

Survey: Americans accept contraception, divide over LGBT rights

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [November 8, 2016](#) issue

When it comes to contraception, a clear majority of Americans say employers should be required to cover it in their health-care plans, even if they have religious objections.

But a recent survey by the Pew Research Center reveals a sharp division on another hot topic: whether wedding service providers should have to serve same-sex couples. And Americans also disagree on whether transgender people should have to use the public restroom of the gender assigned to them at birth.

“What doesn’t surprise me—but is, I think, the biggest news in terms of the value of the research—is the deep divide in this country is more basically theological than anything else,” said Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

For Mohler, Pew’s findings on religious liberty “have almost everything to do” with whether a person attends church services regularly.

The survey, titled *Where the Public Stands on Religious Liberty vs. Nondiscrimination*, shows that those who attend religious services weekly are more likely to hold traditional moral views on matters raised in the study.

By contrast, Kelly Brown Douglas, a theologian at Goucher College and the Washington National Cathedral, said the survey reveals Americans’ attitudes toward discrimination.

She said it is discriminatory to force transgender people to use a bathroom that does not correspond to the gender with which they identify, just as it is discriminatory for a business to refuse to provide a service for a same-sex couple’s wedding.

“We’ve often seen throughout our history that people have used religion to try to legitimize discrimination of other human beings,” Douglas said. “If we waited for the polls, we would still have Jim Crow.”

In designing the survey of 4,538 adults, which has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.4 percentage points, Pew researchers set out to test Americans on matters that have forced courts to weigh religious liberty versus other constitutionally guaranteed rights.

“It’s interesting to see that so many Americans are in agreement about the question about the provision of birth control in employer-provided health care,” said Jessica Martinez, a Pew senior researcher. “You see a lot more division on the other two topics we asked about,” which were transgender people’s bathroom use and wedding services to same-sex couples.

But is the broad agreement on contraception—and the lack of it on wedding services and transgender rights—so surprising?

Most Americans, Pew researchers point out, accept birth control. Just 4 percent consider it immoral. Americans are far more divided, however, on homosexuality, the poll also finds. While 62 percent say homosexuality is morally acceptable or not a moral issue, 35 percent say it is morally wrong.

And while a large majority of Americans (87 percent) say they know a gay or lesbian person, only three in ten say they know a transgender person. Knowing a transgender person is closely linked with the belief that the person should be able to use the restroom of his or her choosing.

Mohler asks whether the agreement on the birth control question would have emerged had the pollsters considered the nature of many of the objections to the Affordable Care Act’s contraception provision—the context for much of the recent controversy on the issue.

Objections to the provision, he pointed out, mostly did not relate to the required coverage of birth control *per se*.

Rather, some Christians objected only to covering those birth control methods that they consider abortifacient. On this issue, the Supreme Court in 2014 ruled in favor of the evangelical Christian employer in what became known as the Hobby Lobby case.

If a question about contraception had explored that specific objection, the response may well have been different, Martinez said. “The question we asked was much

more general.”

The survey also found that on these questions of religious liberty and discrimination, most Americans had little sympathy for opinions that differed from their own.

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