

Loyal but dissenting believers

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [July 12, 2011](#) issue

Significant majorities of Americans say it is possible to disagree with their religion's teachings on abortion and homosexuality and still remain in good standing with their faith. The findings hold true for major religious groups, including Catholics and white evangelical Protestants.

The results reflect the complicated tasks faced by Catholic bishops to discipline politicians who stray from church teaching or by evangelical groups that try to maintain a traditional stance as cultural values shift around them.

In fact, the survey released June 9 by Public Religion Research Institute found that six in ten Americans chafe at the idea of religious leaders publicly pressuring politicians on the issue of abortion, as has happened to several high-profile Catholic Democrats in recent years.

Overall, 72 percent of Americans say it's permissible to disagree with church teaching on abortion, and 63 percent say the same about homosexuality.

Catholics closely mirror the general population's position on abortion and church teaching but are more progressive than the general population on the issue of homosexuality and church teaching. Two-thirds of evangelicals (67 percent) said they could differ with church teaching on abortion, and slightly less than a majority (47 percent) said the same about homosexuality.

The report focused on the views of millennials (people age 18-29) and found that they are more supportive of gay marriage than are their parents. Their views on abortion closely mirror

their parents, however, with six in ten saying abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

Also, most millennials—68 percent—think that at least some health-care professionals in their community should provide legal abortions.

"Millennials are actually more likely to say that abortion should be available in their local community than say it should be legal," said Robert P. Jones, CEO of the Washington-based research firm, which announced its results at the Brookings Institution.

Abortion

services by local health-care professionals are also supported by majorities of white mainline Protestants (72 percent), the religiously unaffiliated (71 percent), white Catholics (58 percent) and black Protestants (56 percent). Minorities of Latino Catholics (38 percent) and white evangelicals (37 percent) supported such availability.

The

report also found a religious divide on the question of the sinfulness of having an abortion, with more than 60 percent of white evangelicals, black Protestants and Latino Catholics seeing it as sinful. White Catholics, meanwhile, were evenly divided (46 percent each), and white mainline Protestants were the sole major religious group in which a majority (55 percent) did not believe it is sinful.

Researchers

found a link between biblical interpretation and opposition to abortion: almost six in ten Americans who say the Bible is the literal word of God believe that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.

More

than 80 percent of people who don't view the Bible as the word of God but rather as a book written by men think abortion should be legal in all or most circumstances.

Significant majorities of mainline

Protestants (85 percent), Catholics (78 percent), black Protestants (74

percent) and evangelicals (62 percent) say public schools should teach comprehensive sex education.

Majorities of Americans who attend church at least once or twice a week hear clergy talk about abortion and homosexuality, with most hearing that such practices are morally wrong and few hearing that they are morally acceptable.

The overall survey, based on telephone interviews with 3,000 people between April 22 and May 8, had a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points. The sample of 431 millennials had a margin of error of plus or minus 4.5 percentage points. —RNS