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Americans Rate the Morality of 16 Social Issues

Doctor-assisted suicide and homosexuality are cultural flashpoints

by Lydia Saad

GALLUP NEWS SERVICE

PRINCETON, NJ -- Dr. Jack Kevorkian's name appears over 150 times in a Nexis search of U.S. newspaper and wire service stories for the week before his June 1 release from prison, where he served eight years for his participation in suicides of terminally ill patients. The name of Christopher Newton, who was convicted of murdering a cell mate in prison in 2001 and the person most recently executed in the United States under a death penalty sentence, appeared only 24 times in the week before he was executed by lethal injection in Ohio on May 24.

One reason for the disparity in news coverage of the two stories could be the disparate levels of controversy associated with each subject. Americans widely agree with the death penalty; they are sharply divided over assisted suicide.

According to Gallup's 2007 Values and Beliefs survey, conducted May 10-13, the death penalty ranks as one of the most widely agreed upon issues on the roster of moral issues facing the country. Nearly two-thirds of Americans say it is morally acceptable (66%), while less than half that number (27%) consider it morally wrong. Support for the death penalty is fairly uniform across different age groups, political parties, and between men and women.

By contrast, the perceived morality of doctor-assisted suicide divides Americans about equally, making it, along with homosexual behavior, one of the most controversial social issues for Americans. Just under half (49%) call it morally acceptable while 44% call it morally wrong. The issue also breaks Americans into factions. While a majority of whites, Democrats, and liberals consider doctor-assisted suicide to be morally acceptable, a majority of nonwhites, Republicans, and conservatives call it morally wrong.

The media and political attention paid to a variety of issues might be better understood by reviewing public support for the full range of 16 issues rated in the poll.

For about half of these, at least 6 in 10 Americans agree about the issues' morality. Issues widely affirmed as acceptable include the death penalty, divorce, stem cell research involving human embryos, and gambling. Issues widely considered taboo include suicide, cloning humans, polygamy, and extramarital affairs.

Consensus Issues: Large Majorities in Agreement May 10-13, 2007

	Morally Acceptable	Morally Wrong	Net Acceptable
	%	%	
The death penalty	66	27	+39
Divorce	65	26	+39
Medical research using stem cells obtained from human embryos	64	30	+34
Gambling	63	32	+31
Suicide	16	78	-62

Cloning humans	11	86	-75
Polygamy, when one husband has more than one wife at the same time	8	90	-82
Married men and women having an affair	6	91	-85

Issues that generate a bit more friction in society include medical testing on animals, premarital sex, use of animal fur in clothing, and cloning animals. While a solid majority agrees on whether each of these is right or wrong, more than a third disagrees.

General Agreement, But More Than One-Third in Disagreement

May 10-13, 2007

	Morally Acceptable	Morally Wrong	Net Acceptable
	%	%	
Medical testing on animals	59	37	+22
Sex between an unmarried man and woman	59	38	+21
Buying and wearing clothing made of animal fur	58	38	+20
Cloning animals	36	59	-23

The most contentious issues, where at least 4 in 10 disagree with the prevailing view, include homosexual relations, doctor-assisted suicide, abortion, and having a baby outside of marriage.

Areas of Controversy: Americans Closely Divided in Views

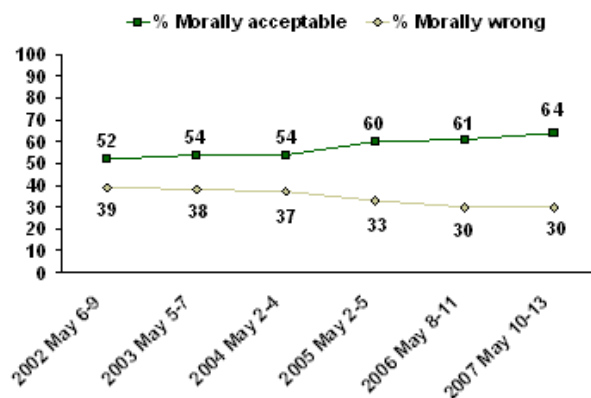
May 10-13, 2007

	Morally Acceptable	Morally Wrong	Net Acceptable
	%	%	
Having a baby outside of marriage	54	42	+12
Doctor-assisted suicide	49	44	+5
Homosexual relations	47	49	-2
Abortion	40	51	-11

