

Embargo until 00.01 Tuesday 12th Feb

New survey reveals that most religious people are not anti abortionⁱ

Overall, the views of people with religious affiliations on abortion are not markedly different from the general view

A new YouGov survey commissioned for the Westminster Faith Debatesⁱⁱ finds that 43% of people who identify with a religion are in favour of keeping or raising the current 24 week limit (compared with 46% of the general population), 30% would like to see it lowered (compared with 28%), and 9% support a ban (compared with 7%). The remainder of people say they 'don't know'.

Even though the Roman Catholic Church teaches that abortion is always wrong and should be illegal, only 14% of Catholics in this country are in favour of a ban.

A significant number of people believe that human life begins at conception, but this does not necessarily mean they are opposed to abortion.

44% of people believe that human life begins at conception, 30% at some time during pregnancy, 17% when the baby is born, and 8% don't know.

Surprisingly, even amongst those who believe that human life begins at conception, most believe that abortion should be legal. Over three quarters believe that abortion is acceptable in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, and a half believe that abortion should be allowed at least up to 20 weeks.

Amongst the religious people surveyed, Catholics, Muslims and Baptists are the most hostile to abortion, but only about half would like to see the law changed

14% of Catholics surveyed support a ban and 33% would like to see the 24 week limit lowered.

30% of Muslims surveyed support a ban and 16% would like to see the 24 week limit lowered.

Those who rely on external religious sources for guidance, and whose religion offers an anti-abortion message, are the most likely to be hostile to abortion

The survey finds that factors like gender, age and voting preference do not make much difference to attitudes to abortion. The people most likely to be hostile to abortion are those:

- who believe in God with most certainty
- rely most strongly on scripture or religious teachings for guidance
- whose religion has a strong anti-abortion message

Only 8% of the population fits this profile, and of this 8% one third support a ban on abortion.

The survey finds that most people in Great Britain—including religious people—rely most on their own judgment or feelings or the advice of family and friends for guidance.

Amongst the population as a whole, anti-abortion sentiment is declining and support for current abortion law is growing

Comparisons with earlier YouGov polls reveal that the percentage of the population who would like to see a ban on abortion has fallen from 12% in 2005 to 7% today. Of those who expressed a view, support for keeping (or even relaxing) the current 24 week limit has risen by about one-third to a clear majority (57%) today.

Background

The current legal limit for abortion is 24 weeks. According to the latest Department of Health abortion statistics (for 2011), 91% of abortions were carried out at under 13 weeks gestation, and 78% at under 10 weeks.ⁱⁱⁱ

The new series of Westminster Faith Debates, on 'religion and personal life', begins this week. The first debate is on 'Stem Cell Research, Abortion and the "Soul of the Embryo"'.^{iv}

ⁱ All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 4,437 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 25th - 30th January 2013. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

ⁱⁱ The Westminster Faith debates are organised by Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead and supported by Lancaster University, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. They are designed to bring high-quality academic research on religion into public debate.

ⁱⁱⁱ The most recent data were published in May 2012 by the Department of Health in Abortion Statistics, England and Wales, 2011, available at: <https://www.wp.dh.gov.uk/transparency/files/2012/05/Commentary1.pdf>

^{iv} Details at http://religionandsociety.org.uk/faith_debates-2013/

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