



Opinion Research  
Strategic Communication

# Catholic Voters and Religious Exemption Policies

Report of a National Public Opinion Survey  
For Catholics for Choice, Call to Action,  
DignityUSA and Women's Alliance for  
Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER)

October 2014



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## Introduction and Methods

According to our 2014 national survey, the views of Catholic voters in the US on a number of issues differ significantly from those of the Catholic hierarchy. The survey reported here was conducted in September 2014 for Catholics for Choice, Call to Action, DignityUSA and Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER), and covers Catholic voters' views on policies that would allow exemptions from public laws based on religious objections, support for legal abortion, insurance coverage for birth control and the role of Catholic bishops in politics.

The survey is based on interviews with 1,054 Catholics who are registered voters. BRS designed the questionnaire for the survey in collaboration with Catholics for Choice. The GfK Group conducted the survey using a sample from KnowledgePanel®, a probability-based web panel designed to be representative of the United States. The margin of sampling error for a random sample of 1,000 is  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points.

The target population for this study was Catholics who are registered to vote at their home address. Catholic voters were pre-selected using updated KnowledgePanel profile data. The field dates were September 3 to 9, 2014. The data were weighted to reflect current Census Department estimates, and data analysis was prepared by BRS analysts.

Crosstab tables and a questionnaire with total percents are appended. Tables and graphs in the text highlight selected survey findings and are expressed in percentages. The base for each table is all respondents (n=1,054), unless otherwise noted. In reading the tables and graphs, when the percent sign (%) appears at the top of a column, the numbers add vertically; when % appears at the left of a row, the numbers add horizontally. An asterisk (\*) indicates less than 1%; a double hyphen (--) indicates zero. Due to weighting, rounding, omission of "don't know," "refuse," or other responses, percentages may add to more or less than 100%.

## Survey Highlights

**Catholic voters stand in opposition to efforts that would allow businesses, universities and other institutions to deny services or employment based on religious objections of the owners, officers or administrators.**

- Refusing to serve or care for someone based on religious objections is widely opposed by Catholic voters.
- Similarly, they object to legal exemptions that would permit tax-funded organizations from refusing to hire someone because of his or her sexual orientation, or dismissing an employee because she is pregnant and unmarried.
- These voters overwhelmingly agree that healthcare institutions that take government funding should not be allowed to refuse to provide certain procedures or medicines.

**Catholic voters favor health insurance coverage for birth control.**

- Catholic voters' position on health insurance for birth control runs counter to the recent Supreme Court decision granting for-profit employers the ability to opt out of providing contraception coverage, based on religious objections of the owners. These voters say all women should have *access to the same* coverage for birth control, no matter where or for whom they work.
- Catholic voters also widely disapprove of providing a religiously-affiliated educational institution exemptions that permit them to deny access to birth control to their employees and students.

**Support for legal abortion and insurance coverage for abortion remain high among Catholic voters.**

- Catholic voters' views on abortion reflect the opinions of Americans generally. Most believe abortion should remain legal, with half of Catholic voters saying it should be legal in almost all or most cases.

Not only do Catholic voters say abortion should remain legal, but they also largely agree that insurance policies should cover abortion.

- Most favor requiring private- and publicly-funded insurance policies to cover abortion when a pregnancy poses a serious health threat to the woman, as well as when it poses a life-threatening situation.
- A majority also believe these insurance programs should include abortion coverage in cases when there is a severe, abnormal condition in a fetus, and a large plurality support abortion coverage whenever “a woman and her doctor decide it is appropriate.”

**Catholic voters’ opinions about social and political issues diverge widely from those of Catholic bishops.**

- Catholic voters do not believe that they have an obligation to vote for candidates who are recommended by the bishops, nor that Catholic politicians are obliged to vote on issues as the bishops recommend.
- Seven in ten Catholic voters disagree with the bishops withholding communion from those who support legal abortion or from those who support same-sex marriage.
- Seven in ten Catholic voters also support stem cell research using human embryos.
- Half of Catholic voters believe we should make “it legal for doctors to assist a terminally ill patient in ending his or her own life.”

