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World Publics Reject Criminal Penalties for Abortion

Public at Odds With Their Country's Laws in Half of Countries Polled

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College Park, MD—WorldPublicOpinion.org finds that in 17 out of 18 nations polled around the world, majorities reject using criminal penalties, such as fines and imprisonment, as a means to prevent abortion.

Nations differ on whether the government should make any effort to discourage abortion. In nine nations majorities believe their government should simply leave these matters to individuals.

Seven nations favor government efforts to discourage abortions, but in only one—Indonesia—does a majority endorse their government using criminal penalties. The other six that favor government efforts are divided between minorities who favor criminal penalties and who favor only non-punitive government efforts to discourage abortion, such as education, counseling and adoption services.

In seven nations the public is at odds with their country's laws. Contrary to their public's preferences, there are criminal penalties for abortion in Egypt, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, the Palestinian Territories, Poland and South Korea.

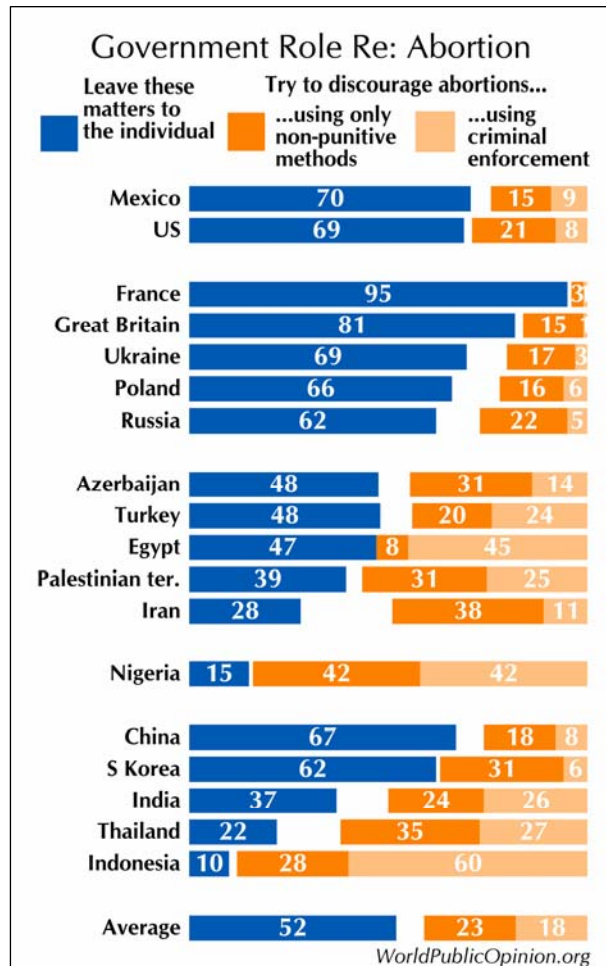
On average across all 18 countries, 52 percent favor leaving the matter of abortion to the individual, while 42 percent think their government should try to discourage abortions. Those who back government efforts include 18 percent who support criminal enforcement, while 23 percent favor education, counseling, and adoption services but not criminal enforcement.

“While it does appear that many people around the world are uncomfortable with abortion, few think that the government should use punitive means to try to prevent it,” said Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org. “Clearly many governments around the world using criminal penalties to try to prevent abortions are out of step with their publics.”

WorldPublicOpinion.org is a collaborative research project of research centers from around the world, managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland.

Interviews with 18,465 respondents were conducted in 18 countries representing 59 percent of the world’s population. This includes most of the largest countries in the world—China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia—as well as Mexico, Britain, France, Poland, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, the Palestinian Territories, Thailand and South Korea. The survey was fielded between Jan. 10 and May 6. Margins of error range from +/-2 to 4 percent. More details can be found at www.WorldPublicOpinion.org.

The survey asked respondents whether they thought “the government should be involved in trying to discourage abortions” or whether it “should leave these matters to the individual.” Those who said the government should be involved in discouraging abortions were then asked if it should “use methods of criminal enforcement, such as fines and imprisonment for people who give or receive abortions” or whether it should “use such methods as education, counseling, and adoption services, but not criminal enforcement.”



In nine of the 18 nations, a majority says the government should leave these matters to the individual. This includes countries where abortion is legal: France (95%), Great Britain (81%), the United States (69%), Ukraine (70%), Russia (62%), and China (67%).

But it also includes three countries with highly restrictive laws: two predominantly Catholic countries—Poland (66%) and Mexico (70%, though laws in Mexico have been liberalizing)—as well as South Korea (62%). In all nine of these countries, fewer than ten percent favor criminal enforcement.

Majorities in seven countries favor government efforts to discourage abortions, though only one supports criminal enforcement. The largest majority is in Indonesia, where nine out of ten (89%) back government efforts, including 60 percent who favor criminal enforcement.

In the other six nations majorities favor government efforts to discourage abortion, but not criminal penalties: Nigerians (84% government efforts/42% criminal penalties),

Thais (66%/ 27%), Palestinians (57%/ 25%), Iranians (55%/ 11%), Egyptians (53%/ 45%), and Indians (53%/ 26%).

Views are divided between those who favor and oppose government intervention in Azerbaijan and Turkey. Small minorities favor criminal enforcement.

For the sample as a whole there is substantial variation by religion. Christians express the most liberal views: 65 percent favor leaving the decision to individuals while just 8 percent support criminal penalties. Muslims show the highest support for government efforts to discourage abortion (59%), including 31 percent favoring criminal enforcement.

The intensity of religiosity is also related to attitudes. Support for government involvement increases from 25 percent among those who are not at all religious to 65 percent among those who are very religious. Even among those who are very religious, however, just 32 percent favor criminal penalties. Only in Indonesia does this subgroup have a majority favoring criminal enforcement, though nearly half of very religious Palestinians (48%) do.

Interestingly, though abortion is often framed as a women's rights issue, there are no significant differences between men and women.

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