

Survey finds one in three in U.S. don't want clergy for civil marriages

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#) in the [January 7, 2015](#) issue

Two surveys released in December by LifeWay Research show some support for separating religious marriage from civil marriage.

In a survey of 2,000 American adults, the Nashville-based Christian research company found the following.

- Nearly six in ten Americans (59 percent) say marriage should not be “defined and regulated by the state.”
- Nearly half (49 percent) say “religious weddings should not be connected to the state’s definition and recognition of marriage.”
- About a third (36 percent) say clergy should “no longer be involved in the state’s licensing of marriage.” However, more than half (53 percent) disagree.
- Those most likely to favor a split between religious weddings and government or civil marriage include 54 percent of men, 53 percent of Catholics and 45 percent of Protestants.

LifeWay also conducted a parallel survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors. It found that one in four favor separating the religious rites from their signature on a government-issued marriage license that makes the ceremony legally binding. This is how it’s done in many foreign countries already, but not—so far—in the United States.

Ed Stetzer, executive director of LifeWay Research, called it noteworthy that so many pastors are willing “to stop saying ‘By the power vested in me by the state’ during a church wedding.”

Last month, the magazine *First Things* launched a campaign for clergy to pledge to stop signing marriage certificates. So far, more than 330 clergy have signed the pledge.

The “I don’t” campaign to alter the “I do” patterns has support from liberals as well.

“The state doesn’t tell you how to celebrate Christmas or Ramadan, and it shouldn’t tell you how to get married,” Paul Waldman wrote in the *American Prospect* in July.

Meanwhile, many brides and grooms are voting with their feet—away from involving clergy at their wedding.

For more than a decade, state offices of vital statistics have not distinguished between clergy and nonclergy wedding officiants, so there are no national statistics to prove a trend. However, an unscientific 2010 study by TheKnot.com and WeddingChannel.com found a shift away from clergy ceremonies: 31 percent of the websites' respondents who married in 2010 said they used a family member or friend as their officiant, up from 29 percent in 2009, the first year of the survey, according to the *Washington Post*. —Religion News Service

*This article was edited on December 22, 2014.*