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For The People & The Press

COMMENTARY

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
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READING THE POLLS ON EVOLUTION AND CREATIONISM

This week in federal district court, a group of parents is challenging the Dover, Pa. school board's decision to require the teaching of "intelligent design" in science classes, on the grounds that this policy violates the principle of separation of church and state. The case is just the latest in a long series of court battles between advocates and opponents of the teaching of evolution in the schools. Opinion polls over the past two decades have found the public deeply divided in its beliefs about the origins and development of life on earth, while broadly supportive of schools teaching evolution as well as alternative theories on how life began.

There is a great deal of consistency across polls in what the public believes about the origins of life and how the issue should be taught in the schools. Polling has regularly found that the public favors the teaching of multiple perspectives on the issue in the schools. While solid majorities believe that evolution should be taught in science classes, roughly two-thirds of Americans favor adding creationism to the school curriculum.

Surveys are also fairly consistent in their estimates of how many Americans believe in evolution or creationism. Approximately 40%-50% of the public accepts a biblical creationist account of the origins of life, while comparable numbers accept the idea that humans evolved over time. The wording of survey questions generally makes little systematic difference in this division of opinion.

Opinions on the theory of "intelligent design," however, are far more complex, making it difficult to determine how many Americans subscribe to this view of life's origins. In part, this reflects the public's lack of familiarity with the concept of intelligent design, which holds that Darwin's theory of natural selection is inadequate in explaining the development of complex life forms. A Gallup survey in August found that only about half of Americans are familiar with the term. Moreover, because the concept involves sensitive matters of faith and science, questions that

attempt to indirectly measure support for intelligent design produce divergent results.

Consider for example the approaches taken by Pew and Gallup (see table below). The two organizations find similar numbers in favor of a creationist position – 42% for Pew, 45% for Gallup – although each describes the concept in decidedly different terms. But Pew finds far more people believing in natural selection (26% vs. 13% for Gallup) while Gallup finds more subscribing to the view that God or a supreme being guided the evolutionary process (38% vs. 18% for Pew).

These differences result from the way the options are presented. Gallup asks respondents to choose among three views, two of which suggest a belief in God (“God created human beings pretty much in the present form” and “God guided [the evolutionary] process”), and one that rejects God’s involvement altogether (“God had no part in this process”). It seems likely that for many respondents, agreeing with this last statement could imply a denial of belief in God. The resulting percentage choosing this option (13%) is about the size of the segment of the public that does not believe in God at all.

Pew’s approach, on the other hand, asks people initially if they believe life “evolved over time” or existed in its “present form since the beginning of time”; the question makes no mention of God. Those who said that life evolved were then asked if life “evolved due to natural processes such as natural selection” or whether “a supreme being guided the evolution of living things for the purpose of creating humans and other life in the form it exists today.” The Pew formulation provides a significantly more positive and inclusive description of the scientific position by characterizing natural selection as “a natural process” rather than something “God had no part in.” This implicitly allows people who believe that God or a supreme being set the evolutionary process in motion, or even shaped it in some way, to still opt for “natural selection” as the main engine of evolution.¹

¹For a complete discussion of the Pew poll, see “Religion a Strength and Weakness for Both Parties,” released Aug. 30, 2005: <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=254>. Note that prior to being asked about evolution, respondents in the Pew poll were given a chance to express their belief in God or a higher power and that God (or a higher power) created life on earth.

Conflicting Views on the Origins of Life

Some people think that humans and other living things have evolved over time. Others think that humans and other living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time.

Which of these comes closest to your view?

(If **'Evolved'**...) And do you think that humans and other living things have evolved due to natural processes such as natural selection, or do you think that a supreme being guided the evolution of living things for the purpose of creating humans and other life in the form it exists today?

Source: Pew Research Center July 7-17, 2005

| Evolved | | | |
|--|-------------------------|---|-----------|
| ----- over time ----- | | | |
| Through natural <u>processes</u> | With <u>guidance</u> | Existed in present <u>form only</u> | <u>DK</u> |
| 26 | 18 | 42 | 14 |

Which do you think is more likely to actually be the explanation for the origin of human life on earth: evolution...or...the biblical account of creation?

(If **'The biblical account of creation,'**...) And by this do you mean: that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh as described in the Book of Genesis or that God was a divine presence in the formation of the universe?

Source: NBC News March 8-10, 2005

| --- Biblical account --- | | | |
|--------------------------|--|--|-----------|
| <u>Evolution</u> | <u>God was a divine presence</u> | <u>God created world in six days</u> | <u>DK</u> |
| 33 | 13 | 44 | 10 |

Which one of the following statements comes closest to your views on the origin and development of human beings?...

(1st and 3rd options are rotated)

--Humans developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process.

--Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God had no part in this process.

--God created human beings pretty much in the present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so.

