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Generational Differences on Abortion Narrow

Support for making abortion broadly illegal growing fastest among young adults

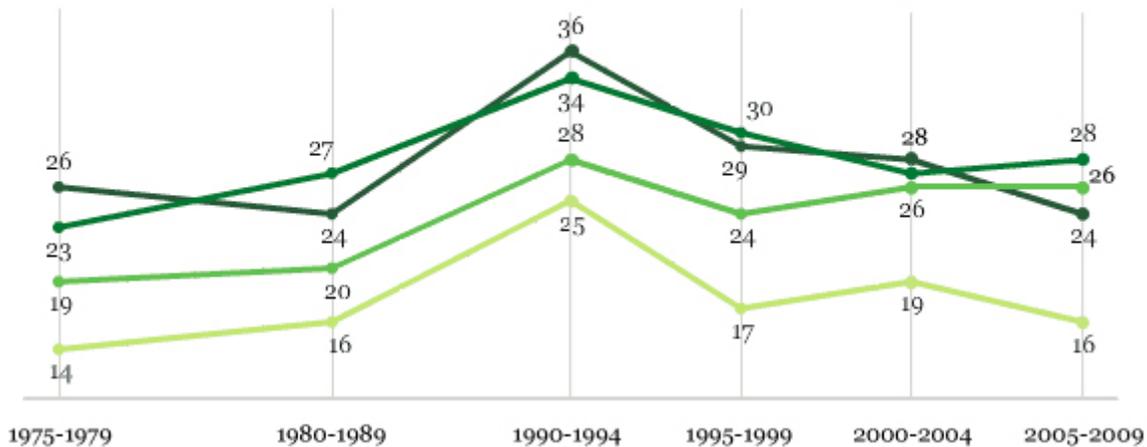
by Lydia Saad

PRINCETON, NJ -- Gallup analysis of U.S. public opinion trends on abortion shows that generational differences in support for broadly legal abortion have diminished over the past decade. In the mid-1970s, when Gallup started polling on the issue, adults aged 18 to 29 and 30 to 49 were the most supportive of legal abortion under any circumstances, and those 65 and older the least, with 50- to 64-year-olds falling in between. That pattern continued through the late 1990s. Since 2000, however, all age groups with the exception of seniors have shown similar levels of support for broadly legal abortion.

Abortion Views by Age, 1975-2009

% "Legal under any circumstances"

■ 18 to 29 ■ 30 to 49 ■ 50 to 64 ■ 65 and older



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The convergence of younger adults' (aged 18 to 49) and middle-aged adults' (aged 50 to 64) views occurred because support for legal abortion in all situations dipped among the youngest two age categories and increased slightly among middle-aged adults between the late 1990s and the early 2000s.

Gallup's long-term abortion question -- instituted two years after the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling gave sweeping constitutional protection to abortion -- asks Americans to say whether they

believe abortion should be "legal under any circumstances," "legal only under certain circumstances," or "illegal in all circumstances." The current analysis looks at the trends on the basis of six segmented time periods between 1975 and 2009, creating expanded sample sizes for stability in subgroup analysis.

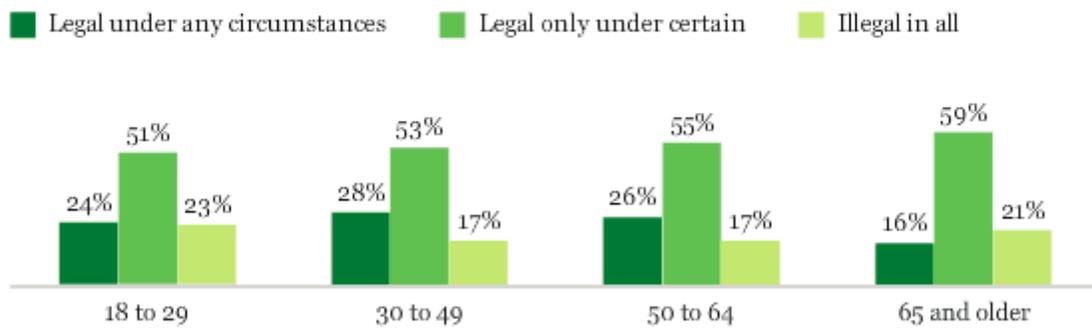
Seniors Remain Least Likely to Favor Legal Abortion

In the most recent period, from 2005 to 2009, the majority of all age groups favored the middle "legal only under certain circumstances" position. However, there was some differentiation in support for the more liberal abortion view, as roughly a quarter of adults aged 18 to 29, 30 to 49, and 50 to 64 -- versus 16% of seniors -- believed abortion should be legal under any circumstances.

