# Abortion views unchanged 40 years after Roe v. Wade

by Lauren Markoe in the February 20, 2013 issue

In the past four decades, American attitudes have changed markedly on gay marriage, smoking, bullying and a host of other cultural issues. But on *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, public opinion today looks much as it did back then.

When it comes to American views on the legality of abortion, "the trend lines look about as flat as they can be," said Daniel Cox, research director at the nonpartisan Public Religion Research Institute.

Just a few years after the justices decided *Roe*, Gallup pollsters began asking Americans about abortion. In 1975, 54 percent said it should be legal only under certain circumstances; last year that figure was virtually unchanged, at 52 percent. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life in January found that 63 percent of Americans don't want *Roe* overturned, a mere 3-percentage-point increase from 1992.

In more recent years, opinions on the morality of abortion have remained similarly stable, with about half of Americans (47 percent) calling it "morally wrong" and four in ten considering it "morally acceptable" or "not a moral issue," according to Pew.

So there you have the general, seemingly static American view on abortion: a lot of us aren't comfortable with it and favor some restrictions, but most want it to remain legal.

But are Americans' feelings about abortion really so stagnant? Are views simply passed down from parents to children, like eye color?

Dig a little deeper, say those who study public opinion and abortion, and you'll find some interesting changes over time—some within various religious groups and others that cross religious lines.

One dramatic change that social scientists have tracked in recent years is the salience of the issue—the degree of importance people attach to it. As the Pew study shows, abortion's salience has dropped dramatically.

In 2006, one in three Americans (32 percent) said abortion is "not that important" compared to other issues. Now, in 2013, more than half (53 percent) hold that view.

David P. Gushee, professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University, said the trend is evident in his own classroom, where for 20 years he has asked his students to write a term paper on a topic of their own choosing. He used to get a sizable stack of papers about abortion; now it's far less common.

"I think students consider it a stalemate and are moving on to issues where they feel they can make more of a difference," said Gushee. "I have some students who have a moral problem with abortion, others don't see it as a problem—but the energy is not there."

Shifting views on abortion since *Roe* are perhaps most visible within certain religious groups, particularly Catholics and conservative Protestants.

In 2009, Gallup released a poll showing that Catholics, who had in the past more readily accepted Catholic teaching against abortion, now shared views that reflected those of Americans in general: there was just a one-point difference on whether abortion is "morally acceptable" between Catholics (40 percent) and non-Catholics (41 percent).

The latest Pew study, which asked a different question on abortion, showed that 73 percent of white evangelical Protestants consider abortion to be morally wrong—outpacing Catholics (58 percent) as the religious group most opposed to abortion.

"Where traditionally it was Catholics who were more opposed to abortion, that's changed in a dramatic fashion," said Cox of the PRRI. "Now it's white evangelical Protestants who are most opposed."  —RNS

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