

No Consensus, and Much Confusion, on Evolution and the Origin of Species

About half of public believes plants, animals and humans evolved while almost half believes humans were created directly by God.

ROCHESTER, N.Y. – February 18, 2009 – Two hundred years after the birth of Charles Darwin, Americans are still deeply divided on the subject of evolution and whether humans evolved or were created directly by God, as in the story of Genesis. But it isn't a neat division of opinion. Some people give inconsistent answers to different questions about evolution and what should be taught in schools.

In reply to one question almost half (45%) of adults say they believe humans were created directly by God and only 29% say they evolved from other species. In reply to another question 53% of these same people say they believe that "plants, animals and human beings have evolved over time," and only 21% say they do not believe this, with fully 25% who are not sure or decline to answer. Furthermore a plurality favors schools teaching both Darwin's theory and creationism.

When people give apparently inconsistent answers like these it is usually a sign that they have not thought much about the issue and do not have very firm opinions.

These are some of the results of a new **BBC World News America/The Harris Poll®** of 2,158 adults surveyed online between February 3 and 5, 2009.

Other interesting results of this BBC World News America/The Harris Poll include:

- People in the South and people who describe themselves as religious (67% of all adults) are less likely to believe that humans evolved from earlier species than are people in other regions or people who are not religious.
- There is no consensus on what should be taught in schools. The largest group (40%) favors teaching *both* Darwin's theory of evolution and creationism. Only 23% believe teaching only Darwin's theory and an even fewer 17% favor only teaching creationism.
- Almost half of the public (45%) are concerned that scientists need to be careful so that they do not influence evolution in ways that would be harmful.

This BBC World News America/The Harris Poll also asked people which of the two men who were born on the same day, February 12, 1809, Charles Darwin or Abraham Lincoln, had the more important impact on earth and the human race. By 3-to-1, most Americans pick Lincoln – 60% to 19% (Lincoln also was rated as America's best president in a Harris Poll in February 2008).

So What?

Our reading of these poll results is that the 23% of the public who believe that **only** Darwin's theory of evolution should be taught in school are solid believers in his theory,

and that the 17% who think that only creationism should be taught are solid believers of that theory. That leaves more than half the public who have some opinions on this topic that are not clearly thought out or firmly held.

Given these numbers and the passion of the advocates on both sides of this debate, *the argument is unlikely to end any time soon*. And to judge by this poll, this is true even though the Supreme Court ruled that creationism should not be taught as science and a court, in the famous Dover School Board case, ruled that intelligent design should not be taught in science classes.

TABLE 1

BELIEVE DARWIN’S THEORY OF EVOLUTION

“Do you believe Charles Darwin’s theory which states that plants, animals and human beings have evolved over time?”

Base: All U.S. adults

	Total	Region				Religiousness	
		East	Midwest	South	West	Religious	Not Religious
	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Believe	53	56	55	48	58	42	75
Do not believe	21	16	24	24	19	30	3
Not at all sure	20	25	17	21	18	22	16
Decline to answer	5	4	4	8	5	5	5

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

TABLE 2

HOW HUMANS CAME TO BE

“Which of the following do you believe about how humans came to be?”

Base: All U.S. adults

	Total	Religiousness	
		Religious	Not Religious
	%	%	%
Human beings were created directly by God	45	62	12
Human beings evolved from earlier species	29	15	57
Human beings are so complex that they required a powerful force or intelligent being to help create them	11	11	10
Not at all sure	11	8	17
Decline to answer	4	4	5

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

TABLE 3

EVOLUTION OR CREATIONISM IN SCHOOLS

“Regardless of what you personally believe, which (one) of these do you think should be taught in schools?”

Base: All U.S. adults

	Total	Religiousness		Political Party		
		Religious	Not Religious	Rep.	Dem.	Ind.
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Darwin’s theory of evolution, which says that human beings evolved from earlier stages of animals	23	10	47	10	30	30
Creationism, which says that human beings were created directly by God	17	24	3	28	14	10
Both Darwin’s theory of evolution and creationism	40	45	31	48	36	44
Neither Darwin’s theory of evolution nor creationism	11	10	11	9	11	11
Decline to answer	10	10	9	5	9	5

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

TABLE 4

SCIENCE AND EVOLUTION

“Which of the following is closer to your opinion?”

Base: All U.S. adults

	Total	Religiousness	
		Religious	Not Religious
	%	%	%
Scientists need to be careful in what they do so they do not influence evolution in ways that would be harmful in the longer term for humans	45	47	42
Scientists should be working to do whatever they can to make life better for humans even if it means they might be changing or influencing evolution (e.g., genetic engineering, developing new species of plants)	25	22	30
Not at all sure	23	23	23
Decline to answer	7	9	5

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

TABLE 5

DARWIN VERSUS LINCOLN

“Both Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln were born on the same day, February 12th, in 1809 – two hundred years ago. Which of these two men do you believe had the more important impact on earth and the human race?”

Base: All U.S. adults

	Total	Religiousness		Political Party		
		Religious	Not Religious	Rep.	Dem.	Ind.
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Abraham Lincoln	60	66	48	72	59	57
Charles Darwin	19	15	28	15	23	21
Not at all sure	21	19	24	13	19	21

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Note: * indicates less than 0.5%;

TABLE 6

RELIGIOUSNESS

“Would you describe yourself as...?”

Base: All U.S. adults

	Total	Region			
		East	Midwest	South	West
	%	%	%	%	%
RELIGIOUS (NET)	67	62	71	74	57
Very religious	22	18	24	26	17
Somewhat religious	45	44	46	48	40
NOT RELIGIOUS (NET)	33	38	29	26	43
Not very religious	17	23	16	13	20
Not at all religious	16	15	13	14	23

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Methodology

This **BBC World News America/The Harris Poll®** was conducted online within the United States February 3 and 5, 2009, among 2,158 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents’ propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words “margin of error” as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

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