

## POLL RELEASES

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### Substantial Numbers of Americans Continue to Doubt Evolution as Explanation for Origin of Humans

*Some Americans appear uncertain as to meaning of terms, however*

*by Deborah Jordan Brooks*

**GALLUP NEWS SERVICE**

PRINCETON, NJ -- Although most scientists subscribe to the theory of evolution as the best explanation for the origin of human beings, a recent Gallup poll shows that the American public is much more divided in its own beliefs. Americans choose "creationism" over "evolution" when asked which of these two terms best describes human origins, but slightly larger numbers of Americans choose one of two evolutionist explanations than choose a strict creationist explanation when given a choice between three specific views. At the same time, only about a third of the public say that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is well supported by evidence.

These different beliefs about the origins of the human race have long been important topics of public debate. The Kansas Board of Education's recent reversal of its previous decision to omit references to many evolutionary concepts in its public school standards has focused more attention on the topic in recent weeks. While much of the debate centers on issues surrounding the separation of church and state in public school classrooms, the discussions are often premised largely on individuals' personal beliefs about Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and the biblical theory of creationism.

#### *Americans More Likely to Identify Themselves as Creationists Than as Evolutionists*

Gallup has asked Americans several times over the last 20 years to choose between three statements that describe the origin and development of the human race. Generally speaking, the plurality of Americans have come down on the side of a creationist approach to human origins, while slightly fewer have agreed with a statement that reflects an evolutionary process guided by God, and only a small number have agreed with an evolutionary process in which God had no part.

Most recently, in Gallup's February 19-21 poll, 45% of respondents chose "God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so," the statement that most closely describes biblical creationism. A slightly larger percentage, almost half, chose one of the two evolution-oriented statements: 37% selected "Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process" and 12% chose "Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God had no part in this process."

The public has not notably changed its opinion on this question since Gallup started asking it in 1982.

*Which of the following statements comes closest to your views on the origin and development of human beings - [ROTATE 1-3/3-1: 1) Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process, 2) Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God had no part in this process, 3) God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so]?*

	<b>Humans developed, with God guiding</b> %	<b>Humans developed, but God had no part in process</b> %	<b>God created humans in present form</b> %	<b>OTHER (vol.)/ No opinion</b> %
2001 Feb 19-21	37	12	45	6
1999 Aug 24-26	40	9	47	4
1997 Nov 6-9	39	10	44	7
1993 Jun	35	11	47	7
1982	38	9	44	9

(vol.) Volunteered response

After asking Americans which of the three statements on the origin of humans they agreed with, Gallup asked, by name, which of the two theories they believe in more. Given this choice, more than half of Americans say they believe in or lean toward the "theory of creationism" while far fewer believe in or lean toward the "theory of evolution" (57% for creationism vs. 33% for evolution) and one out of 10 say they are unsure.

People who consider themselves to be political conservatives are much more likely than liberals to prefer the theory of creationism. Americans in the South and Midwest are more likely than people living in the East and West to believe in the creation theory. Perhaps most notably, those for whom religion is an important part of life (those who attend religious services every week) are far more likely to prefer the theory of creationism than are those who attend church less often (80% versus 47%, respectively).

The first question reviewed above explains the precepts of the creationist and evolutionary approaches without mentioning the labels, while the second gives respondents only the labels without explanation. The results indicate some differences in interpretation based on which question is used. More Americans agree with the word "creationism" than agree with "evolution," but a slightly larger number choose an evolutionary explanation rather than a creationist explanation when given specifics.

In order to better understand these issues, we examined the relationship between responses to these two questions, looking at how people who said they believed in or leaned toward one of the two theories answered the more specific question describing the three approaches to the origin and development of human beings.

Generally, there is a good deal of consistency between responses to the two questions. The majority (two out of three) of the people who said they believed more in "creationism" selected the statement "God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so." But interestingly, more than one-quarter of "creationists" selected a statement that can be seen as compatible with the scientific findings of evolutionary scholars: "Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process." Only 1% of "creationists" selected the evolutionary statement saying that "God had no part in the process." Thus, while almost no "creationists" believe that humans developed without God's help, a not insignificant minority believes that human beings developed from lower forms of life, as evolutionary scientists suggest, but that God helped the process along.

