



Public Opinion on Animal Testing

By Justin Goodman

One of the themes of the 8th World Congress was “Policy/Law on Animal Use, Public Engagement, and Ethics Review.” The top prize for posters in that theme went to Justin Goodman, and co-authors Casey A. Borch and Elizabeth Cherry for “Americans’ Attitudes Toward Animal Testing: 2001-11,” their examination of a decades’ worth of public opinion polling and analysis. Some of the highlights of the poster presentation are featured in this article, followed by a commentary on why we might be seeing these changes.

Animal rights activists and animal experimenters don’t agree about most things, but one area of consensus is that the public’s aversion to animal testing is on the rise.

Conflicting views about the propriety of experimenting on animals date back nearly two millennia, and the issue has been one of particular interest in the U.S. since the 19th century. The first national poll on peoples’ attitudes about the controversial practice in 1948 reported that an overwhelming 84 percent of Americans supported animal testing and only eight percent opposed it.¹

However, independent surveys and animal-testing-industry polls have uniformly shown a consistent and substantial drop in public support for animal testing.

In 2001, the independent polling organization Gallup began conducting its annual Values and Beliefs survey, which asks American adults their opinion on “medical testing on animals.” Since then, the number of people overall responding that it is “morally wrong” (versus “morally acceptable”) has increased from 33 to 43 percent.²

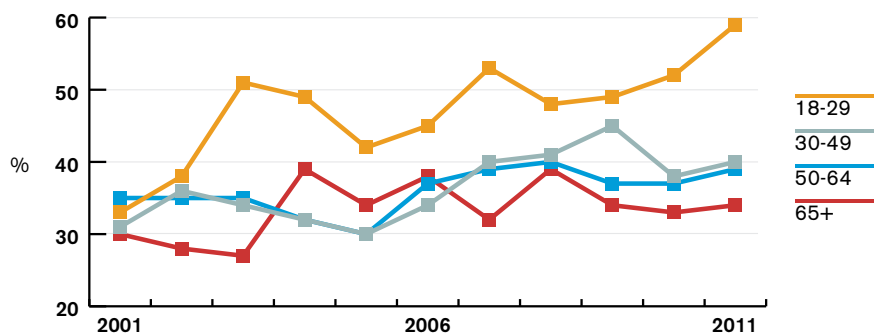
The greatest shift in attitudes about animal testing during this period can be seen among young adults (ages 18-29), whose opposition rose 25 points to where it stands now at 59 percent. Even though opposition increased modestly in other age groups as well, according to the survey data, support for medical testing on animals remains highest among older people (65+), where only 34 percent oppose it. These trends appear to indicate a widening gap of

generational difference of opinion about this issue. (See Figure 1)

Like young adults, a majority of women (52 percent) also find medical testing on animals morally wrong, an increase of 12 percent since 2001. (See Figure 2) Women are now more than twice as likely as men to oppose the practice, a difference which has been attributed to women’s greater care and concern for animals more generally.³

An area that is not well understood

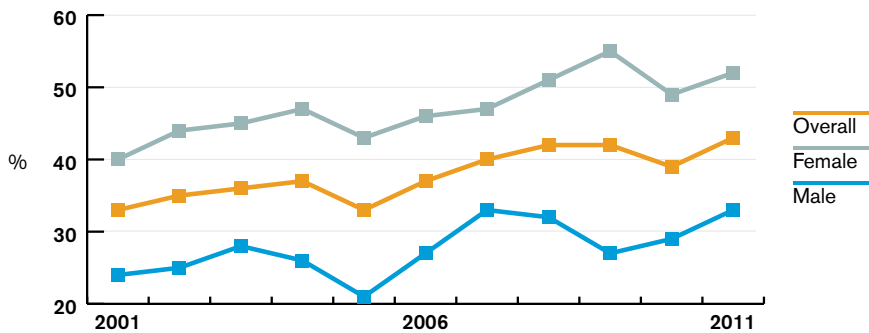
FIGURE 1: OPPOSITION BY AGE GROUP



Source: Gallup “Values and Beliefs” Poll 2001-11

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FIGURE 2: AMERICANS' OPPOSITION TO MEDICAL TESTING ON ANIMALS



Source: Gallup "Values and Beliefs" Poll 2001-11

is the correlation between the education of participants and their opinion on whether animal testing was morally wrong. The more formal education survey participants had, the more likely they were to approve of animal testing. In fact, 65 percent of those with less than a high school level of education opposed medical testing on animals.