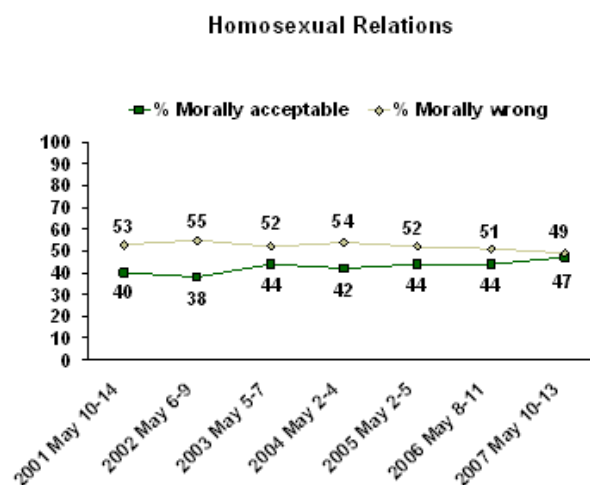
Gallup has tracked public attitudes about most of these issues since 2001 or 2002. The perceived morality of many of the issues has not changed much, or has fluctuated up and down. But, for two, there appears to be a clear change in attitudes underway.

Since 2002, Americans have grown more accepting of medical research using stem cells obtained from human embryos. The percentage considering this morally acceptable has gradually increased from 52% to 64%.

Medical Research Using Stem Cells Obtained From Human Embryos



Since 2001, Americans have also grown more accepting of homosexual relations, with the percentage considering these types of relations morally acceptable increasing from 40% to 47%.



Generational and Ideological Divides

Age is a significant determinant of moral attitudes. Young adults (18 to 34 years old) are generally more likely than those 55 and older to consider the various activities tested to be morally acceptable. The sharpest generational differences are seen with respect to premarital sex, homosexual relations, having a baby outside of marriage, and abortion. Only with respect to using animal fur in clothing and medical testing on animals are older Americans more tolerant than younger Americans.

Even greater differences on the issues are seen according to political philosophy, with liberals much more supportive of the moral acceptability of the actions than conservatives on nearly all issues. Again, the only exception is with respect to animals, where liberals are less likely to say the use of animal fur and medical testing on animals is acceptable.

The most politically divisive issues among the 16 are homosexual relations, premarital sex, and having a baby outside of marriage, where enormous gaps are seen in the views of liberals and conservatives. It is notable that, while embryonic stem cell research falls into the category of consensus issues in the country (based on 64% finding it acceptable), there are sharp divisions between liberals and conservatives on the issue. This may explain why the issue is, nevertheless, a common subject for political debates and the news.

Percentage Calling Each "Morally Acceptable" May 10-13, 2007

	Liberal-Conservative Gap		
	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
	%	%	%
Homosexual relations	83	50	23
Sex between an unmarried man and woman	89	66	34
Having a baby outside of marriage	83	59	33
Abortion	67	39	24
Divorce	87	68	49
Doctor-assisted suicide	73	49	35
Medical research using stem cells obtained from human embryos	84	69	48
Gambling	82	68	47
Cloning animals	55	30	28
Suicide	29	14	8
Cloning humans	22	9	6
Polygamy, when one husband has more than one wife at the same time	19	5	4
Married men and women having an affair	12	5	2
Buying and wearing clothing made of animal fur	52	57	61
Medical testing on animals	52	58	64

Death penalty	54	66	73	-19
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Survey Methods

Results are based on telephone interviews with 1,003 national adults, aged 18 and older, conducted May 10-13, 2007. For 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. 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.

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