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Changing Attitudes Toward Homosexuality  
in the United States from 1977 to 2012

Ellen Decoo

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

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## ABSTRACT

### Changing Attitudes Toward Homosexuality in the United States from 1977 to 2012

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Support for civil rights for gays and lesbians has been increasing nationally. Changes in attitudes may be due not only to the influence of younger, more progressive cohorts, but also to the influence of other factors such as education, religious attendance, political identity, and attitudes toward women's roles. This thesis utilized General Social Survey data from 1977 to 2012 and examined changes in response to attitudinal questions regarding civil rights for gays and lesbians, as well as demographic factors predictive of changing attitudes. Between 1977 and 2012, attitudes became more accepting of civil rights for homosexuals in the United States. Results from multivariate regression models indicate that younger birth cohorts are more accepting of civil rights for gays and lesbians, as are those with higher education. Higher tolerance of non-traditional roles for women is associated with the support of civil rights for gays and lesbians. In addition, religious attendance is negatively associated with acceptance of civil rights for homosexuals, whereas political identity has no association.

Keywords: attitudinal changes, birth cohorts, homosexuality, social movements

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## INTRODUCTION

The past three decades have experienced a rapid change in the acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality. During the 2000s a wide range of political and social forces motivated social change regarding attitudes toward homosexuality. Issues surrounding the LGBT community have been highlighted in the media, social policy, and political campaigns, focusing especially on same-sex marriage (Chauncey 2004; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005). Although marriage equality is an important aspect of LGBT rights in the United States, seeking acceptance for the LGBT community and civil protection remains a central part of the movement as well (Anderson and Fetner 2008).

The goal of this project is to examine factors predictive of changes in attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians between 1977 and 2012. This research explores influential demographic and background factors associated with attitudes such as education, religious attendance, political identity, cohort, and attitudes toward women's roles. I analyze data from the General Social Survey (GSS) from 1977 to 2012. These years have been chosen because they represent a period of changing attitudes toward homosexuality in the United States.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Attitudes toward Gays and Lesbians*

According to Herek (2002), the earliest opinion poll in the United States measuring attitudes toward gays and lesbians occurred in 1965. Seventy percent of the respondents held a negative view of homosexuality and believed they were more "harmful than helpful to American life." Using General Social Survey (GSS) data, Herek (1988) found an increase in positive attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality from 1973 to 1977. Similarly, DeJowski (1992) documented an increase in the 1980s among Americans in the push for restricting civil liberties



of homosexuals, mostly attributed to the rise of the AIDS crisis and a distrust of the gay community. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s scholars observed an increase in tolerance toward gays and lesbians (Altemeyer 2001; Hicks and Lee 2006; Loftus 2001). As portrayed in the media during the 2000s, several television shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Glee* followed the lives of gay and lesbian characters. Further, high schools and college campuses saw a growth in gay-straight alliances among student groups, and an increasing number of companies put anti-discrimination policies in place (Becker 2006; Ohlander, Batalova, and Treas 2005).

### *Attitudes and Change*

Essential to research on changes in society and how people generally view homosexuality, scholars have rooted their research in studies on attitudes (Herek 1988; Treas 2002). An attitude according to Geertz (1973:230) corresponds with a perspective, stance, or a frame of reference. Sociologists who study changes in attitudes among a population start with an interest in an important issue and look at how attitudes in the population shift over time (Schuman 1995). Efforts at explaining such shifts focus on social characteristics in the population and how these characteristics affect attitudes (Fazio 1986; Schuman 1995).

Social scientists generally study changes in attitudes over time through a series of surveys (Herek 1988). However, in research on attitudes, LaPiere (1934) stated that the response of an individual to a question about an object is too abstract and does not offer any context to allow researchers to predict how an individual will behave in the real world. In contrast, Fishbein and Ajzen (1974) argue that attitudes captured on a survey do influence actual behavior. More recent research supports this claim and suggests that shifts in attitudes reflect broader shifts in behavior (Farley 1997). For example, since World War II, Americans have become increasingly more

likely to support civil rights for African Americans, and have been more likely to support laws that overturn discrimination. It is important to note that this does not mean that all Americans are supportive of civil rights or hold positive attitudes toward African Americans; but an attitudinal trend generally exists that corresponds with changes in laws and policies around the country (Farley 1997; Firebaugh and Davis 1988). Further, Brooks (2000) found that since 1972 attitude changes in the U.S. population have impacted voting outcomes in presidential elections. Even if laws and policies do not reflect the attitudes of all Americans, a correlation exists between attitudes the majority of Americans hold, and actions consistent with those attitudes.