At the same time, young adults were slightly more likely than all other age groups, including seniors, to say abortion should be *illegal* in all circumstances.

Abortion Attitudes by Age, 2005-2009

Do you think abortions should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances?



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Americans Aged 18 to 29 Trending More Anti-Abortion

The analysis above focused on public support for the "legal under any circumstances" option in Gallup's abortion question. There is a somewhat different pattern in the trends by age for those choosing the "illegal in all circumstances" position.

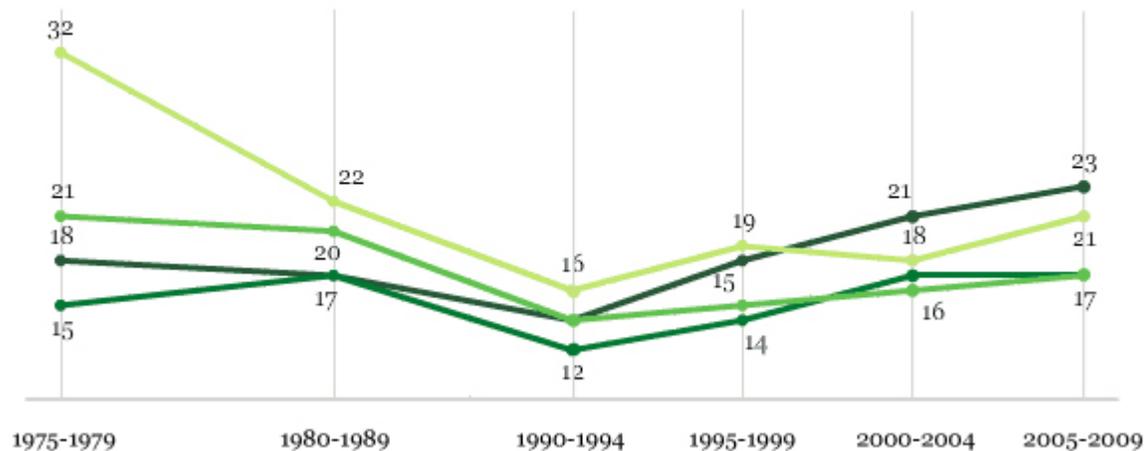
Two important changes are apparent. One is a significant drop in the percentage of seniors saying all abortions should be illegal. This fell from 32% in the earliest years of the trend to 16% in the first half of the 1990s, but has since rebounded somewhat to 21%. This long-term 11-point decline among seniors compares with a 9-point increase -- from 14% to 23% -- in support for the "illegal in all circumstances" position among 18- to 29-year-olds since the early 1990s.

As a result, 18- to 29-year-olds are now roughly tied with seniors as the most likely of all age groups to hold this position on abortion -- although all four groups are fairly close in their views. This is a sharp change from the late 1970s, when seniors were substantially more likely than younger age groups to want abortion to be illegal.

Abortion Views by Age, 1975-2009

% "Illegal in all circumstances"

■ 18 to 29 ■ 30 to 49 ■ 50 to 64 ■ 65 and older



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1975 Age Cohorts

Apart from the trends in how Americans of various age groups have viewed abortion since 1975, a separate question is whether the positions held by members of each age group in 1975 remained steady or changed as they aged. For instance, did people who were 18 to 29 years old in 1975 become more liberal or more conservative on the issue as they reached their 30s, 40s, and 50s? Or more generally, do all age groups go through a predictable transformation in their beliefs about the legality of abortion as they move through various stages of life?

Gallup tracked each age group through 2009 with a "cohort" analysis, using a base year of 1975. The trend lines are shortened for adults in Cohorts 3 and 4 (aged 50 and older in 1975), as their numbers dwindled in Gallup's samples over time.

1975 Age Cohorts

	Age in 1975	Age in 1985	Age in 1995	Age in 2005	Age in 2009
Age Cohort 1	18 to 29	28 to 39	38 to 49	48 to 59	52 to 63
Age Cohort 2	30 to 49	40 to 59	50 to 69	60 to 79	64 to 83
Age Cohort 3	50 to 64	60 to 74	70 to 84	80 to 94	84 to 98
Age Cohort 4	65 and older	75 and older			

