

Poll: Teach evolution and creationism: Two-thirds support teaching both

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Nearly two-thirds of Americans support teaching creationism alongside evolution in public schools, according to a new poll, but there is far less agreement over who gets to decide what is taught.

About 64 percent support teaching both evolution and creationism, according to a poll of 2,000 adults July 7-17 by the Pew pollsters and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, released August 30.

“This is an example of American pragmatism,” of taking an allow-both-sides approach, said John Green, a senior fellow in religion and American politics at the Pew Forum and director of the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron.

“Most Americans are not especially ideological people . . . and this is one way, from the point of view of the average American, to solve the problem: teach both sides and let the students sort it out,” he said.

Even before President Bush opined to news reporters recently that he thought evolution should be taught along with “intelligent design,” which critics call a disguised version of creationism, the battle over evolution in the classroom had flared in public school districts in Kansas, Pennsylvania and elsewhere.

Fully 70 percent of white evangelical Protestants say that life has existed in its present form since the beginning of time; fewer than half as many white mainline Protestants (32 percent) and white Catholics (31 percent) agree.

But when answers to that question by all respondents are considered—regardless of religious background—42 percent say life has always existed as we know it today and 48 percent believe life has evolved over time.

In nearly parallel ratios, 41 percent of Americans want parents to decide what children are taught, compared with a slightly larger combined group who think the decision should be made by teachers (28 percent) or local school boards (21 percent). Not surprisingly, people who support the idea that human life has always existed in its present form are the strongest supporters of allowing parents to decide what their children will learn in science class.

Judging from a similar poll conducted last November by CBS and the *New York Times*, and another Pew poll conducted last March, the proportion of people favoring a dual approach has remained relatively steady, between 57 percent and 65 percent.

But advocates of evolution said they were concerned about the new figures, especially by the 41 percent of people who want parents to set scholarly standards.

“It’s a popularity contest,” said Gerry Wheeler, executive director of the National Science Teachers Association in Arlington, Virginia. “That’s not the way scholarship works.” Wheeler said that adding either creationism or intelligent design to the curriculum in the interest of fairness is misguided.

“At first blush, being fair seems to mean, well, we ought to do both of them,” Wheeler said. “The challenge is that it’s not fair to the students to present a religion in the guise of science.”

Robert Crowther, director of communications for the Seattle-based Discovery Institute’s Center for Science & Culture, a leading proponent of teaching about intelligent design alongside evolution, said allowing both approaches to be presented solves the problem. “We see this as a common-sense approach that avoids the extremes,” said Crowther. *-Religion News Service*