



# LIFECANADA

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# VIECANADA

*Respect for Human Life*

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## Canadian Opinion on Abortion

Canadians have been asked fairly frequently over the past 20 years where they stand on abortion. The responses have varied considerably if one reads the headlines or the interpretation of whichever side of this very contentious debate is making a presentation. And, it is indeed a very contentious issue. Many have said that the issue has been decided in Canada, that we have reached an acceptable compromise and that Canadians are satisfied with the status quo. However, the fact that the polls vary so wildly in their results highlights the fact that Canadians are conflicted on this issue.

The disparity is not really a case of lying with statistics, as many would suggest. It is rather that people react emotionally to the question asked. Because Canadians have never had a full and open public debate on abortion, there is much ignorance about the issue. Most people have no idea how many abortions are performed each year (over 110,000), that almost all are paid for through the publicly funded health care system, that there is usually not a medical reason for the abortion and that there are no legal restrictions whatsoever on the procedure. A new book by two Canadians, *Women's Health After Abortion*, which documents the physical and mental health problems caused or linked to abortion, received almost no media coverage. Most Canadians are unaware that abortion leads to significant health care problems in some women.

Canadians have heard, however, about hundreds of women dying from back-alley abortions when abortion was illegal. In fact, according to the Badgley report written for the federal government in 1978, there were about 12 women a year who died from such procedures between 1958 and 1969 when abortion was legalized in Canada. They worry that women who get pregnant as a result of rape or incest will be forced to carry the child to term. These cases probably account for a fraction of a percent of the 110,000 annual abortions, but Canadians do not hear that.

As a result, when Canadians are asked a broad, closed (yes or no) question, they tend to give the widest possible latitude to women to make their own decisions. The most recent, and widely publicized example, is the *Compas/National Post* poll in late November, which asked 608 Canadians if they thought women should have "complete freedom to decide to have an abortion". Over three-quarters, 78% said yes while 17% said no. They were not given any alternative but "yes" or "no" although if they said "in between" or "Don't know" it was recorded. "Complete freedom to decide to have an abortion" is open to interpretation. Does it mean abortion should always be legal? Does it mean men should have no say in the decision? Does it mean the government cannot impose a decision on individuals? Canadians, in this instance, do not want to force anyone to have a child or, for that matter, to have an abortion.

A quite different picture of Canadian opinion emerges when the question is more detailed and open-ended. Gallup has been polling Canadians almost annually on abortion since 1975. It asks very specific questions that have a direct bearing on public policy. Gallup asks, "Do you think abortions should be legal under any circumstance, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances?" In 2001, the most recent time Gallup posed that question, only 32%, less than one-third of the 1003 polled, agreed that abortion should be legal under any circumstance. Over half, 52% thought it should be legal only in certain circumstances and an additional 14% said it should never be legal. Two-thirds, that is, thought there should be some legal restriction on abortion in Canada. Gallup polled on its own behalf, not for a client.

In 2002, Gallup posed a different question. It asked 1,003 Canadians to "Please tell me if you personally think abortion is morally acceptable or morally wrong." Fifty-seven percent said it was morally acceptable and 40% said it was morally wrong. Despite the fact that abortion has been legal in Canada since 1969 and available on demand since 1988, 40% of us think it is wrong.

These results are similar to a Leger poll in October 2002. Leger added two questions to its Omnibus poll at the request of LifeCanada. Leger asked 1,500 Canadians, "At what point during human development should the law protect human life? Should it be a) from conception on, b) After three months of pregnancy, c) After 6 months of pregnancy, d) Or from the point of birth." Thirty-seven percent said human life should be protected from conception on, 13% said after 3 months and 6% said after six months. Only 30% supported the current policy of no legal protection until birth. Both of these polls give clear direction on a specific policy question.

The other question Leger asked on behalf of LifeCanada was about publicly funded abortion, a subject on which there have been very few polls. This question was asked of 3,010 Canadians to ensure that regional results were statistically significant. Respondents were asked, "When it comes to the use of public funds for abortions, which of the following options best corresponds to your opinion? a) Paying for an abortion should be a private responsibility, including Blue Cross or other private health plans, b) An abortion should be financed through tax dollars but only for medical emergencies such as a threat to the mother's life or in the case of rape or incest, c) An abortion should always be paid for by the health-funded (sic) tax system." Fifteen percent said it should always be a private responsibility, 51% said only in medical emergencies or for rape and incest and 23% said it should always be funded publicly. That means that two-thirds of Canadians polled thought that most abortions should be privately funded, whereas at present in Canada, almost all are publicly funded.

This brief survey illustrates the need for an open debate on the issue of abortion. Typically, such debates result in a great deal of public education and lead to research on the particular issue being debated. In Canada, we have spotty and incomplete reporting of even such basic information as how many abortions are performed in Canada annually. We have no information on the specific reason (personal or medical) for the procedure, and very little dissemination of the existing scientific studies on the effects of abortion on women and families.

This question encompasses serious moral, ethical and human rights issues that deserve open and free debate.