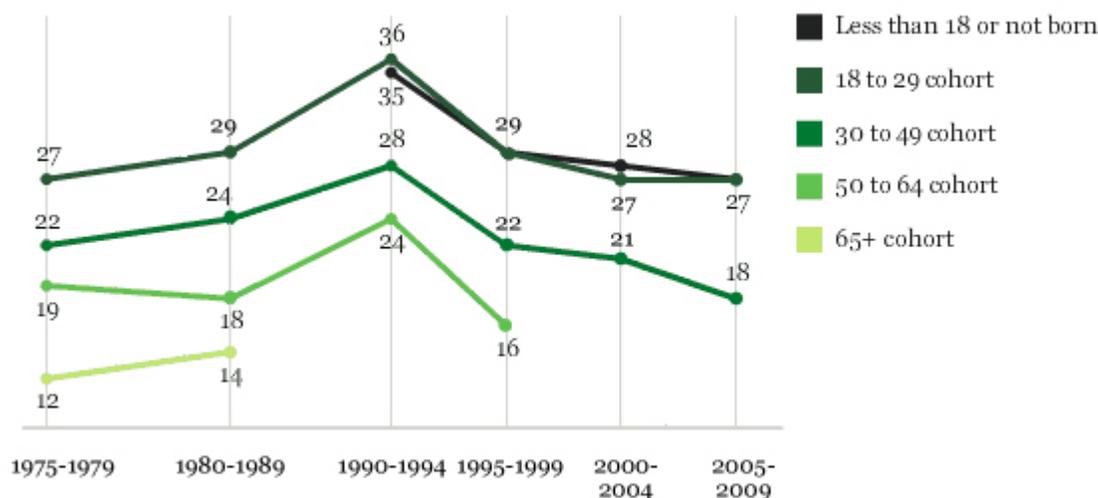
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The analysis finds no steady increase or decrease in support for abortion among any of the various age cohorts over the last 35 years. Rather, all age groups became more supportive of legal abortion under any circumstances in the early 1990s, and all subsequently shed some of that support in the late 1990s, with further decline seen since then. These shifts are consistent with [Gallup's trend](#) in overall support for abortion.

American adults who either turned 18 after 1975 or were born after that year now range in age from 18 to 51. Their views since they came of age have tracked very closely with those in the 1975 18 to 29 age cohort (aged 52 to 63 in 2009).

Trends in U.S. Abortion Views by Age Cohort (Age in 1975)

% "Legal under any circumstances"



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Unlike the pattern seen with the basic age trends, support for abortion by age cohort has varied consistently by age over time. The youngest adults in 1975 were then the most supportive of legal abortion under any circumstances and remain the most supportive today (tied with adults who

came of age since 1975). Accordingly, middle-aged and older adults in 1975 were incrementally less supportive of abortion at that time, and subsequently maintained those positions.

Bottom Line

Given the abortion issue's status as a contentious social issue, the subject might be expected to spark different reactions from younger versus older Americans the way [gay rights](#) certainly does. That was somewhat true in the first few years after the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, when older adults were decidedly more conservative than younger adults in their preferences about legality. However, in recent years, the generational distinctions have blurred. Support for abortion that is "legal under any circumstances" is similar among age groups ranging from 18 to 64; only seniors show significantly less support for this. At the same time, young adults are now roughly tied with seniors as being the most likely age group to favor having abortion "illegal in all circumstances."

Gallup's cohort analysis suggests that attitudes toward abortion grow neither more liberal nor more conservative with age, per se. While the views of each cohort have changed since 1975, those fluctuations in support for legal abortion have been consistent with broader cultural shifts on the issue.

This is the second of a multipart Gallup series reviewing long-term changes in Americans' abortion views. [Part 1](#) focused on trends by Party ID. Subsequent articles will look at patterns by gender, region, education and other population subgroups.

Survey Methods

The trends reported here are based on annual averages of Gallup's abortion surveys, from 1975 through 2009. All individual surveys are based on interviews with a random sample of approximately 1,000 national adults, aged 18 and older. For annual results based on the total sample of national adults one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 3 percentage points. Results based on subgroups can have higher margins of error depending on sample size.

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.

Gallup Abortion Trends -- Sample Sizes for Year-Summary Averages

Age and 1975 age cohorts

	1975- 1979	1980- 1989	1990- 1994	1995- 1999	2000- 2004	2005- 2009
Age						
18 to 29 years	1,234	976	1,336	1,133	1,954	987
30 to 49 years	1,501	1,524	2,715	2,521	4,958	2,865
50 to 64 years	990	850	1,175	1,203	2,916	2,797
65 years and older	800	710	984	945	2,164	2,309
1975 age cohort						
Less than 18/Not yet born			2,074	2,420	5,623	3,774
18 to 29 in 1975	1,236	1,095	1,694	1,476	2,884	2,371
30 to 49 in 1975	1,436	1,198	1,651	1,415	2,741	2,419
50 to 64 in 1975	1,000	829	692	463		
65+ in 1975	671	290				

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