Source: Gallup November 7-10, 2004

February 19-21, 2001

August 24-26, 1999

November 6-9, 1997

June 18-21, 1993

July 23-26, 1982

| Evolution, God had no part in <u>process</u> | Evolution, God guided guided the <u>process</u> | God created in present <u>form</u> | <u>DK</u> |
|---|--|---|-----------|
| 13 | 38 | 45 | 4 |
| 12 | 37 | 45 | 5 |
| 9 | 40 | 47 | 4 |
| 10 | 39 | 44 | 7 |
| 11 | 35 | 47 | 7 |
| 9 | 38 | 44 | 9 |

Confusing Concepts

Most Americans say they are familiar with creationism and evolution, but there is some confusion about the terms’ meaning. In an August 2005 Gallup poll, 58% of the public said that creationism was definitely or probably true as an explanation for the origin and development of life, but 55% also said this about evolution. Since creationism and evolution are incompatible as explanations, some portion of the public is clearly confused about the meaning of the terms.

A 1999 Fox News poll of registered voters offered respondents the explicit option to say that both Darwin’s theory of evolution and the biblical account of creation were true: 26% said both were. Similarly, Pew’s July 2005 poll found that about nearly three-in-ten of those who oppose the teaching of creationism nonetheless personally accept creationist accounts of life’s origins, and 14% of those who accept natural selection favor teaching creationism *instead* of evolution.

The term “intelligent design” is still unknown to much of the public. In the August 2005 Gallup survey, 52% said they were either “not too familiar” or “not at all familiar” with the phrase. By comparison, only 17% and 24% were not familiar with “evolution” and “creationism,” respectively. Given the low level of public recognition of the term, “intelligent design” is rarely mentioned in polling on the origins of life.

| Evolution and Creationism Not Viewed as Incompatible | | | | | |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|-----------|
| <i>For each of the following, please say whether you believe it is definitely true, probably true, probably false or definitely false as an explanation for the origin and development of life on earth. How about...</i> | | | <u>True</u> | <u>False</u> | <u>DK</u> |
| | <i>Evolution?</i> | | 55 | 34 | 11 |
| | <i>Creationism?</i> | | 58 | 26 | 16 |
| | <i>Intelligent Design?</i> | | 31 | 32 | 37 |
| Source: Gallup August 5-7, 2005 | | | | | |
| <i>Which do you think is more likely to actually be the explanation for the origin of human life on Earth: the theory of evolution as outlined by Darwin and other scientists, the Biblical account of creation as told in the Bible, or are both true?</i> | | <u>Darwinian evolution</u> | <u>Both</u> | <u>Biblical creation</u> | <u>DK</u> |
| | | 15 | 26 | 50 | 9 |
| Source: Fox News August 25-26, 1999 (Based on registered voters) | | | | | |
| <i>(For each statement, just check the box that comes closest to your opinion of how true it is...Definitely true, probably true, probably not true, definitely not true)... Human beings developed from earlier species of animals</i> | | | <u>True</u> | <u>Not true</u> | <u>DK</u> |
| Source: General Social Survey 2004* | | | 45 | 54 | 2 |
| | | 2000 | 42 | 49 | 10 |
| | | 1994 | 40 | 48 | 8 |
| | | 1993 | 44 | 48 | 8 |
| * In 2004, respondents were shown a card with response options and gave verbal answers. | | | | | |

Scientists and Evolution

A narrow majority of the public (54% in a recent Pew poll) believes that scientists are generally in agreement about evolution. But fewer believe there is strong scientific evidence in support of evolution. A December 2004 Newsweek survey found just 45% saying evolution was both widely accepted in the scientific community *and* well supported by evidence, and the same number in a 2005 Harris Interactive survey agreed that “Darwin’s theory of evolution is proven by fossil discoveries” (48% disagree). A 2004 Gallup poll registered even fewer (35%) saying Darwin’s theory of evolution has been “well-supported by evidence.” This question also offered respondents the choice of saying they don’t know enough about the issue, an option that 30% selected.

| Many Doubt Scientific Evidence for Evolution | | | |
|--|-------------------------------|------------------|-----------|
| <i>From what you’ve heard or read, is there general agreement among scientists that humans evolved over time, or not?</i> | <u>Yes</u> | <u>No</u> | <u>DK</u> |
| | 54 | 33 | 13 |
| Source: Pew Research Center July 7-17, 2005 | | | |
| <i>Do you think the scientific theory of evolution is well-supported by evidence and widely accepted within the scientific community, or that it is not well-supported by evidence and many scientists have serious doubts about it?</i> | Supported and widely Accepted | Many have Doubts | DK |
| | 45 | 42 | 13 |
| Source: Newsweek December 2-3, 2004 | | | |
| <i>Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement. Darwin’s theory of evolution is proven by fossil discoveries...</i> | <u>Agree</u> | <u>Disagree</u> | <u>DK</u> |
| | 45 | 48 | 6 |
| Source: Harris Interactive June 17-21, 2005 | | | |
| <i>Just your opinion, do you think that Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution is – a scientific theory that has been well-supported by evidence, or just one of the many theories and one that has not been well-supported by evidence, or don’t you know enough about it to say?</i> | <u>Supported</u> | Not supported | <u>DK</u> |
| | 35 | 35 | 30 |
| Source: Gallup November 7-10, 2004 | | | |
| Source: Gallup February 19-21, 2001 | 35 | 39 | 26 |