## Detailed Findings

### 1. Catholic voters' opposition to a broad array of religious exemptions to US law

Since the enactment of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, legislative efforts to permit exemptions from laws governing reproductive healthcare have intensified. Efforts to allow businesses and individuals to discriminate based on religious beliefs in other areas have also persisted at the state and federal levels, legislatively and in the courts.

The survey demonstrates that Catholic voters disapprove of a wide assortment of these proposed and enacted religious exemptions to US laws.

**Service and care:** Allowing service providers exemptions from serving or caring for someone, based on religious beliefs, is just one practice widely rejected by Catholic voters.

- The most unpopular are decisions based on sexual identity. Eighty-six percent of Catholic voters disapprove—including 70% strongly disapproving—of a guidance counselor refusing to help a gay student because of the counselor's religious faith. Objection to this refusal is strong across all demographic and political groups.
- Also, 74% of Catholic voters oppose (59% strongly opposing) “a law that would allow companies or other institutions to use the owner's religious beliefs as a reason to deny services to employees or customers.” While political orientation matters in this case, a majority opposes this practice across political and party lines.

**Employment:** Employment decisions based on religion also come in for strong criticism.

- Nine out of ten Catholic voters disapprove of a company firing an unmarried employee who is pregnant based on the owner's belief that sex outside marriage is a sin; 90% disapprove, including 76% strongly disapproving. Definitive opposition was seen across all demographic and political groups.

- Two-thirds (67%) disapprove of a religiously-affiliated school requiring “all its staff to sign a contract making some personal beliefs and practices grounds for dismissal.”
- There is very little support among Catholic voters for a tax-funded organization refusing to hire someone who is gay or lesbian; 87% disapprove, including 71% strongly disapproving. This type of proposal is rejected across all demographic and political groups.

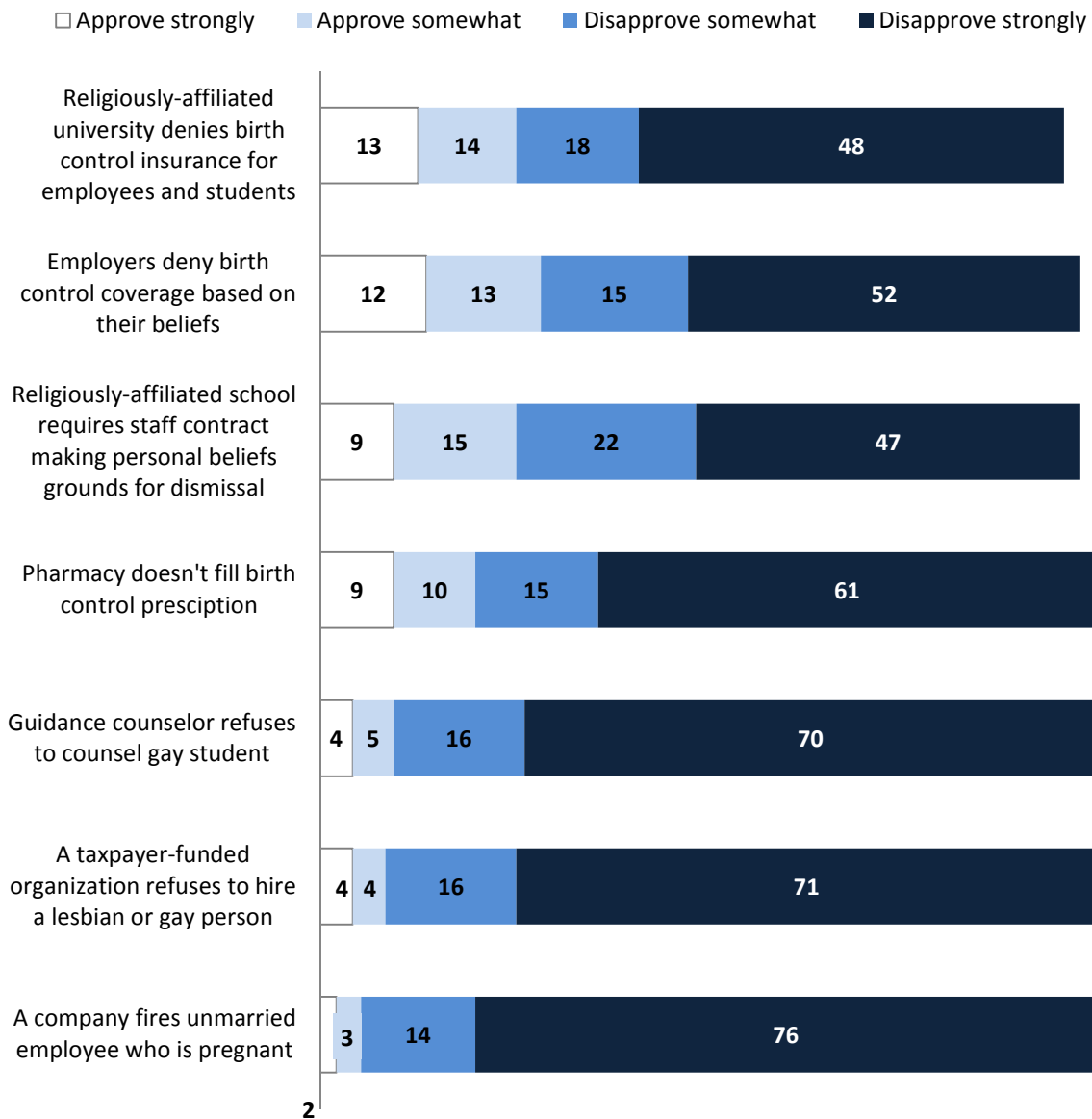
**Birth control:** Religious exemptions allowing for the denial of access to birth control are another practice widely disapproved by Catholic voters, whether involving a religiously-affiliated educational institution or a private business entity.