### *Gay Rights as a Social Movement*

Attitudes toward a minority group do not change in a linear way over time. Instead, social movements shape attitudes and behaviors by increasing exposure to issues and the demand for equal rights (Brooks and Manza 2004; Miceli 2005). According to social movement theory, demonstrating the injustice done to a certain social group and how it violates the image a society has of itself can bring about change to fix these injustices (Miceli 2005; Zald, 1996). By highlighting these aspects, social movements are able to identify what needs to be modified or eliminated in order to achieve the goals of equality and non-discrimination.

Gay rights groups have framed their strategies as identity politics to create a shared understanding among members of how they view the world and how the world views them (Loftus 2001; Swank and Fahs 2012). The influence of social movements often lies in finding the right political opportunity, where visibility in the public sphere is the first step in creating change (Miceli 2005; Swank and Fahs 2012). While there are many aspects of the gay and lesbian rights movement, the movement in the past 30 years has emphasized recognition of gay and lesbian identity in the workplace and other aspects of daily life in order to promote non-discrimination

policies and equality (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008). Further, the push for equality and civil rights has often been linked to the culture at large and its values. By doing so, social movements are able to persuade the public their cause is valid and acceptable (Miceli 2005).

Attitudes toward a group of unfamiliar people can influence initial perceptions of the group. According to Fazio (1986), an attitude is “simply an association in memory between a given object and one’s evaluation of an object.” This association is heavily influenced by how strong the memory is. The gay rights movement has placed emphasis on visibility and also on coming out. Pride parades in cities reach out to the greater community, and television shows portraying gay and lesbian individuals in the late 1990s and early 2000s have presented likable and relatable gay characters (Anderson and Fetner 2008; Becker 2006; Walters 2001). When an individual unfamiliar with gays or lesbians has a positive experience with a gay or lesbian person, it becomes easier to create a connection to the group at large.

The emphasis on coming out, according to social contact theory, explains why visibility has contributed to increasing tolerance and acceptance for gays and lesbians. The social contact hypothesis states that having interpersonal contact under appropriate conditions with other members of different social groups, effectively reduces prejudice between groups (Herek and Capitanio 1996). By creating greater visibility of gays and lesbians through activism, the gay rights movement has encouraged individuals to come out to their friends and family in the hopes that visibility will generate acceptance (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008). Also the type of content with someone who is gay or lesbian matters (Anderssen 2002). Individuals who have gay family members or coworkers they are on good terms with are more likely to report a change in attitudes. This means that a previously held negative or indifferent view of gays and lesbians can be changed to a more positive view through positive interaction. Further, being close to someone

who is gay or lesbian also pushes the individual to become more involved with gay rights issues (Altemeyer 2001; Anderssen 2002).

*Attitudes toward Gays and Lesbians: Morality vs. Civil Rights*

While Americans have become more tolerant toward gays and lesbians over a 40 year period, this tolerance and acceptance is complicated and layered. On average, Americans view homosexuality as both a moral issue and a political issue, and tend to have different views for each (Loftus 2001). Using General Social Survey Data, researchers found that the civil liberties of gays and lesbians, such as being able to make a speech, teach in a classroom or be the author of a book kept in a public library, have received increasing support from Americans of all generations (Dejowski 1992; Loftus 2001). However, Americans tend to separate the morality of homosexuality from civil rights for gays and lesbians. Many Americans believe that homosexuality is wrong, and view it as a personal choice rather than an innate characteristic (Loftus 2001; Anderson and Fetner 2008). Because of this, the LGBT community has explicitly framed its cause for equality in terms of identity, focusing on coming out and creating greater visibility of gays and lesbians (Chauncey 2004; Eskridge 2002).

