

Study says evangelicals waver on amendment: Federal Marriage Amendment

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A landmark study of American evangelical Christians has determined, among several noteworthy findings, that evangelicals oppose gay marriage but are lukewarm in their support for a constitutional amendment to ban it.

The survey of more than 1,600 respondents found that, while 85 percent of evangelical Christians oppose gay marriage, only 41 percent of those who oppose the practice felt the Constitution should be amended to do so. Instead, 52 percent of evangelical gay-marriage opponents said it is enough for states or nonconstitutional federal laws to prohibit same-sex marriage.

Support for such an amendment among evangelicals was only slightly stronger than among the general population, 35 percent of whom preferred amending the Constitution to ban gay marriage over simple legislative bans.

The survey, conducted in late March and early April by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, was commissioned by *U.S. News & World Report* magazine and the PBS television show *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*.

Anna Greenberg, a vice-president of the firm that conducted the study, said the gay-marriage response and some others on the importance of certain moral issues to evangelicals surprised her. “We fully expected that evangelicals would be opposed to gay marriage,” Greenberg said, in an April 13 press conference announcing the study’s release. However, their opposition doesn’t translate into majority support for a step as significant as amending the Constitution to ban it.

Greenberg also noted that “evangelical elites”—such as television preachers and Washington activists—have been emphasizing support for the proposed Federal Marriage Amendment as an important issue in the 2004 elections. But the survey

showed that, of rank-and-file evangelicals, “less than a majority said they had a litmus test” for political candidates on the issue of gay marriage. In fact, while 46 percent of evangelical respondents said they would not vote for a candidate who disagreed with them on legalizing gay marriage, 42 percent said they could back a candidate who disagreed with them on that issue but agreed on most others.

The survey also showed that evangelicals had levels of concern for the moral direction of the country that were similar to those of the general population, and that evangelicals had similar levels of worry about various social ills as the general population.

“This is a very sophisticated survey,” said John Green, director of the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron (Ohio) and an expert in the study of evangelicals and politics. “It’s been a long time since anybody has looked at the evangelical community in this much detail.”

Green noted the survey reflected an ideological diversity in the evangelical community that opinion-makers in the media and government often overlook. Asked to rate certain personalities on a 0-100 scale of favorability, Baptist television personality Jerry Falwell scored only a 44 percent rating among white evangelicals. Christian Coalition founder and broadcaster Pat Robertson fared slightly better, at 54 percent. Focus on the Family founder James Dobson scored a 73 percent approval rating among evangelicals. Even Pope John Paul II got a higher favorability rating among evangelicals than Robertson or Falwell, with 59 percent.

“To look at it from a historical point of view, the pope is no longer the Antichrist,” Green joked. *—Associated Baptist Press*