- Two out of three Catholics disapprove of a religiously-affiliated university denying “its employees and students insurance coverage for birth control on the grounds that birth control is a sin.”
- Seventy-six percent disapprove of a pharmacy that “does not fill a prescription for birth control because it goes against the owner’s religious beliefs.”
- Two-thirds (67%) of Catholic voters reject the right of employers to “deny birth control coverage to their employees and their dependents based on the employer’s beliefs.” Opposition to this issue is strongest among women, 75% of women under 55 disapprove.
- Seventy-seven percent of these voters oppose—including 55% strongly opposing—“hospitals and clinics that take taxpayer dollars refusing to provide certain procedures or medications.”



## Disapproval of Religious Exemptions by Employers, Educational Institutions and Others

Percent of Catholic voters approving/disapproving

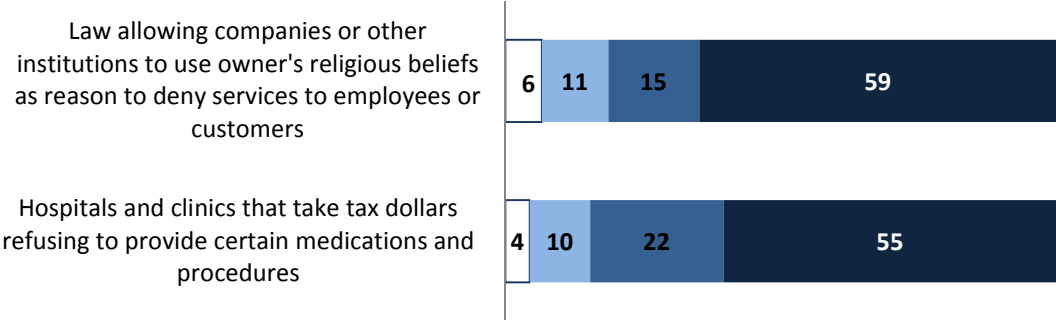


Please indicate if you approve or disapprove of the following: Q6. A religiously-affiliated university denies its employees and students insurance coverage for birth control on the grounds that birth control is a sin; Q10. Employers deny birth control coverage to their employees and their dependents based on the employer's belief; Q9. A religiously-affiliated school requires all its staff to sign a contract making some personal beliefs and practices grounds for dismissal; Q8. A pharmacy does not fill a prescription for birth control because it goes against the owners' religious beliefs; Q7. A high school guidance counselor refuses to counsel a gay student because the counselor's religion says homosexuality is morally wrong; Q11. A taxpayer-funded organization refuses to hire someone because the person is gay or lesbian; Q5. A company fires an unmarried employee who is pregnant because the owners believe sex outside of marriage is a sin.

