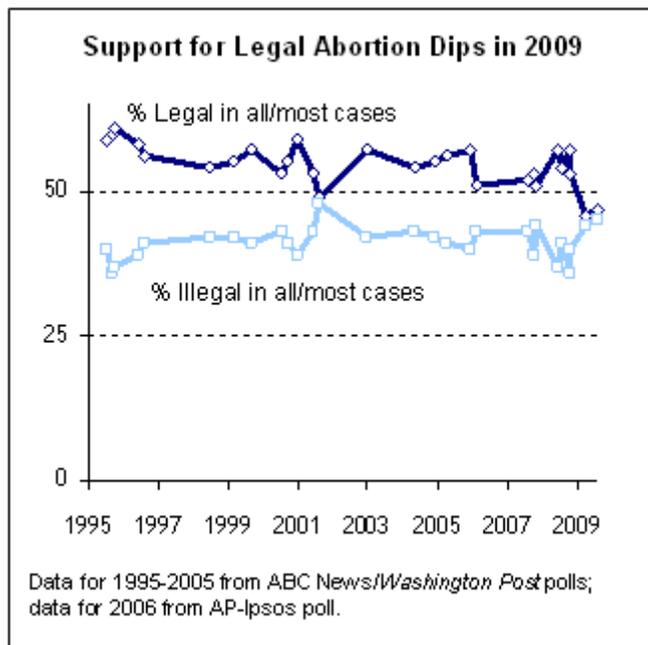
In this report:

- **Overview**
- [Support for Legal Abortion; Restricting and Reducing Abortion](#)
- [Importance of Abortion as an Issue; Confidence in One's Position on the Issue](#)
- [Finding a Middle Ground on the Issue; Obama and Abortion](#)
- [Abortion and Morality](#)
- [About the Survey](#)

- [PDF version \(36 pgs.\)](#)
- [Topline questionnaire PDF \(10 pgs.\)](#)

Overview

Polls conducted in 2009 have found fewer Americans expressing support for abortion than in previous years. In Pew Research Center polls in 2007 and 2008, supporters of legal abortion clearly outnumbered opponents; now Americans are evenly divided on the question, and there have been modest increases in the numbers who favor reducing abortions or making them harder to obtain. Less support for abortion is evident among most demographic and political groups.



The latest Pew Research Center survey also reveals that the abortion debate has receded in importance, especially among liberals. At the same time, opposition to abortion has grown more firm among conservatives, who have become less supportive of finding a middle ground on the issue and more certain of the correctness of their own views on abortion.

No single reason for the shift in opinions is apparent, but the pattern of changes suggests that the election of a pro-choice Democrat for president may be a contributing factor. Among Republicans, there has been a seven point decline in support for legal abortion and a corresponding six point increase in opposition to abortion. But the change is smaller among Democrats, whose support for legal abortion is down four points with no corresponding increase in pro-life opinion. Indeed, three groups of President Obama's strongest supporters - African Americans, young people and those unaffiliated with a religion - have not changed their views on abortion at all. At the same time, fully half of conservative Republicans (52%) - the political group most opposed to abortion - say they worry Obama will go too far in supporting abortion rights.

The shift in opinion is broad-based, appearing in most demographic groups in the population. One of the largest shifts (10 points) has occurred among white, non-Hispanic Catholics who attend Mass at least weekly. Substantial change has also occurred among Democratic men (with support for abortion down nine points), but not among Democratic women.

Declining Support for Legal Abortion

	Aug 2008	Aug 2009	Change
<i>Abortion should be...</i>			
Illegal in all/most cases	41	45	+4
Legal in all/most cases	54	47	-7
	Jan 2007	Aug 2009	
<i>Make abortion more difficult?</i>			
Favor	35	41	+6
Oppose	56	50	-6
	Jul 2005	Aug 2009	
<i>Good to reduce # of abortions?</i>			
Yes	59	65	+6
No	33	26	-7

This shift in attitudes is also evident on other measures of public opinion about restrictions on abortion. For instance, four-in-ten Americans (41%) now say they favor making it more difficult to obtain an abortion, up six points from 35% in 2007. Similar movement is seen on the question of whether it would be good to reduce the number of abortions in this country; in 2005, 59% of respondents agreed it would be good to reduce abortions. Today 65% take this view, an increase of six points. And three-quarters (76%) continue to favor requiring minors to obtain the permission of a parent before having an abortion.

