

Poll Finds That Support Is Strong For Teaching 2 Origin Theories

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Rochester drew criticism when officials there said creationism would be taught as an alternate theory to evolution. Just yesterday, The Columbus Dispatch in Ohio reported that a group called the Young Earth Creation Club objected to the inclusion of evolution in new science standards set by the state's school board.

Despite scientific evidence of an Earth that is billions of years old and fossils that indicate one species evolving into another, the strictest creationists believe in a literal reading of Genesis: that the universe, Earth and all the planet's species were created a few thousand years ago in essentially their present form.

Only about a third of the respondents in the poll, though, defined creationism this way. Others said they understood it more loosely as referring to God's having created humans, but not necessarily as described in the Bible. People unclear on the meaning were read a definition based on the looser version and were told creationism sharply conflicted with evolution theory.

The poll did not offer other, more nuanced views of divine intervention, like the idea that God infused humans with a soul and otherwise allowed evolution to take its course.

The results indicate that about 30 percent of Americans believe that creationism should be taught as a scientific theory, either with or without evolution in the curriculum. At the other end of the spectrum, 20 percent believe that evolution should be taught in science class without any mention of creationism.

Most respondents, though, took the middle road, saying that evolution should be taught as a scientific theory, while creationism should also be discussed — as a religious belief

rather than a scientific theory.

"When you put it in terms of human evolution, you're referring to the hottest button of a hot-button issue," said Molleen Matsumura of the National Center for Science Education in El Cerrito, Calif. "Even then, there was a great deal of support for evolution."

The survey found little variation in responses by geographic region. But it did determine that young Americans, 18 to 24 years old, and Americans with relatively high education levels were more likely to support teaching evolution and less likely to favor teaching creationism.

Dr. Steve Abrams, a veterinarian and member of the Kansas school board who voted to change the state's standards, said the survey's overall results "would seem to be consistent" with opinion in Kansas.

But he objected to a question asking respondents' opinion of the Kansas board's action, saying it did not describe the action accurately.

The question said the board had voted "to delete evolution from their new state science standards" and asked respondents if they supported or opposed that action.

But, Dr. Abrams said, "what we did was to allow local boards of education to decide how they want to deal with evolution. We did not encourage the teaching of creationism at all."

A researcher at DYG said that while the question necessarily condensed a complex and divisive issue into a short sentence for the survey, the firm stood behind the wording as impartial and accurate.

The answers to that Kansas question seemed to indicate that most Americans disagreed with the board's decision. While praising the survey in general, Dr. David W. Moore of The Gallup Poll also maintained that the Kansas question was

POLL

On Human Origins

A recent study on the teaching of evolution and creationism in public schools shows that most Americans feel there should be room for both.

Those who support teaching evolution.

83%

Those who support teaching creationism in some fashion.

79%

Those who agree that a person can believe in evolution and still believe God created humans and guided their development.

68%

A representative national survey of 1,500 Americans was conducted for the study.

Source: People for the American Way Foundation

The New York Times

poorly worded.

More generally, though, Dr. Moore said the results of the survey showed how much public opinion had changed from the days of the Scopes trial, when "most people probably rejected evolution because they just couldn't believe that human beings descended from apes."

Now, he said, it seems unlikely most people would object to that proposition, "so long as scientists are not saying that God had no part in the evolutionary process."

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