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People in Washington react outside the U.S. Supreme Court May 2, 2022. (CNS photo/Moira W

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May 6, 2022

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A number of polls in recent days have shown that a majority of Americans think abortion should be legal; a new Pew Research survey is no exception.

The large survey of 11,044 Americans, released Friday (May 6), shows that 61% of respondents said abortion should be legal in most or all cases — little changed from 1995 when 60% said the same.

But contrary to what many may assume, those opposed to abortion are not necessarily all religious. In fact, the country's many religious groups have wide-ranging opinions on the legality of abortion.

The only religious group that overwhelmingly opposes abortion is white evangelicals, 73% of whom say abortion should be illegal. Many white evangelicals celebrated

earlier this week when a leaked draft opinion showed that a majority of Supreme Court justices are ready to overturn Roe v. Wade and eliminate women's constitutional right to abortion. (The actual ruling is expected in June.)

White evangelicals are also far more likely than other religious groups to say life begins at conception, the survey found. An overwhelming number of white evangelicals — 86% — said the assertion that the fetus is a person with rights reflects their beliefs "extremely well" or "somewhat well."

But other Christian groups, even those considered highly devout, such as Black Protestants, are far more supportive of abortion rights. Among Black Protestants, only 23% said abortion should be illegal most or all of the time; 66% said they thought abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

On the question of when life begins, Black Protestants stood out from white evangelicals, too. Only 38% of Black Protestants said human life begins at conception.

"They're both highly religious groups," said Besheer Mohamed, a senior researcher at Pew Research referring to white evangelicals and Black Protestants. "But their views on abortion are very different."

But perhaps the biggest misconception about religious groups is the widely held view that Catholics universally oppose abortion rights. While the Catholic Church has consistently opposed all forms of abortion — and the U.S. bishops have made it a defining teaching of the church — the Pew survey shows that 56% of Catholics say abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Only 44% of Catholics said they were "extremely" confident that life begins at conception.

"The bishops have been trying to convince their own people and have failed," said the Rev. Thomas Reese, a Jesuit priest and senior analyst for Religion News Service. "Catholics don't listen to the bishops."

Religious "nones" — U.S. adults who describe themselves, religiously, as atheists, agnostics or "nothing in particular" — were most supportive of legal abortion. Eight-in-10 nones said abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Atheists, a small subgroup among the "nones," were the only group where a majority said abortion should be legal in all cases, no exceptions.

The Pew survey did not break down religion for minority faiths, such as Jews and Muslims. But a new study issued Thursday from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding finds that 75% of American Jews and 56% of American Muslims believe abortion should remain legal.

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The survey, conducted by the market research firm SSRS from among 2,159 respondents (807 of whom were Muslim), asked a similar question to Pew: Do you think abortion should be legal in all cases, legal in most cases, illegal in most cases or illegal in all cases?

The survey found that younger Muslims were more likely than Muslims aged 50 and older to believe abortion should be legal in all cases.

"The wider society may think Muslims are less supportive of legalized abortion, but that's clearly not the case from this data," said Meira Neggaz, executive director of the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding.

That said, among all religious groups, as among all Americans, few took an absolutist view on the legality of abortion. Even the most anti-abortion said there are some cases where abortion should be legal and even those most supportive of legal abortion said there are times when abortion should not be allowed.

"One commonality across these groups is that sizable numbers in all of them see the issue of abortion in shades of gray," the Pew survey found.

For example, a majority of all religious groups, including white evangelicals, said abortion should be legal if the pregnancy threatens the life or health of the woman. And all religious groups, including 56% of white evangelicals, said that how long a woman has been pregnant should matter in determining when abortion should be legal.

Americans broadly are more likely to favor restrictions on abortion later in pregnancy than earlier in pregnancy.

The Pew survey had a 1.5 percentage point margin of error for the entire study.