

Americans' views on morality: Fewer taboos, but values seen as worsening

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[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) The Gallup polling organization has been taking America's moral pulse, and the results are telling, even though they may appear contradictory.

As Frank Newport, Gallup's editor in chief, said, "We have Americans largely saying that the overall moral tone of our culture is in bad shape and getting worse, even as they increasingly say that formerly taboo behaviors are morally acceptable."

Seventy-two percent of those surveyed believe the state of moral values in the United States is getting worse, while just 22 percent say it is getting better—a trend that has continued since Gallup began asking this question each year since 2002.

At the same time, the American public has become more tolerant on a number of moral issues, including premarital sex, embryonic stem cell research, and euthanasia.

"On a list of 19 major moral issues of the day, Americans express levels of moral acceptance that are as high or higher than in the past on 12 of them, a group that also encompasses social mores such as polygamy, having a child out of wedlock, and divorce," Gallup reported.

Specific examples:

Sixty-nine percent say divorce is "largely acceptable." Sixty-six percent say the same about sex between an unmarried man and woman; 65 percent on medical research using stem cells from human embryos; 58 percent on having a child outside of marriage.

Married men and women engaging in an affair remains consistently unacceptable by more than 90 percent of those surveyed. But other issues traditionally seen as taboo are rising in acceptability, including suicide (which 19 percent of Americans call

"morally acceptable"), polygamy (16 percent), and cloning human beings (15 percent).

Newport found five things of particular interest in his organization's recent polling:

1. "The shift toward more liberal attitudes on a number of social and values issues has occurred across the age spectrum, not just among young people."
2. "Americans have not shifted their views of all moral issues over time. The notable exception is the American public's views of married men and women having an affair, which have not changed much. That particular behavior remains essentially culturally taboo (in the sense that it is viewed as morally unacceptable to 90%+ of the public), even as other behaviors relating to sexual behavior and procreation have shifted."
3. "The largest shifts in cultural attitudes have been those relating to gay and lesbian issues."
4. "Despite these shifts in attitudes, 72 percent of Americans say the state of moral values is getting worse in this country rather than better."
5. "All cultural shifts have consequences. One such consequence is politics."

That there would be a difference between Democrats and Republicans here may not be surprising, but the size of that difference may be.

Gallup's Rebecca Riffkin said: "In the 12 years Gallup has asked this overall question, Democrats have become significantly more tolerant on many issues, while independents generally show a smaller shift in the same direction and Republicans' views have changed little. The percentage of Democrats who say an issue is morally acceptable has increased for 10 issues, including abortion, sex between an unmarried man and woman, extramarital affairs, cloning humans, divorce, cloning animals, suicide, research using stem cells from human embryos, polygamy, and gay and lesbian relations."

The Pew Research Center reported last week that "public support for allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally continues its rapid rise (57-39 percent) ... the highest level of support measured for same-sex marriage in nearly 20 years."

"But here's something perhaps even more telling," the *Washington Post* observed. "Even those who don't support same-sex marriage (mainly religious conservatives)

also think it's inevitable same-sex marriage will soon be legal across America.”

Among Republicans as well as Democrats, according to Pew, 72 percent think same-sex marriage (now legal in 36 states and the District of Columbia) will become legal in all jurisdictions.

Given the trends in public opinion regarding such issues as gay marriage, stem cell research, and abortion, Gallup’s Frank Newport said, “There is little doubt that it's likely to be a more difficult environment in this election for conservative candidates to focus on specific moral issues than has been the case in previous cycles.”