**Disapproval of Religious Exemptions by Businesses and Health Care Providers**

Percent of Catholic voters supporting/opposing

□ Approve strongly ■ Approve somewhat ■ Disapprove somewhat ■ Disapprove strongly



Do you approve or disapprove of the following of these: Q22. A law that would allow companies or other institutions to use the owner's religious beliefs as a reason to deny services to employees or customers; Q18. Hospitals and clinics that take taxpayer dollars refusing to provide certain procedures or medications.

## 2. Support for health insurance coverage for birth control

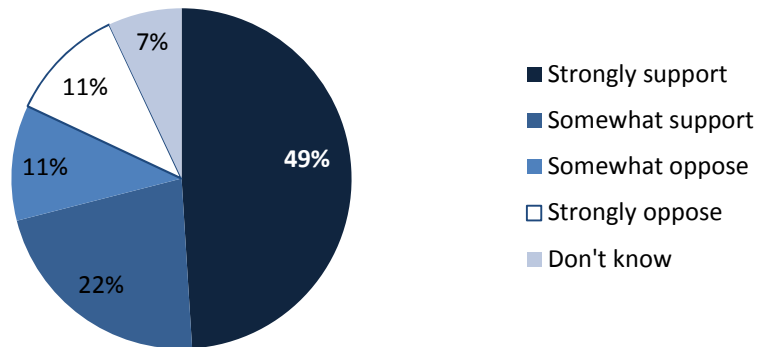
The guarantee of coverage for contraception under the ACA has been heralded by medical professionals, economic experts and advocates of full access to reproductive services for all Americans. Yet, in June 2014, the Supreme Court found in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* that for-profit employers with religious objections can opt out of providing contraception coverage for their works under the ACA.

As with the majority of Americans, Catholic voters' views go in the opposite direction from the Court's decision.

- Seven in ten (71%) say they support “ensuring all women have the same access to insurance coverage for birth control, regardless of where they work,” and half (49%) feel strongly about making sure the same access to insurance coverage for birth control is secure for all women wherever they work.
- A similar number support coverage for contraception regardless of where or by whom the insurance policy is provided. Asked simply whether health insurance policies, be they private or government, should cover contraception, 72% say yes. Women under 55 are especially supportive (83%).
- A majority of Catholic voters say insurance policies, whether private or government, should include “emergency contraception, also known as the morning after pill.” Women under 55 again show the strongest support at 60%.

### Ensuring that All Women Have Same Access to Birth Control Regardless of Where They Work

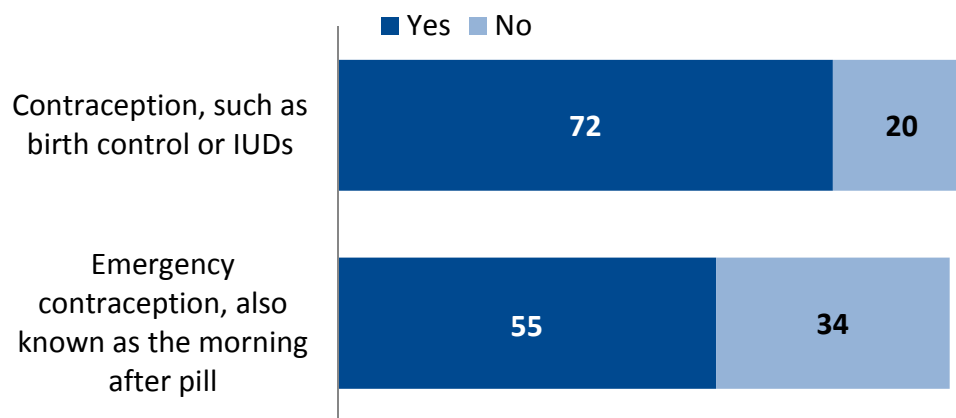
Percent of Catholic voters saying



Q21. Indicate whether you support or oppose ensuring that all women have the same access to insurance coverage for birth control regardless of where they work.

### Support for Health Insurance Coverage for Birth Control And Emergency Contraception

Percent of Catholic voters saying



Do you think health insurance policies—whether they are private or government—should cover the following? Q23. Contraception, such as birth control or IUDs. Q24. Emergency contraception, also known as the morning after pill.