Although Americans may believe it is wrong to be homosexual, restricting civil rights represents the idea that government can legislate morality (Loftus 2001; Treas 2002). By combining civil rights with identity, Americans are more willing to support civil rights for gays and lesbians compared to previous decades, but are simultaneously stepping back from the moral issues of homosexuality. This may explain why more and more cities and states are voting in favor of non-discrimination laws and marriage equality (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008). This underscores the arguments made by LaPiere (1934) and Fishbein and Ajzen (1974), that Americans are able to both combine and separate attitudes from behavior.

Americans are uncomfortable restricting the rights of individuals because it goes against the ideology of American freedom, or because they feel conflicted if they know someone who is gay or lesbian (Loftus 2001; Treas 2002). This disconnect is found in the attitudes held by Americans toward gays and lesbians. Attitudes toward homosexuality before the 1960s were strongly attached to religious ties and a firm belief that homosexuality was detrimental to society (Alwin and Krosnic 1991; Anderson and Fetner 2008). However, as religiosity declined in the 1960s and 1970s, and as the gay rights movement pushed against barriers, attitudes about homosexuality changed (Brewer 2003; Coontz 1992; Hicks and Lee 2006; Loftus 2001). While many Americans are still influenced by institutions or traditions that view homosexuality as evil, the severity of these attitudes seems to have diminished and perhaps becomes less important compared to other pressing social and moral issues (Coontz 1992; Loftus 2001; Treas 2002).

#### *Factors Influencing Attitudes toward Homosexuality*

While the time period an individual grows up in and establishes core attitudes and values matters, several other factors influence and even change attitudes during an individual's formative years (Loftus 2001; Sherkat et al. 2011). Based on previous literature regarding attitudes toward homosexuality, factors such as education, religion, political identity, and cohort have been found to influence how individuals feel about homosexuality. Recent literature also suggests that changes in family structure and attitudes toward gender roles influence support for the gay rights movement (Brewer 2003; Coontz 1998).

*Education.* Several studies have found that the more education one receives, the more likely he or she is to be in favor of minority rights, including the rights of gays and lesbians (Hicks and Lee 2006; Keleher and Smith 2012). Individuals with low education tend to show more hostility toward minorities and members of an out-group, which often translates into moral

and political conservatism relative to those who have gained higher education (Sherkat et al. 2011).

*Religion.* Groups that oppose gay rights are often conservative Christian groups who advocate for traditional values in the public sphere, specifically reflecting those of the nuclear family (Chauncey 2004; Hicks and Lee 2006). Religious belief and church attendance are strongly correlated with a rejection of homosexuality. Individuals who attend religious services more than once a week are typically opposed to homosexuality, and those who attend less show higher tolerance toward homosexuality (Anderson and Fetner 2008; Loftus 2001; Treas 2002).

*Political Identity.* In the United States, ideology and partisanship are closely related, meaning that the cultivation of family values among religious conservatives in America has also been embraced by the Republican Party (Brewer 2003; Brooks and Manza 2004; Hicks and Lee 2006). Between 1991 and 2010 the acceptance of gays and lesbians increased significantly, especially among people who identified as politically liberal (Keleher and Smith 2012; Treas 2002). LGBT rights have become associated with the Democratic Party (Anderson and Fetner 2008; Brewer 2003). Individuals who support LGBT rights usually vote democratic or for a third-party candidate, but rarely vote republican (Brooks 2000).

This liberal-conservative divide regarding attitudes toward gays and lesbians is also reflected in LGBT laws in different states in the United States. States that are more tolerant toward gays and lesbians and have laws that protect against discrimination or have approved same-sex marriage tend to have a more liberal population. This is in contrast to more conservative states, where anti-discrimination policy is not written into law (Brewer 2003; McCann 2011).

