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Most Still Oppose Gay Marriage, but Support for Civil Unions Continues to Rise

October 9, 2009

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A clear majority of Americans (57%) favor allowing gay and lesbian couples to enter into legal agreements with each other that would give them many of the same rights as married couples, a status commonly known as civil unions. This finding marks a slight uptick in support for civil unions and appears to continue a significant long-term trend since the question was first asked in Pew Research Center surveys in 2003, when support for civil unions stood at 45%.

Over the past year, support for civil unions has grown significantly among those who oppose same-sex marriage (from 24% in August 2008 to 30% in 2009) while remaining stable among those who favor same-sex marriage. At the same time, opponents of same-sex marriage continue to outnumber supporters overall. An August 2009 Pew Research Center survey finds that 53% oppose allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally, compared with 39% who support same-sex marriage, numbers that are virtually unchanged over the past year.

Supporters of same-sex marriage are divided over the best way to pursue its legalization; 45% favor pushing hard to legalize it as soon as possible, while 42% of same-sex marriage advocates say they should not push too hard to legalize same-sex marriage right away because this might risk creating a backlash against gays and lesbians.

The recent national survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, conducted Aug. 11-27 among 4,013 adults reached on both landlines and cell phones, also finds that half of the public (49%) says homosexual behavior is morally wrong, while 9% say it is morally acceptable and 35% say it is not a moral issue. Those who say it is morally wrong are less supportive of same-sex marriage (11% in favor compared with 70% of those who have no moral qualms about homosexuality) and civil unions (33% in favor compared with 82% of those who have no qualms about homosexuality).

Same-Sex Marriage Issue Continues to Divide

Attitudes on same-sex marriage currently stand almost exactly where they did 12 months ago, with just over half of Americans (53%) opposed and 39% in favor of allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally. There are stark differences of opinion among the public on this issue, especially among religious and political groups. For example, more than seven-in-ten liberal Democrats (72%) favor same-sex marriage, while eight-in-ten conservative Republicans (81%) oppose it.

More than three-quarters of white evangelical Protestants (77%) and two-thirds of black Protestants (66%) oppose same-sex marriage, as do half of white mainline Protestants (50%).

Catholics are evenly divided on the issue, with 45% favoring same-sex marriage and 43% opposing it. Most of those unaffiliated with any particular religion support same-sex marriage (60%).

Overall, a strong majority of those who attend services at least weekly oppose same-sex marriage (71%), while about half of those who seldom or never attend religious services favor it (54%). This pattern is evident within Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism.

Most regularly attending white Catholics in the survey oppose same-sex marriage, while most white Catholics who attend Mass less often favor it. Among white evangelicals, 85% of those who attend services at least weekly oppose same-sex marriage, 21 percentage points higher than among less-observant white evangelicals.

Public opinion on this issue also varies according to age, sex, race and education.

Most young people (ages 18-29) favor same-sex marriage (58%), while majorities in older age groups oppose it. Women are more likely than men to support same-sex marriage (43% vs. 34%), and whites and Hispanics are more supportive than blacks (39%, 45% and 26% respectively). Among those in the survey with a college education, a 49%-plurality favors same-sex marriage, while half or more of those with less education oppose it.

Most Southerners and Midwesterners oppose same-sex marriage (60% and 54% respectively). By contrast, people who reside in the West and the East are evenly divided on the issue (47% favor vs. 47% oppose in the West, 45% favor vs. 45% oppose in the East).

Advocates Split on Strategy

The 39% of Americans who favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry are evenly divided over how hard supporters should push to legalize same-sex marriage. Roughly four-in-ten (42%) say that supporters should not push too hard to make it legal right away because doing so could create bad feelings against homosexuals. A similar number (45%), however, say that supporters of same-sex marriage should push hard to make it legal as soon as possible, despite the risk of creating bad feelings against gays and lesbians. There has been a slight decline since 2006 in the number of same-sex-marriage supporters favoring a hard push to legalize same-sex marriage right away (from 51% to 45% in 2009).

Gay Marriage

	Favor	Oppose	DK	N
%	%	%	%	
Total	39	53	8=100	2,010
Men	34	59	7=100	895
Women	43	48	9=100	1,115
White	39	52	8=100	1,526
Black	26	66	8=100	197
Hispanic	45	49	8=100	165
18-29	58	37	5=100	283
30-49	38	53	9=100	568
50-64	35	58	7=100	622
65+	22	67	11=100	507
College grad+	49	43	8=100	769
Some college	42	51	8=100	492
HS or less	32	59	9=100	743
Conserv Rep	14	81	5=100	364
Mod/Lib Rep	36	54	11=100	149
Independent	44	47	9=100	706
Cons/Mod Dem	41	53	6=100	413
Liberal Dem	72	24	3=100	219
Protestant	27	65	8=100	1,100
White evangelical	17	77	8=100	449
Attend weekly	10	85	5=100	301
Attend less often	28	64	8=100	146
White mainline	39	50	10=100	405
Attend weekly	37	55	8=100	118
Attend less often	41	48	11=100	282
Black Protestant	25	66	9=100	146
Catholic	45	43	12=100	446
White non-Hispanic	45	42	13=100	330
Attend weekly	30	59	11=100	149
Attend less often	54	31	15=100	179
Unaffiliated	60	34	8=100	286
Attend services ...				
Weekly or more	22	71	7=100	838
Monthly/yearly	47	44	9=100	647
Seldom/never	54	38	8=100	504
East	45	45	10=100	391
Midwest	38	54	8=100	505
South	31	60	9=100	773
West	47	47	6=100	341

Gay Marriage Supporters Disagree on Strategy

Gay marriage supporters... July 06 Aug 09 Aug Change 06-09 % % %

Shouldn't push too hard, could create bad feelings 41 42 +1

Should push hard to legalize as soon as possible 51 45 -6

Don't know 8 13 +5

N 100 100

Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding. Q146a.