Liberals Relax, Conservatives Retrench

	Mar 2006	Aug 2009	06-09 Change
<i>% saying abortion is critical issue</i>	%	%	%
Total	20	15	-10
Conserv Rep	35	26	-9
Mod/Lib Rep	24	12	-12
Independent	24	13	-11
Cons/Mod Dem	27	12	-15
Liberal Dem	34	8	-26
<i>% saying country should find middle ground</i>	Jul 2006	Aug 2009	06-09 Change
Total	66	60	-6
Conserv Rep	56	44	-12
Mod/Lib Rep	73	71	-2
Independent	66	61	-5
Cons/Mod Dem	71	64	-7
Liberal Dem	71	71	0
<i>% ever wonder about abortion view</i>	Jul 2006	Aug 2009	06-09 Change
Total	30	26	-4
Conserv Rep	30	19	-11
Mod/Lib Rep	26	26	0
Independent	29	26	-3
Cons/Mod Dem	33	32	-1
Liberal Dem	33	28	-5

The latest national survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, conducted Aug. 11-27 among 4,013 adults reached on both landlines and cell phones, also finds that fewer people say abortion is a critical issue today (15%) compared with 2006, when 28% described abortion as a critical issue facing the country.

There are, however, important political differences in these attitudes. The poll shows evidence of significant weakening in the level of concern about the abortion issue among liberal Democrats, while conservative Republicans appear more entrenched in their positions and less willing to compromise on this issue.

For example, there has been a 26-point drop since 2006 in the proportion of liberal Democrats who say abortion is a critical issue, from 34% to 8%. But among conservative Republicans, the decline has been much smaller (nine points, from 35% to 26%). Additionally, support for finding a middle ground on the abortion issue is down 12 points among conservative Republicans (44% now say the country needs to find a middle ground on the issue, compared with 56% in 2006), while liberal Democrats have not moved on this question. And the percentage of conservative Republicans who say they ever wonder whether their position is right has dropped 11 points (from 30% in 2006 to 19% now), while the figure among liberal Democrats has been relatively stable.

Concern on the Right Over Obama's Support for Abortion Rights					
	<i>Will Obama ...</i>				<i>Don't</i>
	<i>Go too far</i>	<i>Not go far enough</i>	<i>Handle about right</i>	<i>DK</i>	<i>know Obama pro-choice</i>
	%	%	%	%	%
Total	19	4	29	6	42=100
Conserv Rep	52	7	10	6	25=100
Mod/Lib Rep	19	6	33	7	36=100
Independent	18	4	29	7	42=100
Cons/Mod Dem	7	3	36	4	51=100
Liberal Dem	4	6	55	3	32=100

Q135 & Q136. Respondents were first asked if Obama's views are pro-choice or pro-life; those answering pro-choice were then asked how they think Obama will handle the abortion issue. Results based on total.

The timing of this shift in attitudes on abortion suggests it could be connected to Obama's election. The decline in support for legal abortion first appeared in polls in the spring of 2009. Overall, roughly three-in-ten (29%) think Obama will handle the abortion issue about right as president. One-in-five Americans (19%) worry that Obama will go too far in supporting abortion rights, while very few (4%) express the opposite concern that Obama will not go far enough to support abortion rights. Concern about Obama's handling of abortion is especially evident on the right; fully half of conservative Republicans (52%) worry that Obama will go too far in supporting abortion rights. However, nearly one-in-five political independents (18%) also worry that Obama will go too far in support of abortion rights.

The poll finds that four-in-ten Americans are unaware of Obama's position on the abortion issue. Conservative Republicans, however, are more likely than any other group to know Obama's position, with 75% correctly identifying him as "pro-choice" rather than "pro-life."

In spite of the small shift toward opposition to legal abortion, the basic contours of the debate are still intact, with most major groups lining up on the same side of the issue as they have in the past. For example, most people who regularly attend religious services continue to come down in opposition to abortion, while the large majority of those who rarely or never attend religious services still support legal abortion.

The survey also reveals continued polarization over abortion. Even as the public expresses support for finding a middle ground, most Americans are quite certain that their own position on abortion is the right one, with only a quarter (26%) saying they ever wonder about their views on the issue. This is a slight decline since 2006, when 30% expressed doubts about their own view on abortion. Furthermore, many people on both sides of the issue say that the opposite point of view on abortion is not a "respectable" opinion for someone to hold. Nearly half of abortion opponents (47%), including 62% of those who say abortion should be illegal in all cases, say that a pro-choice view is not a respectable opinion for someone to hold. On the other side, 42% of abortion supporters (including 54% of those who want abortion to be legal in all cases) say the pro-life point of view is not respectable