*Women's Roles.* As with many forms of social change, the sexual revolution and the accompanying shift in family structure have led to more accepting attitudes (Loftus 2001; Treas 2002). After the Stonewall Riots in 1969, the Gay Rights Movement found its political opportunity in the sexual revolution where prior heteronormative discourse was challenged, including the dominant image of the 1950s' nuclear family (Coontz 1992). The growing influence of the Feminist movement and the Civil Rights movement not only demanded policies that fought discrimination, but also created exposure for populations that had otherwise been ignored (Coontz 1992).

By the mid 1970s, changes in the structure of the economy meant that many couples and families had to give up previously prescribed family forms and had to postpone marriage and family; consequently a new type of family structure was established (Coontz 1992; DeJowski 1992; Sherkat et al. 2011; Treas 2002; Walters 2001). This liberalization in attitudes that occurred regarding family structure, gender, and sexuality provided a political opportunity for gay rights advocates to push for the acceptance of individuals who deviated from the heterosexual norm (Coontz, 1992; Loftus 2001; Treas 2002).

Changes in American social life, family life, and gender roles have created more liberalized attitudes among Americans (Treas 2002; Sherkat et al. 2011). The growing acceptance of non-traditional families sends the message that gender roles allocated in a family based on sex are no longer the only way a family can be structured, thus paving the way for the acceptance of same-sex couples (Coontz 1992; Loftus 2001).

*Cohorts.* Increased support of civil rights for gays and lesbians and a significant growth in acceptance of homosexuality in general over the past several decades is found in all cohorts (Keleher and Smith 2012; Sherkat et al. 2011; Treas 2002; ). The increased tolerance of gays and

lesbians is explained by both a succession of younger cohorts with more progressive ideas and intra-cohort attitudinal change; that is, increased tolerance at all ages, including greater tolerance toward gays and lesbians among older cohorts (Loftus 2001; Treas 2002).

In 2010, Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 made up the demographic age group called the Millennial generation (Pew Research Center 2013). Compared to Generation X (born between 1960 and 1980), the Millennial generation (born after 1981) reported slightly higher education and lower religiosity compared to generations before them (Pew Research Center 2013). Many Millennials have also grown up with “new” or “non-traditional” families and parenting arrangements (Pew Research Center 2013). Also the Democratic party received many votes from the Millennial generation during the 2006 and 2008 elections, and Millennials tend to have more liberal views on social issues relative to generations before them, especially regarding civil rights for minority groups (Pew Research Center 2013).

### *Research Question*

Because of changes in demographics over time, including the composition of cohorts, there has been a positive change in attitudes toward homosexuality over the past few decades. The goal of this project is to add to previous research by examining what factors explain changes in attitudes toward civil rights of homosexuals between 1977 and 2012. In particular, I explore the contribution of background and demographic factors on attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians including education, religious attendance, political identity, cohort, and attitudes toward women’s roles.

## DATA AND METHODS

This analysis uses data from the *General Social Survey* (GSS) which has been collecting demographic data and social attitudes in the United States. Participants in the survey are at least



18 years old and are found in randomly selected households. The survey has been conducted every year from 1972 to 1994 (except in 1979, 1981 and 1992); and since 1994 has been conducted every other year. As of 2010, 55,087 respondents and 5,417 variables have been collected.

The GSS contains information about attitudes toward civil rights for homosexuals, asking the same questions almost every year since the survey started. This data was selected because it captures attitudinal change over several generations of Americans along with other demographic and social characteristics. Among the many questions asked every year, the survey includes the year the respondent was born, level of education, religious attendance, and political affiliation. In addition, it also contains information about other social attitudes such as feelings toward women's rights and roles. Utilizing the data, I examine changes in attitudes toward civil rights for homosexuals based on surveys collected from 1977 to 2012, and examine factors predictive of that change.

Through combining surveys collected between 1977 and 2012, and dropping cases missing attitudinal data on civil rights for homosexuals, as well as women's rights, I analyze a sample of 12,372 adults. Specifically, I model the change in attitudes toward civil rights for homosexuals over a 35 year period, and examine factors predictive of that change. I include measures of education, political identity, religious attendance, cohort, and attitudes regarding the role of women to determine how these factors account for changing attitudes toward civil rights for homosexuals.