Political affiliations, identified as conservative, moderate and liberal, also correlated with attitudes. Moderates surpassed the others with 50 percent opposing medical testing on animals.

Overall, opposition to medical testing on animals—which historically has been the most widely supported of all forms of animal experimentation—rose from 2001-2011 in all but one of the demographic categories measured by Gallup. Opposition to cosmetics testing on animals is considerably higher; 72 percent according to one recent poll.⁴

By all accounts, people are growing increasingly intolerant of animal testing. Further studies may help identify the causes of the trends reported. But in any case, because the practice is largely funded by consumer and tax dollars and allegedly conducted on the public's behalf, these shifts in opinion should be prompting a paradigm shift in the way science is conducted—away from animal use.

WHY THE CHANGE?

Proponents of animal experimentation see these statistics as cause for alarm and attribute this transformation to what they claim is people's ignorance

about the alleged "benefits" of animal testing.⁵ But in my view, this explanation is off-the-mark. American culture still, unfortunately, paints animal testing in a positive and uncritical light, and people are constantly exposed to this messaging via the media, medical and scientific communities, teachers, and textbooks.

Opposition to animal testing isn't on the rise because people don't know the pro-animal-testing position, it's because they know better.

Since the first poll on animal testing was conducted in 1948, and certainly in the last several decades, the general public's awareness about the pain and suffering that animals endure in laboratories has increased. Most recently this is due in large part to animal protection organizations' effective harnessing of the internet's potential as an advocacy tool⁶ to dispel the white-washing and scare-mongering that vivisectioners rely on to defend their cruel trade.

Since 2001 when the Gallup poll discussed was first administered, there has been a large increase in internet usage among adults.⁷ The corresponding rise in opposition to animal testing is unlikely coincidental. Animal protection groups have considerably outperformed pro-vivisection groups at creating and growing communities of online supporters. For example, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has more than 1.8 million followers on its two main Facebook pages, while the two largest pro-animal testing groups have

less than 26,000 combined.

The importance of these developments for animals cannot be overstated. Historic exposés that catapulted the issue of animal testing into the public consciousness and literally transformed public policy—like the landmark 1960s *Sports Illustrated* and *Life* magazine features that revealed the horrendous trafficking of stray dogs for experimentation and PETA's disturbing 1981 Silver Spring monkeys undercover investigation—speak to the power that images of animal suffering in laboratories wield when brought to the masses.

Today, with the advent of the internet and its widespread adoption, individuals and organizations are able to immediately transmit these images, along with information and calls for action, to tens of millions of people, who can access them for free, from anywhere in the world and at any time they please.

People now have no shortage of easy ways to publicly air their grievances, alert their friends and family, and hold recalcitrant government agencies, consumer products companies, and universities accountable for continuing to mutilate, poison, and kill animals in laboratories. **AV**

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¹ National Opinion Research Center. (1949). *Animal Experimentation: A Survey of Information, Interest, and Opinion on the Question Among the General Public, High School Teachers, and Practicing Physicians* (Report No. 39). Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center.

² Goodman, J.R.; Borch, C.A.; Cherry, E. "American Attitudes Toward Animal Testing 2001-2011." Poster presented at the 8th World Congress on Alternatives and Animal Use in the Life Sciences, 2011 August 22, Montreal, Canada.

³ Herzog, Hal. (2007). "Gender Differences in Human-Animal Interactions: A Review." *Anthrozoos* 20: 7-21.

⁴ Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. (2011). "More Than a Makeup Trend: New Survey Shows 72 percent of Americans Oppose Testing Cosmetics Products on Animals." Retrieved from <http://www.pcrm.org/search/?cid=3026>.

⁵ Parker, J.V. and Conn, P.M. (2011). From Test Tube to Hypodermic Needle. *The Scientist*. Retrieved from <http://the-scientist.com/2011/12/01/from-test-tube-to-hypodermic-needle/>.

⁶ Convio. 2010. "PETA Honored at Fifth Annual Convio Client Summit for Best Email Communications." Retrieved from <http://ir.convio.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=555015>.

⁷ Pew Internet and American Life Project. (2009). "Online activities, 2000-2009." Retrieved July 15, 2011, from <http://www.pewinternet.org/Trend-Data/Online-Activities-20002009.aspx>.