

June 22, 2006

Americans Divided on Whether Federal Government Should Promote Moral Values

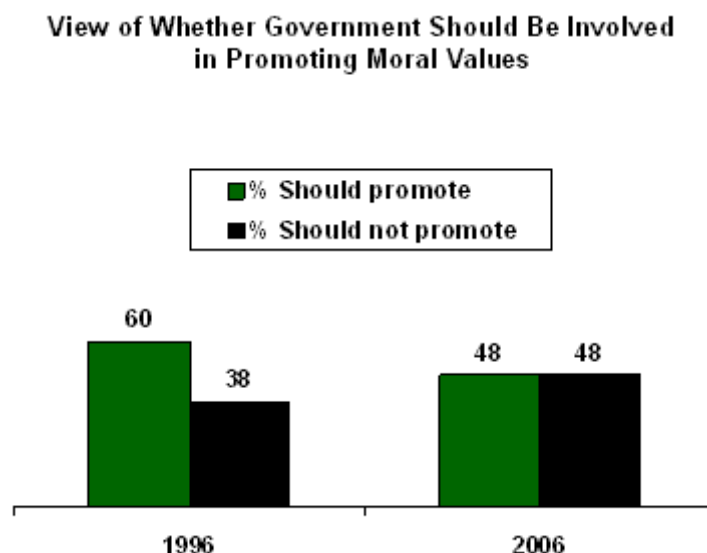
Americans less accepting of government involvement now than in 1996

by Jeffrey M. Jones

PRINCETON, NJ -- Gallup's polling has consistently shown that Americans rate the state of moral values in the United States quite poorly. Only 14% say it is excellent or good and 81% say it is getting worse, according to a May 2006 Gallup Poll. In that same poll, Gallup asked Americans whether they think government policies affect the moral values of people in this country, and whether the federal government should be involved in promoting moral values. Most Americans believe that government policies do influence Americans' moral values, consistent with what Gallup found on this measure a decade ago. However, Americans are divided as to whether the government should attempt to promote moral values, and are less accepting of government involvement in this area than they were in 1996.

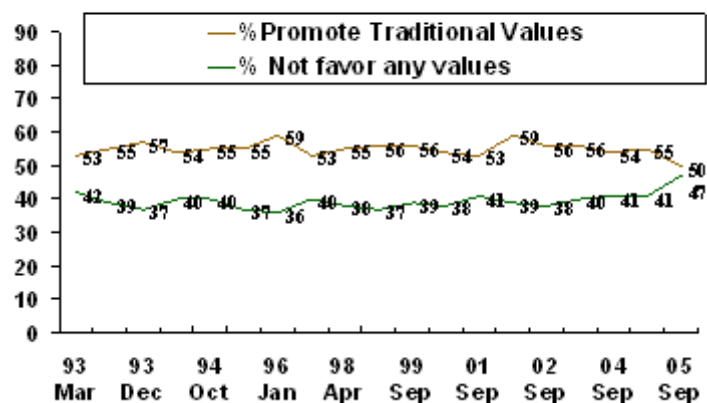
The May 8-11, 2006, Gallup Poll on Values and Beliefs finds most Americans (59%) agreeing that government policies have a "significant effect on the moral values of people in this country;" only 38% dispute this. Gallup asked the same question in 1996, and found similar results (58% versus 39%).

The public is divided, however, on whether the federal government should be involved in promoting moral values, with 48% saying it should and 48% saying it should not. In 1996, Americans took a very different view on this matter, with 60% saying the government should be involved and 38% saying it should not.



That change appears to be a fairly recent phenomenon. Gallup regularly asks a similar question -- whether the government should promote traditional values or not favor any set of values. Last September, 50% of Americans said the government should promote traditional values and 47% said it should not favor any values. That was the closest the gap has been in the 13-year trend on this question. Prior to that, there had been roughly a 10 percentage point margin in favor of promoting traditional values.

Should Government Promote Traditional Values?