The original sample included over 32,000 cases, but many of these cases did not include data on attitudes toward the role of women. I analyzed the models both including attitudes toward women (a smaller sample) and excluding it (a larger sample), and found little or no

difference in the coefficients for the other variables; therefore, the final sample only includes respondents that were surveyed about attitudes toward civil rights for homosexuals, and attitudes regarding the role of women (n=12,372).

### *Dependent Variable*

The dependent variable measures attitudes toward civil rights for homosexuals. Three questions regarding civil liberties for gays and lesbians were consistently included in almost every GSS survey year:

- (1) And what about a man who admits that he is a homosexual? Suppose this admitted homosexual wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak or not?*
- (2) Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?*
- (3) And what about a man who admits that he is a homosexual, if some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote in favor of homosexuality should be taken out of your public library would you favor removing this book, or not?*

Responses were divided into “allowed” (coded 1) or “not allowed” (coded 0). Coding regarding removal of a book favoring homosexuality from a library was reversed so that 0=favors removal, 1=does not favor removal. Responses to these three questions were combined to create a scale to measure acceptance of civil rights for homosexuals. Factor scores for the three items were combined into a scale where high values indicate greater acceptance of homosexual civil rights. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .821.

### *Independent Variables*

I first consider how attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians have changed each year the GSS survey was conducted. I next examine which factors help explain changes in

attitudes. I include measures of education, religious attendance, political party identification, cohort, and attitudes toward the role of women.

*Education.* Education measures the highest level of schooling the respondent has completed. The measurement is one variable with ordered categories, and starts at “no formal schooling” (coded 0) and ends at “eight years of college” (coded 20). I expect that higher education will be associated with greater acceptance of civil rights for gays and lesbians.

*Religious attendance.* Religious attendance is one variable with ordered categories and measures how frequent the respondent attends religious services. The range of frequency of attendance is from “never” (coded 0), to “more than once a week” (coded 8). I anticipate that religious attendance will be negatively associated with acceptance for civil rights for homosexuals.

*Political party identification.* Respondents can indicate which political party they identify most with. Political party identification ranges from “strong democrat” (coded 0), to “strong republican” (coded 6). I expect that identification with the Republican party will be negatively associated with support for civil rights for gays and lesbians.

*Cohort.* To measure cohort, variables were created that represent four different cohorts based on the year of the respondents’ birth: The Silent Generation (1884-1942), Baby Boomers (1943-1964), Generation X (1965-1979) and the Millennial Generation (1980-1994). Baby boomers is the reference category. I anticipate that Millennials and Generation X will be more accepting of civil rights for gays and lesbians compared to older cohorts.

*Attitudes toward the role of women.* Similar to the GSS questions regarding attitudes toward civil liberties for homosexuals, the GSS consistently asks several questions regarding

how the respondent feels about the role of women, especially working women and working mothers. Three questions represent attitudes toward the role of women:

- (1) It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.*
- (2) A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.*
- (3) A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.*

Responses range from “strongly agree” (coded 1) to “strongly disagree” (coded 4). Coding regarding children establishing a warm relationship with a working mother was reverse coded. Factor scores for responses to these three questions were combined to create a scale to measure attitudes toward the role of women. Higher values on the scale indicate more egalitarian attitudes regarding the role of women and low scores indicate more traditional attitudes. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .743.

### *Analysis*

Because the dependent variable is a standardized scale, models are estimated using least squares regression. Regression coefficients presented in tables are unstandardized and indicate the change in standard deviation in attitudes toward homosexual civil rights for each unit increase in an independent variable. I begin the analysis of the data with descriptive statistics in order to highlight attitudes toward civil rights for homosexuals and factors predictive of support for civil rights over time (Table 1). Next changes over time in attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians are presented graphically (Figure 1). I then estimate multivariate models to examine the relationship between year and attitudes toward civil rights of homosexuals (model 1, Table 2), as well as the relationship between other predictors and attitudes. Subsequent models (2 through 6) include each background characteristic separately (birth cohort, education, religious

attendance, political identity, and women's roles). A final model (7) includes all statistically significant variables from previous models.

