

# Poorly Informed Public Fears Science, Cloning

By ACSH Staff — May 2, 2002

What's the connection between cloning, astrology, alternative medicine, and the Earth orbiting the sun?

These are all things about which the public knows very little but about which it nonetheless has formed opinions. The latest public survey by the National Science Foundation shows that between one third and one half of Americans don't know how long it takes the Earth to go once around the sun, believe in various scientifically groundless alternative medicine methods, read horoscopes (which have been demonstrated to have no more predictive power than random chance), think humans and dinosaurs co-existed, and think lasers work by focusing sound waves.

All that would be cause for amusement if not for the fact that these same citizens are the ones who get polled and who vote to decide what public policies the government will adopt. Opponents of cloning must be cheered by data from the survey that shows half the public opposed to cloning not only of humans but of *barnyard animals* even when told to assume it would lead to the creation of drugs to treat humans. About half reject the theory of evolution. About half reject using dogs or chimps in medical research.

I suspect the real reason that the numbers so often show a fifty-fifty split is that most people have no firm opinion at all on these matters. When a tough philosophical question comes up, to quote Kent Brockman's election commentary from *The Simpsons*, "America flips a coin." What a boon to public discourse it would be, though, if pollsters always offered people an "I don't know" or "beats me" as an answer option and honestly reported how many respondents chose those options.

In a democratic era, though, it is assumed everyone should have an opinion, so we find ourselves buffeted by demagoguery, the only way to squeeze political opinions out of the turnip of public apathy.

Take William Kristol (and his Stop Human Cloning organization), who has put out radio ads featuring a couple named Harriet and Louis (parodies of the characters Harry and Louise, featured in recent pro-cloning ads). Kristol is smart enough to know that so-called therapeutic cloning the replication of cells in petri dishes does not result in the creation of a whole new being, and certainly not in an adult duplicate of the donor. Yet his ads imply just that, playing upon a gullible public's vague fear that creepy science is going to create zombielike doppelgangers of them without their permission. William Kristol, like his father Irving, follows in the tradition of conservative philosopher Leo Strauss, who believed that enlightened leaders must sometimes dupe the ignorant masses in order to maintain public order, using religious and patriotic appeals that they do not themselves believe in. The [Straussians](#) <sup>[1]</sup> sometimes lament the materialism and cynicism of the modern world, pointing to Machiavelli as one of the figures who started us down this road, but they are the ones who seem most comfortable with Machiavellian, demagogic

political tactics.

Meanwhile, Kristol's newfound leftist ally in the anti-cloning movement, Jeremy Rifkin, has gotten ahead of the curve and is now attacking the construction (still in its earliest theoretical and experimental stages) of artificial wombs, warning that they will lead to the heartless mass-production of humans as in *Brave New World* (luckily for Rifkin, he will never have to experience the pain of the old-fashioned method of childbirth).

The ugly truth may be that most of today's political factions rely upon the public's fear of change and newness for grassroots support, despite political leaders' sometimes high-minded rhetoric. Whether the public rallies to prevent plant closings, cloning, global trade, genetically-modified foods, immigration, homosexuality, offensive art, welfare cuts, or chemicals, they're usually inspired by a desire to fend off the scary unknown, while the rhyming slogans, messianic speeches, and sing-alongs created by their leaders help keep them focused on the enemy of the moment. If our society put everything to a vote, I wouldn't be surprised if we had laws forbidding new machines, new hairstyles, the transformation of old businesses, exotic animals, complex arguments, long chemical names, and suspicious-looking people.

So it's hardly surprising we find ourselves poised for at least a partial cloning ban, with the best likely outcome a compromise bill [announced](#) [2] by Senators Hatch, Specter, Kennedy, and Feinstein that bans cloning of whole children but permits cell replication research to continue. (A petition in favor of such research can be found at [www.FranklinSociety.org](http://www.FranklinSociety.org) [3].) It would be a mistake to think the debate hinges on the hair-splitting arguments over the definition of "zygote" that occupy the well-educated and well-informed. This debate is moved by the vague aesthetic reactions of a public that doesn't know, for instance, whether antibiotics fight viruses or bacteria but knows that some things sound just too creepy to accept and so must be outlawed. Since the masses don't seem likely to become science-literate any time soon, it would be nice if we could get people to just stop legislating upon such matters (or better yet, stop legislating altogether).

Can we get fifty percent of survey respondents to agree that public opinion is meaningless?

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[1] <http://reason.com/9707/fe.bailey.shtml>

[2] <http://www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/04/30/science.cloning.reut/index.html>

[3] <http://www.franklinsociety.org/>