Gay Marriage Opponents Increase Support for Civil Unions

	Aug 2008	Aug 2009	Change
% favor civil unions	%	%	
Total	54	57	+3
Favor gay marriage	95	94	-1
Oppose gay marriage	24	30	+6
Republican	40	48	+8
Democrat	60	60	0
Independent	59	63	+4

Based on those who favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding. Q147.

Most FAVOR Civil Unions

Currently, support for civil unions stands at an all time high in Pew Research Center surveys, with 57% favoring them and 37% opposed to allowing gay and lesbian couples to enter into legal agreements with each other, giving them many of the same rights as married couples. This marks a slight increase in support for civil unions.

Among most political groups, half or more support civil unions, including 59% of moderate and liberal Republicans, 63% of independents, 54% of moderate and conservative Democrats and 76% of liberal Democrats. The only exception to this pattern is conservative Republicans, among whom a slim majority (53%) opposes civil unions.

Most white evangelicals oppose civil unions (57%), with opposition especially concentrated among the most-observant white evangelicals (67% among those who attend church at least weekly). Black Protestants are divided on the issue, with 43% in favor of civil unions and 49% opposed.

Most other religious groups favor civil unions, including observant white Catholics (55%) and observant white mainline Protestants (57%). Among the religiously unaffiliated, more than two-thirds (68%) favor civil unions.

Among those who oppose same-sex marriage, three-in-ten (30%) say they would support civil unions. A majority of same-sex marriage opponents, however, still oppose civil unions (66%). Among those who favor same-sex marriage, nearly all (94%) favor civil unions.

Two-thirds of those under age 30 (68%) support civil unions, the highest level of support among any age group. College graduates are also much more supportive of civil unions (70%) than are those with a high school education or less (47%).

Majorities of both men (54%) and women (60%) favor civil unions. Whites also largely support civil unions (61%), while blacks and Hispanics are more evenly divided on the issue.

Overall support for civil unions has grown over the past year among those who oppose same-sex marriage. There has been a six-point increase in support for civil unions (from 24% to 30%) among same-sex marriage opponents, while the figure among those in favor of same-sex marriage has not changed substantially. Support for civil unions is also up significantly among Republicans (from 40% in 2008 to 48% in 2009). Support has remained relatively stable among independents and Democrats, with six-in-ten among both groups expressing support for such arrangements.

Homosexuality and Morality

Nearly half of the public (49%) says homosexual behavior is morally wrong, while 9% say it is morally acceptable and 35% say it is not a moral issue. A similar number says abortion is morally wrong (52%), while far fewer see moral impropriety in divorce (29%) or drinking alcohol (15%).

Blacks are much more likely to think that homosexuality is morally wrong (64%) than whites (48%) or Hispanics (43%). At least half of those ages 30 and older say homosexuality is wrong, compared with fewer than four-in-ten (38%) among those under age 30. And a slim majority of Americans with a high school education or less see homosexual behavior as morally wrong (52%), compared with three-in-ten (33%) among those with a college degree or some college education (46%).

Assessments of morality are divided sharply along partisan lines. For example, three-quarters of conservative Republicans say homosexual behavior is wrong, while only a third of liberal Republicans say it is not a moral issue (13%) or that it is not a moral issue (57%).

Among religious groups, 76% of white evangelical Protestants and 65% of black Protestants believe homosexuality is morally wrong; mainline Protestants (40%), Catholics (39%) and the unaffiliated (29%) are much less likely to take this view. Views also differ markedly by level of worship service attendance. Overall, two-thirds of those who attend services at least weekly say homosexual behavior is morally wrong, compared with 43% of those who seldom or never attend. The same is true within religious traditions. For example, among Catholics, a slim majority of weekly Mass attenders (53%) say homosexual behavior is morally wrong, while among those who attend less often, a majority (65%) say it is not a moral issue or is morally acceptable.

Younger people perceive more discrimination against gays and lesbians than their elders: 80% of those under 30 say there is a lot of discrimination against gays and lesbians, compared with roughly six-in-ten of those ages 30 to 64 and just over half those ages 65 and older (54%). Women are more likely to face discrimination (68% vs. 59%). Three-quarters of Democrats (74%) say that gays and lesbians face a lot of discrimination, as do 59% of independents and 58% of Republicans.

Compared with views on same-sex marriage and civil unions, there is more agreement among the largest religious groups about the level of discrimination faced by gays and lesbians.

Roughly six-in-ten white evangelical and mainline Protestants (57% and 61%) and Catholics (60%) say there is a lot of discrimination, as do 69% of those who are unaffiliated with a particular religion.

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View the [topline and survey methodology](#) at [peoplepress.org](#).

Homosexual Behavior and Morality	Moral Perceptions and Gay Issues
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