

Kentuckians evenly divided on abortion

Yet majority say they are 'pro-life'

By JOSEPH GERTH
The Courier-Journal

FRANKFORT, Ky. — Although a slim majority of Kentuckians consider themselves to be "pro-life" and think abortion is murder, they are evenly divided over whether abortion should be outlawed or remain a woman's choice.

These are the findings of The Courier-Journal's Bluegrass State Poll and they may reflect two clashing sentiments over abortion — people's moral convictions and their notion of individual choice.

The poll of 800 Kentucky adults found widespread opposition to abortion. When asked, "Do you think abortion is an act of murder or don't you feel this way," 54 percent said it is murder and only 29 percent said they didn't feel that way. The rest had no opinion.

Also, 52 percent considered themselves "pro-life," while na-

tionally only 42 percent identified themselves that way in a 1999 survey by the Gallup Organization.

Yet Kentuckians were evenly split when asked which came closer to their view — leaving abortion as a private matter for the woman to decide or having government ban it with only a few exceptions.

The poll, which was conducted from Jan. 31 to Feb. 6, comes at a time when the Kentucky General Assembly is getting ready to consider two bills that are seen by some abortion foes as the first step toward outlawing abortion.

The bills would define a fetus as a person and allow for criminal and civil penalties against someone who harms or kills a fetus. Although the bills wouldn't apply to doctors who perform abortions, abortion opponents believe such legislation would further their cause. They believe that it would give them legal grounds to argue to the U.S. Supreme Court that abortion takes a human life and should be outlawed.

THE COURIER-JOURNAL'S BLUEGRASS STATE POLL

Q. Which of the following two statements comes closer to your views: first, abortion is a private matter that should be left to the woman to decide without government intervention . . . or second, abortion should be outlawed by the government except in cases of rape, incest or a threat to the woman's life.

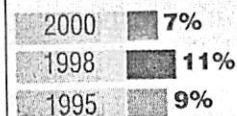
A WOMAN'S DECISION



OUTLAWED BY GOVERNMENT



NO OPINION/OTHER



Percentages don't add to 100 because of rounding. Results are based on three Bluegrass State Polls in which 800 to 803 Kentucky adults were interviewed.

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BY WES KENDALL, THE C-J

Poll finds Kentuckians evenly split on abortion

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The Supreme Court ruled in 1973 that women have a constitutional right to abortion. In order to prohibit abortions, the high court would have to overturn that ruling or Congress would have to pass a constitutional amendment.

House Bills 378 and 379 are expected to get a hearing in the House Judiciary Committee next month.

Jodi Jervis of Louisville is among those who feel a bit conflicted over the abortion issue. She believes that abortion to get rid of an unwanted pregnancy is murder but considers herself to be "pro-choice."

Jervis, 24, who took part in the Bluegrass poll and agreed to a follow-up interview, said she doesn't believe abortion should be used as birth control but that there are legitimate reasons to terminate a pregnancy such as the life and health of both mother and child.

"AND YOU should consider whether or not the mother can take good care of and support the child, not so much after birth because there is always adoption but during pregnancy," she said. "You know there's so many women who can't get themselves off crack long enough to have the baby or just can't stop smoking cigarettes."

Karlyn Bowman, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think-tank, said the seemingly contradictory results in Kentucky are similar to those found by Gallup and other national polls — although the polls indicate Kentucky is more conservative on the issue than the nation as a whole.

When pollsters have asked whether abortion is an act of murder, pluralities or majorities have said it is, but "at one and the same time, you have even more substantial majorities saying it should be a choice between a woman and her doctor," she said.

"Those two things are profoundly contradictory, they can't be reconciled. Yet I think many of us hold them within our own hearts at the same time," said Bowman, who believes people see no real need to reconcile those differences.

Bowman said that most Americans don't want to outlaw abortion in large part because the nation values individual freedom, but at the same time they do favor some restrictions because they generally don't like the idea of abortion on demand.

Stefan Girton, a 34-year-old roofer in Louisville, opposes abortion in general but said that the government



Stefan Girton is against abortion but said the government should not outlaw it. "Having an abortion just to get rid of a child, I'm against that," he said.



"You should consider whether or not the mother can take good care of and support the child, not so much after birth ... but during pregnancy," Jodi Jervis said.

should not outlaw it in all situations.

