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Cultural Tolerance for Divorce Grows to 70%

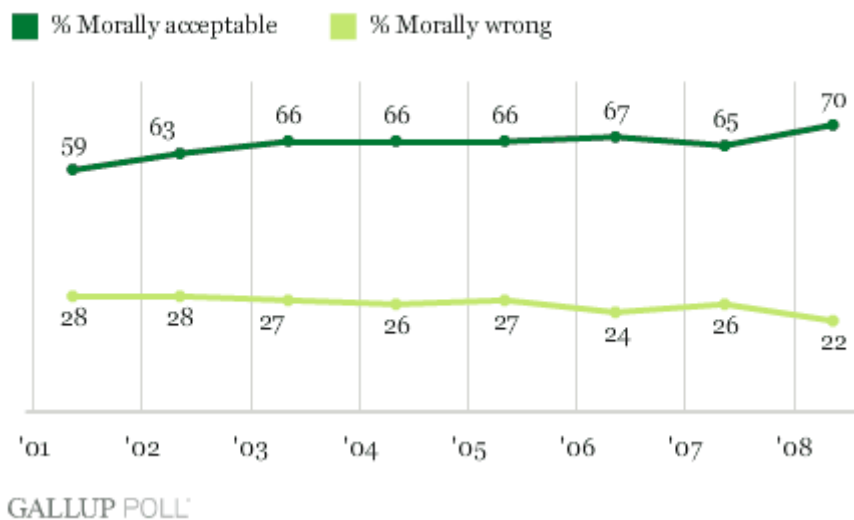
Along with polygamy, extramarital affairs are one of the least accepted acts

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by Lydia Saad

PRINCETON, NJ -- More Americans than ever believe divorce is morally acceptable, with the percentage who say this jumping to 70% in Gallup's 2008 Values and Beliefs survey, up from 59% in 2001, and breaking the previous high of 67% in 2006.

Opinion of Divorce



Notably, while divorce tops Gallup's 2008 list of 16 ethical issues rated for moral acceptability, one of the main reasons many couples seek divorce -- because one or both spouses have had an extramarital affair -- is at the bottom.

Tolerance for divorce is comparable to public acceptance of gambling, the death penalty, embryonic stem-cell research, and premarital sex. However, married men and women having an affair is tied with polygamy in last place, and ranks just slightly below cloning humans and suicide in perceived moral acceptability.

Next, I'm going to read you a list of issues. Regardless of whether or not you think it should be legal, for each one, please tell me whether you personally believe that in general it is morally acceptable or morally wrong.

	Morally acceptable	Morally wrong
	%	%
Divorce	70	22
Gambling	63	32
The death penalty	62	30
Medical research using stem cells obtained from human embryos	62	30
Sex between an unmarried man and woman	61	36
Medical testing on animals	56	38
Having a baby outside of marriage	55	41
Buying and wearing clothing made of animal fur	54	39
Doctor-assisted suicide	51	44
Homosexual relations	48	48
Abortion	40	48
Cloning animals	33	61
Suicide	15	78
Cloning humans	11	85
Polygamy, when one husband has more than one wife at the same time	8	90
Married men and women having an affair	7	91

Gallup Poll, May 8-11, 2008

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Trend in Acceptance of Divorce

Since 2001, acceptance of divorce has risen across society, and, as a result, it is now considered morally acceptable by a majority of nearly every major demographic category of Americans. This is a shift from 2001, when fewer than half of adults aged 65 and older, Republicans, self-described political "conservatives," and highly religious Americans thought divorce was acceptable.

Tolerance of divorce continues to be higher among younger adults compared with those 65 and older. Also, conservatives show far less support than do self-described moderates and liberals. And barely half of Americans who say religion is very important in their lives believe divorce is morally acceptable, compared with virtually all non-religious Americans.

Percentage Calling Divorce "Morally Acceptable"

	May 2001	May 2008	Change
	%	%	Pct. pts.
Men	63	70	+7
Women	56	69	+13
18 to 29	61	71	+10
30 to 49	65	74	+9
50 to 64	58	71	+13
65 and older	43	57	+14
East	63	68	+5
Midwest	63	71	+8
South	54	69	+15
West	57	72	+15
Republican	48	61	+13
Independent	69	74	+5
Democrat	59	72	+13
Conservative	49	57	+8
Moderate	63	72	+9
Liberal	72	87	+15
Protestant	53	65	+12
Catholic	60	75	+15
Importance of Religion			
Very important	47	55	+8
Fairly important	74	83	+9
Not very important	79	91	+12

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Other Findings

Divorce is the only issue measured in Gallup's 2008 Values and Beliefs survey for which U.S. public opinion has changed to a significant degree over the past year. However, compared with 2001, Americans have also become more accepting of sex between unmarried men and women, and homosexual relations. (Changes of fewer than five percentage points are not statistically significant.) They have become less accepting of medical testing on animals, and the use of animal fur for clothing -- although the majority still support both.

Percentage Calling Each Issue “Morally Acceptable”

Based on national adults

	May 2001	May 2008	Change
	%	%	Pct. pts.
Divorce	59	70	+11
Sex between an unmarried man and woman	53	61	+8
Homosexual relations	40	48	+8
Cloning humans	7	11	+4
Doctor-assisted suicide	49	51	+2
Cloning animals	31	33	+2
Suicide	13	15	+2
Married men and women having an affair	7	7	0
Death penalty	63	62	-1
Abortion	42	40	-2
Buying and wearing clothing made of animal fur	60	54	-6
Medical testing on animals	65	56	-9

Only items measured in both May 2001 and May 2008 are shown

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Bottom Line

People going through divorce often deal with a range of difficult emotions, including anger, sadness, trepidation, remorse, and a sense of failure. One issue becoming less and less a factor in that gut-wrenching mix is the sting of moral condemnation.

Survey Methods

Results are based on telephone interviews with 1,017 national adults, aged 18 and older, conducted May 8-11, 2008. 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.

Interviews are conducted with respondents on land-line telephones (for respondents with a land-line telephone) and cellular phones (for respondents who are cell-phone only).

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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