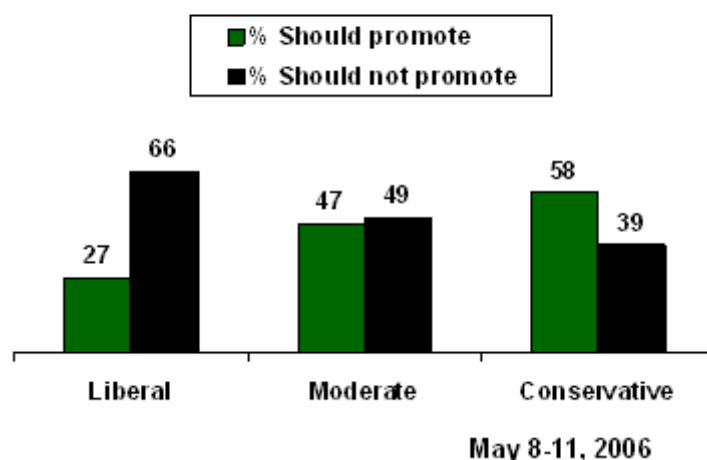


The question of whether government policies actually do affect moral values is not highly controversial. For the most part, views on this do not vary significantly by demographic or political subgroup. There are noticeable differences, however, when looking at Americans' religious preferences and commitment.

By a 60% to 37% margin, Christians believe that government policies do affect moral values. Among non-Christians (which includes those with no religious preference), just 48% say government policies affect values while 50% disagree. Also, 67% of Americans who say they attend religious services weekly believe government policies affect values, compared with 60% of those who attend religious services at least monthly, and 51% of those who seldom or never attend.

There are far greater divisions among subgroups on the question of whether government should attempt to regulate moral values. For example, 58% of conservatives say it should, compared with 47% of moderates, and only 27% of liberals. Sixty-six percent of liberals believe this is something the government should not be doing.

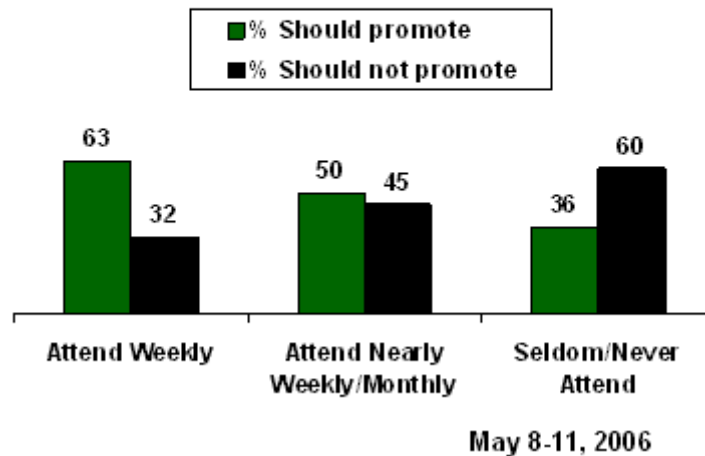
View of Whether Government Should Be Involved in Promoting Moral Values, by Ideology



Partisans also diverge on this issue, but not to the degree seen among the ideological groups. Sixty-three percent of Republicans, 40% of independents, and 43% of Democrats think the government should attempt to promote morality.

Opinions also differ by church attendance -- 63% of weekly attendees believe the government should try to legislate morality, compared with 50% of semi-regular attendees, and 36% of non-attendees.

View of Whether Government Should Be Involved in Promoting Moral Values, by Church Attendance



Survey Methods

These results are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 1,002 adults, aged 18 years and older, conducted May 8-11, 2006. For results based on this sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum error attributable to sampling and other random effects is ± 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.

42. *In your view, do government policies have a significant effect on the moral values of people in this country, or not?*

	Yes, have	No, have not	No opinion
	%	%	%
2006 May 8-11	59	38	3
1996 May 9-12	58	39	3

43. *Do you think the federal government should or should not be involved in promoting moral values in our society?*

	Should	Should not	Depends (vol.)	No opinion
	%	%	%	%
2006 May 8-11	48	48	3	2
1996 May 9-12	60	38	1	1