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New Pew study: Most Americans view abortion as moral issue

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A new study shows most Americans view abortion as a moral issue but do not feel as strongly about stem-cell research or in vitro fertilization as moral issues.

According to the study, released Aug. 15 by the Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, 49 percent of adults consider it morally wrong to have an abortion; 22 percent consider embryonic stem-cell research morally wrong; and 12 percent view the use of in vitro fertilization as morally wrong.

The findings were based on telephone interviews of 4,006 adults conducted March 21-April 18 with a margin of error of plus or minus 2.1 percentage points.

The survey's results show that opinions on the morality of abortion differ widely among religious groups. Seventy-five percent of white evangelical Protestants and 64 percent of Hispanic Catholics consider having an abortion morally wrong. Fifty-eight percent of black Protestants and 53 percent of white Catholics hold this view while 38 percent of white mainline Protestants and 25 percent of religiously unaffiliated adults see abortion as morally wrong.

Relatively small percentages of people in all religious groups consider it morally acceptable to have an abortion. However, among the unaffiliated, nearly equal amounts view having an abortion as morally acceptable (28 percent) and morally wrong (25 percent).

The survey also revealed that there are sizable differences in opinions about the moral acceptability of abortion by partisanship, political ideology and education, but few differences when it comes to gender and age. For example, about two-thirds (64 percent) of Republicans and independents who lean toward the Republican Party consider having an abortion morally wrong, compared with 38 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents.

Differences of opinion on embryonic stem-cell research among religious groups are relatively modest in comparison with attitudes toward abortion. Among the major religious groups, white evangelical Protestants are most likely to say embryonic stem-cell research is morally wrong. But there are differences of opinion when it comes to partisanship and ideology.

About 75 percent of Democrats and independents who lean toward the Democratic Party consider embryonic stem-cell research to be either morally acceptable or not a moral issue. Republicans and Republican-leaning independents are more inclined to consider such research morally wrong.

Those who say that having an abortion is morally acceptable are also more likely to say that embryonic stem-cell research is morally acceptable (67 percent). And among those who consider abortion to be morally wrong consider embryonic stem cell research to be morally wrong by 36 percent.

But a majority of those who view abortion as morally wrong consider embryonic stem-cell research to be either morally acceptable (23 percent) or not a moral issue (29 percent).

When asked about the moral acceptability of medical research using stem cells that do not derive from human embryos, the overwhelming majority of adults say that non-embryonic stem-cell research is either morally acceptable (33 percent) or is not a moral issue (42 percent); only 16 percent describe this research as morally wrong.

There are only modest differences in opinion among social and demographic groups -- including religious groups -- about the moral acceptability of in vitro fertilization, or IVF. Those with at least a college degree are more inclined to say that using IVF is morally acceptable. But there are no significant differences on this issue by political party, and only modest differences by ideology; more liberals and moderates than conservatives say IVF is not a moral issue.

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