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all variables in the analysis for the total sample, as well as by survey decades. Looking at the three questions measuring acceptance of civil rights for homosexuals, there is increasing acceptance of civil rights for gays over time. The average education of respondents is 12 to 13 years of schooling and religious attendance is a few times a year on average. Across decades, levels of education increase over time ( $r = .168, p < .001$ ) and religious attendance decreases slightly ( $r = -.060, p < .001$ ). Political identification across years is "independent" on average, and means across decades indicate potential movement toward greater conservatism ( $r = .035, p < .001$ ). Attitudes toward women's roles are somewhat accepting of non-traditional roles on average. Across decades attitudes appear to become more accepting of non-traditional roles, particularly during the 1980s ( $r = .191, p < .001$ ). Most of the respondents surveyed are from older cohorts (baby boomers and silent generation).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The overall change in attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians is presented in Figure 1. This graph indicates a trend toward more acceptance of civil rights for homosexuals since the late 1970s. There is a slight decrease in acceptance of homosexuals in the early and mid-1980s, followed by a sharp increase in acceptance in the late 1980s. The trend continues to grow until 2012, the last GSS survey year in the data set. To determine which factors are predictive of this general trend toward greater acceptance, I now present the results of the multivariate models.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The results of the multivariate analyses are presented in Table 2. Model 1 of Table 2 shows the change over time in acceptance of civil rights of homosexuals based on survey year. For every year surveyed, there is a .020 standard deviation increase in the acceptance of civil rights for homosexuals. Overall there is an increasing trend of greater acceptance of civil rights for gays and lesbians. To examine factors predictive of that trend, models 2 through 6 examine various predictors separately.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Model 2 shows the relationship between birth cohort and attitudes toward civil rights for homosexuals. The model indicates that the Silent Generation is the least likely of the birth cohorts to be accepting of civil rights for gays and lesbians, while the other cohorts are more accepting. Model 3 shows the relationship between total years of education and attitudes toward civil rights for homosexuals. Each year increase in education increases the likelihood of acceptance of civil rights for homosexuals by .113 standard deviations.

Model 4 examines the effect of religious attendance and support of civil rights for homosexuals. Increased attendance of religious services has a negative impact (-.067) on support for civil rights for homosexuals. In Model 5 the impact of political party identity has no relationship with support for civil rights and is not statistically significant. Model 6 examines the impact of support of non-traditional roles for women. In the model, the coefficient is .295, indicating that increased support for non-traditional roles for women is associated with increased support for civil rights for gays and lesbians.

Model 7 includes all significant factors that influenced attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians in the previous models. Examining the trend coefficients in Model 7 relative to Model 1, birth cohort, education, religious attendance and attitudes toward women's roles

explain 60% of the change in attitudes toward civil rights for homosexuals ( $1 - (.008 / .02)$ ). Thus nearly two-thirds of the increasing trend toward greater acceptance of gays and lesbians is accounted for by education, religious attendance, attitudes toward women's roles, and cohort. Overall, these factors account for about one-fourth of the variation in attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians ( $R^2 = .24$ ).

## DISCUSSION

### *Changes over time*

Positive attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians have increased in the United States since the civil rights movement for gays and lesbians gained momentum in the 1960s. Changes in attitudes are clear when looking at the early years of the GSS survey (1977) to the last year the survey was conducted (2012). Similarly, there is a notable difference between the oldest cohort (Silent Generation) and younger cohorts and their acceptance of civil rights for homosexuals.

The examination of changes over time and of cohort differences shows that Americans born after the 1960s are more likely to exhibit acceptance of civil rights for homosexuals. However, cohort effects in the analysis were relatively small. As noted in the review of the literature, changes in attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians are not only due to the succession of younger cohorts, but also to older cohorts shifting their attitudes over time (Sherkat et al. 2010; Treas 2002).

Liberalization of public opinion toward acceptance of civil rights for gays and lesbians is largely attributed to visible political activism of the LGBT communities. This study highlights the increasing acceptance of civil rights for gays and lesbians between 1977 and 2012, a time in which the visibility and salience of gay rights grew (Anderson and Fetner 2008; Treas 2002).