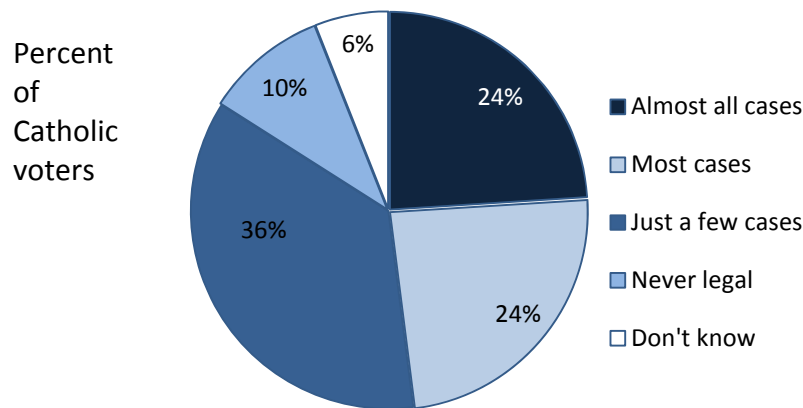
### 3. Support for legal abortion and access to services through insurance coverage

**Legal abortion:** US Catholic voters' views on abortion mirror those of the nation as a whole.

- More than eight in ten Catholic voters (84%) support legal abortion in some cases. About one half (48%) of Catholic voters say that abortion should be legal in almost all or most cases, and another 36% want it to be legal in just a few cases.
- Only 10% think abortion should never be legal.

These figures are very similar to those found among Americans at large.

**When Should Abortion Be Legal?**



Q30. Do you think abortion should be legal in almost all cases, legal in most cases, legal in just a few cases, or never legal?

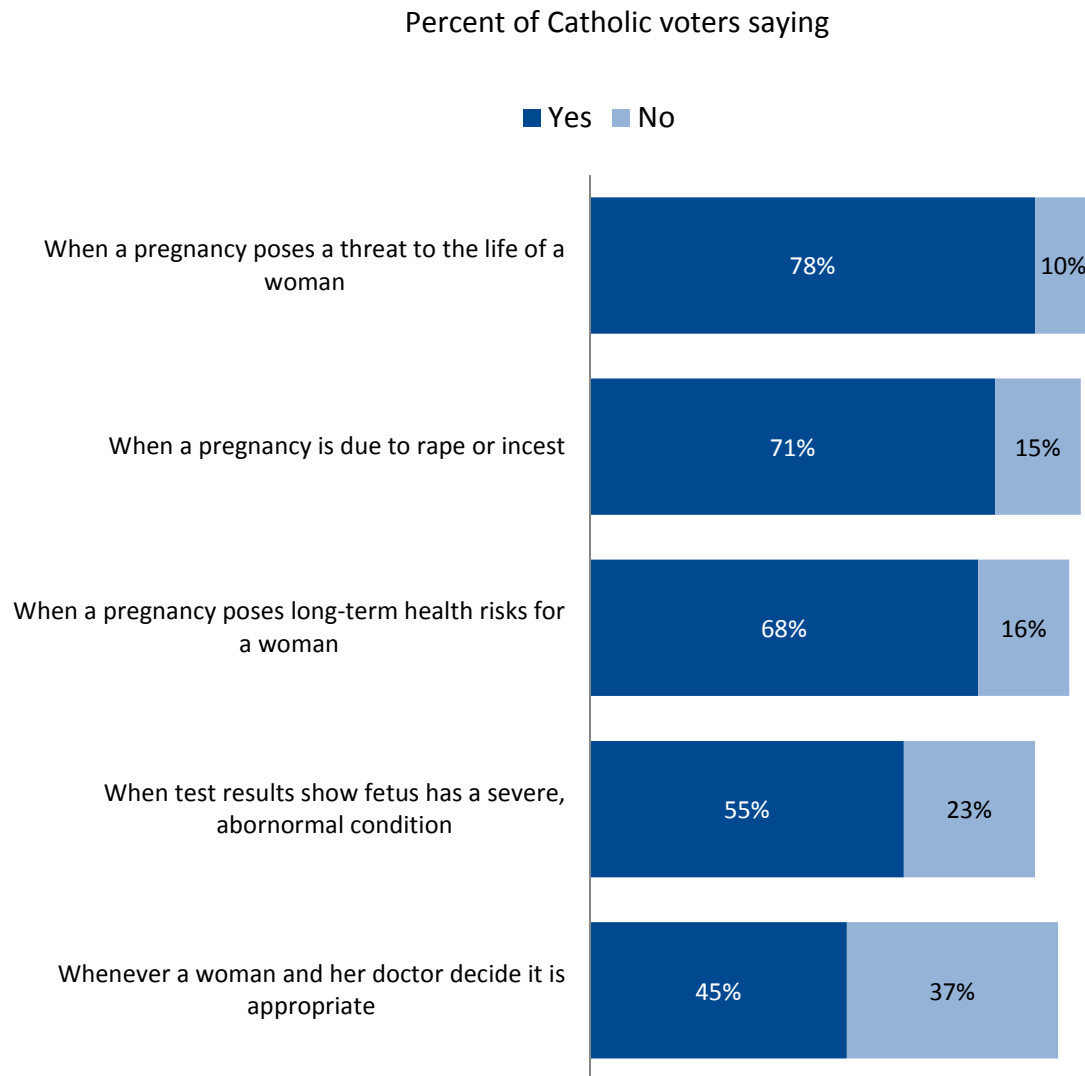
**Various circumstances:** We also asked respondents to the survey to consider the circumstances under which insurance policies, regardless of whether they are public or privately funded, should cover abortion. In keeping with their views regarding legality, the majority of Catholic voters say insurance should cover abortion when a pregnancy is:

- Life-threatening (78%),
- Due to rape or incest (71%),
- Posing a long-term health risk for the woman (68%), and
- Showing that a fetus has a severe, abnormal condition (55%).

About half of Catholic voters (45%) also believe private- and publicly-funded insurance programs should include abortion coverage “whenever a woman and her doctor decide it is appropriate.”

**Hospital refusal:** The practice of Catholic hospitals deciding not to perform abortions in keeping with the position of their local Catholic bishops is broadly opposed by Catholic voters. Sixty-eight percent disapprove when, at the direction of the local bishop, “a Catholic hospital declines to perform an abortion that is medically necessary to protect a woman’s health.” A majority (48%) strongly oppose this practice. A majority of Democrats (77%), Independents (66%) and Republicans (58%) disapprove.

### Insurance Policies Covering Abortion in Various Circumstances



Do you think that insurance policies—whether they are private or government—should cover abortions under each of the following circumstances? Q28. When a pregnancy poses a threat to the life of a woman; Q25. When a pregnancy is due to rape or incest; Q26. When a pregnancy poses long-term health risks for a woman; Q27. When test results show fetus has a severe, abnormal condition; Q29. Whenever a woman and her doctor decide it is appropriate.

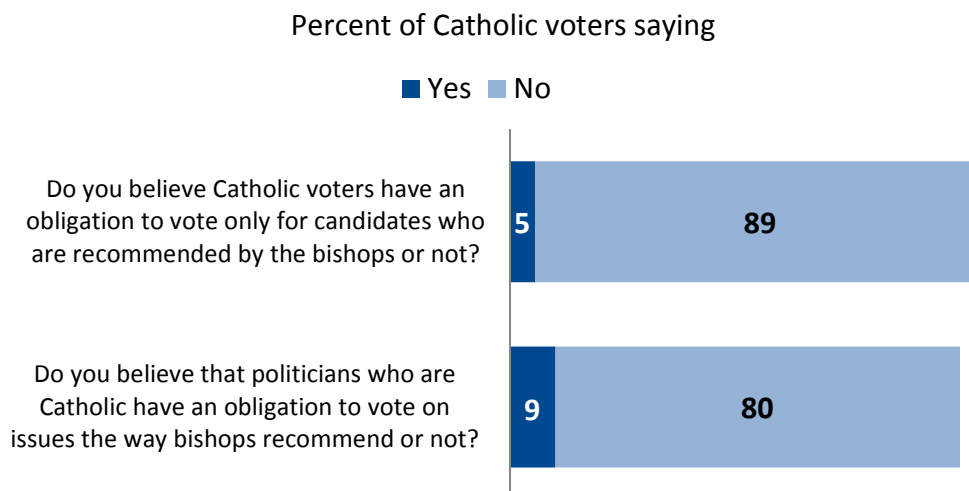
## 4. Catholic voters' disagreement with the Catholic bishops

When it comes to social and political issues, most Catholic voters believe they should follow their own conscience, and do not feel obligated to follow the views of the Catholic bishops when it comes to voting.