People who choose "evolution" as their preferred theory are most comfortable with the idea that God guided an evolutionary process of human development. A majority -- 51% --

selected the statement "Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process," while 34% selected that statement with the condition that "God had no part in this process." Finally, just 10% chose the statement that God created human beings within just the last 10,000 years.

What do these findings tell us? First, only a very small minority of "evolutionists" choose a creationist explanation when confronted with the specifics of the theories. Thus, the vast majority of "evolutionists" are consistent and choose an evolutionary explanation, with or without God's involvement.

On the other hand, over one-quarter of Americans who say they believe in the creationist perspective choose an evolutionary statement -- albeit the one that has God's involvement. Thus, it appears that a substantial proportion of "creationists" cannot be distinguished from the majority of "evolutionists" in the way they think about the origins and development of humankind. While 57% of Americans claim to lean toward the label of "creationist," in actuality, only 41% of Americans are "creationists" who do not support an evolutionary way of thinking about human development. The difference suggests that there is either a very broad interpretation of the term "creationism" -- one that does not support the biblical account of the creation of the human race -- or that there is misunderstanding about what the label "creationism" means, among at least some of the creation-leaning public.

	Total %	"Evolutionists" %	"Creationists" %
Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process	37	51	28
Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God had no part in this process	12	34	1
God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so	45	10	67
OTHER (vol.)	1	1	2
Don't know	4	3	2
Refused	1	1	0

### *Public Doubtful About Whether Evidence Supports Darwin's Theory*

Another question included in the recent poll asked directly about the evidence supporting Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Given a choice between three alternatives, only about one-third of Americans think that Charles Darwin's theory is "well supported by evidence," while slightly more (39%) believe that it is not well supported, and that it is "just one of many theories" on this subject. A substantial percentage of Americans -- one in four -- felt they didn't know enough to say.

Individuals with more education and people with higher incomes are more likely to think that evidence supports the theory of evolution. Younger people are also more likely than older people to think that evidence supports Darwin's theory, perhaps reflecting the widespread teaching of evolution in the classroom in recent decades.

Again, however, not all Americans are consistent in their beliefs. Seventeen percent of those who say evolution is the best theory to explain human origins feel that evidence does not support the theory well in response to this specific question about Darwin's theory, while 16% indicate they don't know enough to say. Among people who prefer creationism, one out of five says the evidence supports Darwin's theory, while 24% report they don't know enough to say.

Only 34% of Americans consider themselves to be "very informed" about the theory of evolution, while a slightly greater percentage -- 40% -- consider themselves to be "very informed" about the theory of creation. Younger people, people with more education, and

people with higher incomes are more likely to say they are very informed about both theories.

### Survey Methods

The results reported here are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 1,016 adults, 18 years and older, conducted February 19-21, 2001. For results based on this sample, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the maximum error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 3 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

*How informed would you say you are about the theory of evolution? Do you feel that you are very informed about the theory of evolution, somewhat informed, not too informed, or not informed at all?*

	<b>Very informed</b>	<b>Somewhat informed</b>	<b>Not too informed</b>	<b>Not informed at all</b>	<b>No opinion</b>
2001 Feb 19-21	34%	47	11	6	2

*How informed would you say you are about the theory of creationism? Do you feel that you are very informed about the theory of creationism, somewhat informed, not too informed, or not informed at all?*

	<b>Very informed</b>	<b>Somewhat informed</b>	<b>Not too informed</b>	<b>Not informed at all</b>	<b>No opinion</b>
2001 Feb 19-21	40%	40	10	7	3

*Would you say that you believe more in -- [ROTATED: the theory of evolution (or) the theory of creationism] to explain the theory of the origin of human beings, or are you unsure? Do you lean more towards -- [ROTATED: the theory of evolution (or) the theory of creationism]?*

### Q.21/Q.22 COMBINED RESPONSES

	<b>Theory of evolution</b>	<b>Lean toward evolution</b>	<b>Lean toward creationism</b>	<b>Theory of creationism</b>	<b>No opinion</b>
2001 Feb 19-21	28%	5	9	48	10

*Just your opinion, do you think that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is -- [ROTATED: a scientific theory that has been well supported by evidence, (or) just one of many theories and one that has not been well supported by evidence], or don't you know enough about it to say?*

	<b>Supported by evidence</b>	<b>Not supported by evidence</b>	<b>Don't know enough to say</b>	<b>No opinion</b>
2001 Feb 19-21	35%	39	25	1