Attitudinal changes not only occur because of the influence of a younger and more liberal cohort, but also occur with older birth cohorts (Treas 2002). When looking at cohort differences, the Silent Generation remains the least accepting of civil rights, but even this association was reduced once measures for education, religious attendance, and attitudes toward women's roles were included in the analyses. Thus, in addition to cohort changes, changes in other factors that influence attitudes toward gays and lesbians have played a role in changing attitudes over time.

An increase in obtaining higher education is one of the changes in demographic characteristics among cohorts in the United States. As demonstrated in the analysis, there has been an increase in education over time, and an increase in higher education results in greater acceptance of civil rights for gays and lesbians on average. As stated in the literature, higher education can lead to higher tolerance toward minority groups (Keleher and Smith 2012; Ohlander, Batalova, and Treas 2005; Ryder 1965; Treas 2002). Through education students become exposed to different ideas, but also to social activism organized by other students (Sherkat et al. 2011). As gay rights become a larger political issue, education and awareness of these issues become an item of discussion in higher education.

Religious attendance has a negative effect on the acceptance of civil rights for gays and lesbians. As suggested in the literature, religious attendance has declined over time (Chauncey 2004; Hicks and Lee 2006). If the influence of religion continues to decline in the United States, this could lead to further acceptance of civil rights for gays and lesbians in the future. Changes in the religious landscape of the United States could also lead to shifts not only toward greater acceptance of civil rights for homosexuals, but also toward changes in views regarding the morality of homosexuality. Future research is needed to examine such a shift.



As ideas about gender roles shift, so do attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians. As the Gay Rights Movement gained momentum around the same time as the sexual revolution, gender roles for women (and also men), and heteronormativity were challenged. According to this analysis, greater acceptance of non-traditional gender roles for women, on average, is associated with greater acceptance of civil rights for gays and lesbians. Social movements such as the women's movement can also influence attitudes toward homosexuality by exposing discrimination of marginalized groups and challenging oppressive power structures (Coontz 1992). Due to shifts in the labor market and the acceptance of non-traditional families and gender roles, individuals perhaps view the acceptance of civil rights for gays and lesbians as an extension of a similar process. As changes occur that undo and transform the gender binary which influences gender roles, a shift toward the acceptance of civil rights of gays and lesbians seems to occur simultaneously.

Although the literature states that political identity affects attitudes toward civil rights, in this project political party identification had no effect on attitudes for civil rights for gays and lesbians. This could indicate the success of the gay rights movement as a political action movement, where civil rights are framed in such a way that they cross political boundaries and ideologies (Miceli 2005; Swank and Fahs 2012). The fact that political party identification is not significant in the research could point to social change resulting from the gay rights movement. It is possible that the gay rights movement has changed attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians, regardless of an individual's political party identification. Another potential explanation is that political groups generally are more accepting of civil rights for gays and lesbians, in contrast to acceptance of the morality of homosexual relationships. Because the morality of homosexuality is separated from basic civil rights measured in the GSS, perhaps many

Americans are comfortable granting basic civil rights to gays and lesbians (Loftus 2001; Anderson and Fetner 2008) even if they oppose homosexuality on moral grounds.

The gay rights movement and the emphasis on exposure and visibility of gays and lesbians have changed how individuals feel about extending civil rights. Changing attitudes are reflected in behavioral changes with anti-discrimination laws supported in many states (Becker 2006; Ohlander, Batalova, and Treas 2005). Exposure to and positive contact with gays and lesbians increases support for civil rights for homosexuals, as does support for non-traditional women's roles (Anderssen 2002; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008). This may in part explain why the Silent Generation remains the least accepting of civil rights for homosexuals. If greater acceptance of rights for women and minorities, and greater openness about sexuality are associated with increased support for civil rights for homosexuals, experiencing these movements as much older adults may account for why the Silent Generation is less accepting of civil rights for homosexuals relative to younger cohorts. Younger cohorts came of age during the sexual revolution and civil rights for women and minorities, and thus were more accepting later of gays and lesbians relative to the older generation (Loftus 2001; Treas 2002).