"I do think having an abortion just to get rid of a child, I'm against that," said Girton, who has six children and may soon adopt his girlfriend's son.

If a woman doesn't want a child, he said, "there's a lot of people here who want kids. If anything, put it up for adoption, let somebody else raise it."

IN GENERAL, Bowman said the poll results show that Kentuckians, like other Americans, are not comfortable with the abortion issue and haven't been able to reconcile their beliefs.

Many people who feel conflicted, she said, tend to turn away from the debate, "so what you have are the activists on both sides getting all the press attention but they really don't represent the American people."

But Margie Montgomery, executive director of Kentucky Right to Life, said the anti-abortion movement represents a large number of people. "We're not going to go away because the pro-life movement is as invigorated as it was 27 years ago. . . . We're not going to go away as long as innocent life is being taken."

Montgomery said she agrees with Bowman that many people tend to be conflicted about abortion, which she attributes to a lack of understanding. "There is still a lot of misinformation out there," she said.

Jervis said she has doesn't often pay attention to the abortion issue when she goes to the polls because she finds it difficult to wade through the rhetoric and figure out which

politicians come closest to agreeing with her on the subject.

Beth Wilson, director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Kentucky's Reproductive Freedom Project, said the poll shows that while many in Kentucky do not like abortion, there is no agreement on whether to ban the procedure.

"I think the split is the very reason the government needs to stay out of this issue," she said.

THE POLL, which has a margin of error of 3.5 percentage points, found sharp differences among Kentuckians, depending on where they reside and their education and religious affiliations and convictions.

Those who were most likely to support a woman's right to choose resided in the state's five most urban counties — Jefferson, Fayette, Boone, Campbell and Kenton. In those counties, 56 percent said abortion should be a woman's choice, compared with 41 percent in the rest of the state.

Among those with at least a high school education, 49 percent supported a woman's choice compared with only 29 percent of those who hadn't completed high school.

Thirty percent of those polled said they supported the conservative Christian political movement. Among this group, 65 percent said abortion should be outlawed compared with 40 percent of other Kentuckians.

Among church members, a majority of fundamentalists and Southern Baptists chose outlawing abortion over the option of allowing the woman to decide. However, 63 percent of

THE COURIER-JOURNAL'S BLUEGRASS STATE POLL

KENTUCKY IS MORE PRO-LIFE

Q. With respect to the abortion issue, would you consider yourself to be pro-choice or pro-life?

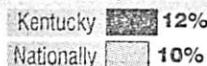
PRO-CHOICE



PRO-LIFE



NO OPINION/OTHER



Based on a Bluegrass State Poll of 800 Kentucky adults conducted Jan. 31-Feb. 6, and a national poll of 1,014 adults taken by the Gallup Organization from April 30-May 2, 1999.

BY WES KENDALL, THE C-J

How the poll was conducted

The BLUEGRASS STATE POLL[®] asked the following questions:

I have a few questions about the abortion issue. Please tell me which of the following two statements comes closer to your views.

First, abortion is a private matter that should be left to the woman to decide without government intervention . . . or second, abortion should be outlawed by the government except in cases of rape, incest or a threat to the woman's life. (The order in which the questions were read was rotated from interview to interview.)

With respect to the abortion issue, would you consider yourself to be pro-choice or pro-life?

Some say that abortion is an act of murder, while other people disagree with this. What is your view — do you think abortion is an act of murder or don't you feel this way?

The BLUEGRASS STATE POLL[®] is based on telephone interviews conducted Jan. 31 to Feb. 6 with 800 Kentucky adults.

Trained interviewers called households randomly selected by a computer. Then, one adult in each household was selected randomly to be interviewed.

Results have been weighted to balance the sample by age, sex and areas of the state.

The poll's margin of error is 3.5 percentage points. This means, in theory, in 19 out of 20 cases the poll results will differ by no more than 3.5 points above or below the results that would have been obtained by questioning all Kentucky adults who have telephones. Percentages based on subsamples are subject to a higher potential margin of error.

The practical difficulties of conducting any survey can also influence the results.

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the members of mainline Protestant churches, including Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists, supported a woman's choice.

Among Catholics, 49 percent said it should be outlawed and 48 percent said it should be a woman's choice.