- Catholic voters resoundingly reject the idea that they have an obligation to vote for candidates recommended by the bishops; 89% say Catholic voters do not have such a duty.
- Similarly 80% reject the idea that Catholic politicians have an obligation to vote on issues as the bishops recommend.

Catholics across the demographic and political groups we examined hold this view.

### Disagreement with Obligation to Abide by Bishop Directive



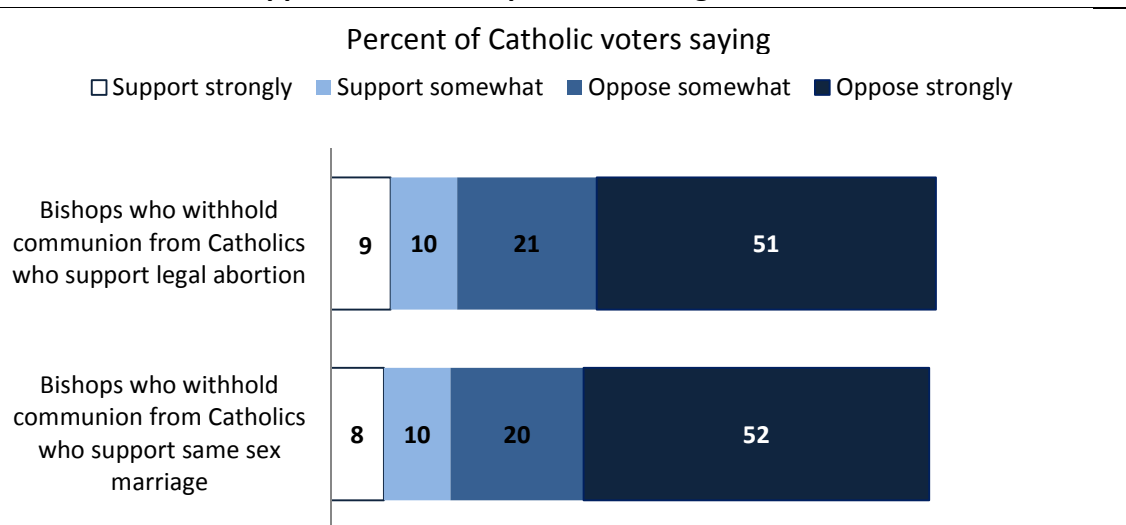
Q12. Do you believe Catholic voters have an obligation to vote only for candidates who are recommended by the Bishops or not? Q13. Do you believe that politicians who are Catholic have an obligation to vote on issues the way bishops recommend or not?

When it comes to withholding communion, Catholic voters are again strongly opposed. Though conservative and Republican Catholic voters disapprove less strongly than Democrats, Independents, liberals and moderates, a majority of voters in every demographic opposes the practice.



- Seventy-two percent of Catholics voters object to bishops withholding communion from those who support legal abortion. Democrats (83%) and liberals (85%) are the most opposed, while fewer Republicans (63%), Independents (68%) and conservatives (58%) are troubled by bishops withholding communion from supporters of abortion rights.
- Seven in ten Catholic voters object to the bishops withholding communion from those who support same-sex marriage (72%).
- Half of all Catholic voters strongly oppose withholding communion due to support for these issues.