Teach Evolution, Other Approaches

Despite the fact that fewer than half of Americans personally believe in evolution, a solid majority over the past 20 years has supported the teaching of alternative accounts of the origins of life, including evolution. Poll questions have typically asked if creationism should be taught along with evolution, and majorities ranging from 57% to 68% say that it should. Questions have been asked about removing evolution from the curriculum, but only a minority of the public favors this step. And questions that ask if creationism should be taught *instead* of evolution have found only 33%-40% in favor.

| Public Consistently Favors Adding Creationism to Curriculum | | | |
|---|--------------|---------------|-----------|
| Pew Research Center, July 2005 | | | |
| <i>Would you generally favor or oppose...</i> | | | |
| | <u>Favor</u> | <u>Oppose</u> | <u>DK</u> |
| ...Teaching creationism along with evolution in public schools? | 64 | 26 | 10 |
| ...Teaching creationism instead of evolution in public schools? | 38 | 49 | 13 |
| Gallup/CNN/USA Today, June 1999 | | | |
| <i>(I'm going to read a variety of proposals concerning religion and public schools. For each one, please tell me whether you would generally favor or oppose it.)...</i> | | | |
| ...Teaching creation along with evolution in public schools. | 68 | 29 | 3 |
| ...Teaching creation instead of evolution in public schools. | 40 | 55 | 5 |

Relatively few questions have asked if respondents believe that evolution *should* be taught, perhaps because it is the status quo today. A recent Gallup poll found 61% favoring the teaching of evolution in public school science classes, while 54% said creationism should be taught and 43% said that intelligent design should be taught.

A survey conducted by Fox News in 1999 found nearly identical majorities of people favoring the teaching of evolution and opposing its removal from the curriculum. In one version of the question, respondents were told that the Kansas State Board of Education adopted new standards that would *remove* evolution from the mandatory curriculum; a 57% majority of registered voters disagreed with the board's actions, while 33% agreed with the removal. The other version stated that "the National Academy of Sciences recommended that evolution be taught to all public school students as the most convincing theory for how human beings developed" and then asked if respondents agreed or disagreed that evolution should be taught in all public schools: 56% agreed with teaching evolution and 35% disagreed with it. Thus, despite the invocation of two very different kinds of authority on opposite sides of the issue, the public opinion result was the same.

None of the polls probes deeply into what respondents are thinking when they say a particular approach should be taught. Should standardized science tests now include sections on both

evolution and creationism? Does support for teaching evolution (or creationism) mean mandatory or optional instruction? On the latter question, a 1999 Gallup survey found that when offered the choice between having evolution as *required instruction* or having it *offered as an elective* but not required, just 28% said it should be required; 49% supported offering it as an option, and 21% opposed offering it at all. The same alternatives were offered for creationism and responses were very similar.

Public Supports Introducing Students to Evolution and Creationism

On a different subject, do you think each of the following explanations about the origin and development of life on earth should or should not be taught in public school science classes, or are you unsure? How about...

| | <u>Should</u> | <u>Not</u> | <u>Unsure</u> |
|---------------------------|---------------|------------|---------------|
| <i>Evolution</i> | 61 | 20 | 19 |
| <i>Creationism</i> | 54 | 22 | 23 |
| <i>Intelligent Design</i> | 43 | 21 | 36 |

Source: Gallup August 8-11, 2005

Last year the National Academy of Sciences recommended that evolution be taught to all public school students as the most convincing theory for how human beings developed. Do you agree or disagree that evolution should be taught in all public schools?

| | <u>Agree</u> | <u>Disagree</u> | <u>Unsure</u> |
|--|--------------|-----------------|---------------|
| | 56 | 35 | 8 |

Source: Fox News August 25-26, 1999 N=902(RV)

The Kansas State Board of Education recently approved new standards for teaching science in public schools that remove the teaching of evolution from the mandatory curriculum. Do you agree or disagree with the Board's attempt to take the teaching of evolution out of the schools?

| | <u>Agree</u> | <u>Disagree</u> | <u>Unsure</u> |
|--|--------------|-----------------|---------------|
| | 33 | 57 | 10 |

Source: Fox News August 25-26 1999 N=902(RV)

(I'm going to read some areas of instruction that high schools might offer. Please say whether you think each one should be required instruction, could be offered as an elective but should not be required, or should not be taught at all.) How about...

| | <u>Req- uired</u> | <u>Offered, but not required</u> | <u>Not offered</u> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|--|------------------------|
| <i>the theory of evolution?</i> | 28 | 49 | 21 |
| <i>the theory of creationism?</i> | 25 | 56 | 16 |

Source: Gallup August 24-26, 1999