### Opposition to Bishops Withholding Communion

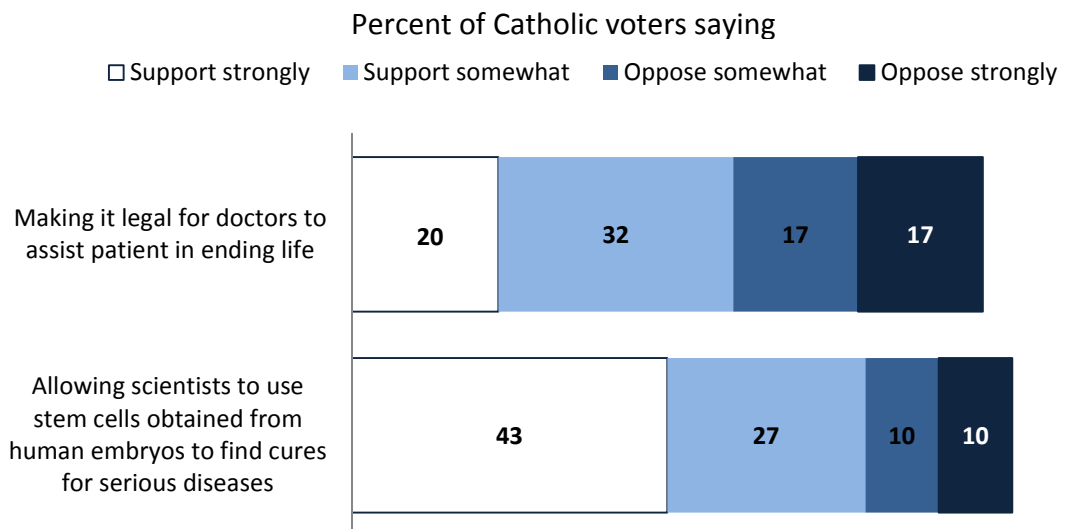


Do you approve or disapprove of the following of these: Q14. Bishops who withhold communion from Catholics who support legal abortion. Q15. Bishops who withhold communion from Catholics who support same-sex marriage.

Catholic voters differ with the bishops on issues regarding individual health decisions and support for research.

- Fifty-two percent support “making it legal for doctors to assist a terminally ill patient in ending his or her own life.” Twenty percent indicate strong support and 32% somewhat.
- Support for allowing doctors to assist the terminally ill patient is also considerably higher among Catholic voters who are older men. Sixty-four percent of men 55 and older are in favor, compared to just 48% of women in their age group and 50% of younger men and women.
- Seventy percent support stem cell research using human embryos in the quest for cures to diseases, including Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s. Forty-three percent support this research strongly and 27% somewhat. Similar patterns among the subgroups emerge on this question.

### Support for Assistance at End of Life and for Stem Cell Research

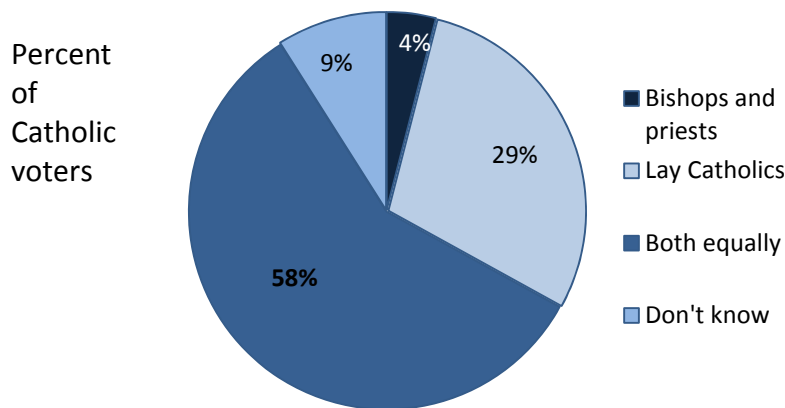


Do you approve or disapprove of the following of these: Q17. Making it legal for doctors to assist a terminally ill patient in ending his or her own life. Q20. Allowing scientists to use stem cells obtained from human embryos to find cures for serious diseases such as Alzheimer’s, Diabetes, and Parkinson’s.

Catholic voters were clear when asked about whom Pope Francis should listen to more for advice on modern family issues.

- A large majority of Catholic voters (58%) want Pope Francis to listen to lay Catholics as well as the bishops when it comes to advice about modern family issues. Women under 55 (64%) and Latinos (66%) are most likely to want both clergy and lay Catholics to be consulted. Three in 10 Catholics (29%) believe only lay Catholics' advice should be consulted.
- Only 4% say the Pope should seek only the advice of the bishops and priests in these matters.

**To Whom Should Pope Francis Listen on Modern Family Issues?**



Q3. Whom do you think Pope Francis should listen to more for advice on modern family issues: the bishops and priests or lay Catholics or both equally?

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