### *Limitations*

This study is limited in part by the dataset. Although the GSS is a consistent source to look at attitudinal changes over several decades, different groups of people are interviewed every cycle of the GSS. Also problems exist with the wording of the questions measuring attitudes toward civil rights for homosexuals, such as the focus on male homosexuality. Respondents may react differently to gay men and gay women, which cannot be captured in these questions. There are also potential problems with the wording of the civil rights questions; as worded, the questions imply a negative connotation and use outdated language (Loftus 2001). However, the

GSS is the only nationally representative dataset that consistently asks questions concerning homosexuality over a period of several decades. Therefore, this dataset is the best way to explore if attitudes toward homosexuals have changed since 1977 (Loftus 2001).

Another limitation of the research is that data on civil rights for homosexuals measures attitudes on the right to make a speech, allowing a homosexual teacher to teach, and allowing books with homosexual content in the library. In the late 2000s, civil rights for gays and lesbians shifted to a focus on same-sex marriage. The three questions in the GSS that cover civil rights for homosexuals, without mentioning same-sex marriage, might be interpreted differently during same-sex marriage discourse, and might imply nuances during the interview that did not occur to the respondent in the 1970s and 1980s.

#### *Conclusion and future research*

Based on the analysis conducted, there are several demographic factors that influence the trend of greater acceptance of civil rights for gays and lesbians. Social activism and social movements in favor of civil rights for gays and lesbians have continued to grow, and are also facilitated through the use of the internet (Anderson and Fetner 2008; Schwadel and Garneau 2014). Through this analysis, it becomes clearer that support for civil rights of gays and lesbians cannot only be explained by changes in cohorts, but that these shifts in attitudes are linked to other characteristics. Education and religion are still important factors that influence how a person develops attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians. Lastly, the research also shows that supporting non-traditional roles for women is tied to supporting civil rights for gays and lesbians; Americans may view these two issues as different issues, but the association suggests an awareness of inequality and discrimination.

There are several ways in which future research can expand on this project. First, more research should be conducted to examine if there is a difference in terms of acceptance of civil rights for gay men versus lesbian women. Because the questions in the GSS only refer to gay men, this could potentially skew results by setting the default to gay masculinity. Homosexuality in men has historically been more associated with sexual perversion and emasculation, whereas homosexuality in women has had a slightly less negative connotation. Gay women are perhaps considered less threatening to a patriarchal society than gay men. Future research is needed to determine any differences in attitudes toward civil rights if the rights involve gay men versus lesbian women.

Last, with the Supreme Court Ruling of 2013 overturning the constitutional ban on same-sex marriage (*United States v. Windsor*), future research is needed to examine how the emphasis on LGBT rights has further changed views of gays and lesbians. Marriage equality for same-sex couples is a new civil rights cause for the gay rights movement; although same-sex marriage is framed as a civil rights issue, it is also a morality issue for many Americans. While Americans may feel comfortable granting civil rights to gays and lesbians, such as allowing them to make a speech, teach a college course, and allow books about homosexuality in the library, legalizing same-sex marriage is a more radical and bold move of the gay rights movement in the United States. Future research should examine if growing acceptance of civil rights for homosexuals such as free speech and being openly gay is creating an environment accepting of marriage equality for same-sex couples.

Whatever the future of gay and lesbian rights in the United States, it is clear that the trend toward greater acceptance has increased since the late 1970s, and that greater acceptance is associated with increasing levels of education, declines in religious attendance, and greater

acceptance of non-traditional women's roles. Greater acceptance of civil rights for gays and lesbians seems to be a continuing trend in America as an outgrowth of the gay rights movement. As a social movement, the emphasis on greater visibility and civil rights for homosexuals has promoted social change and greater acceptance. How the trend toward greater support for civil rights influences marriage equality and attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality is yet to be seen.

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## FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1  
Acceptance of Civil Rights for Homosexual Scale by Year of GSS Survey

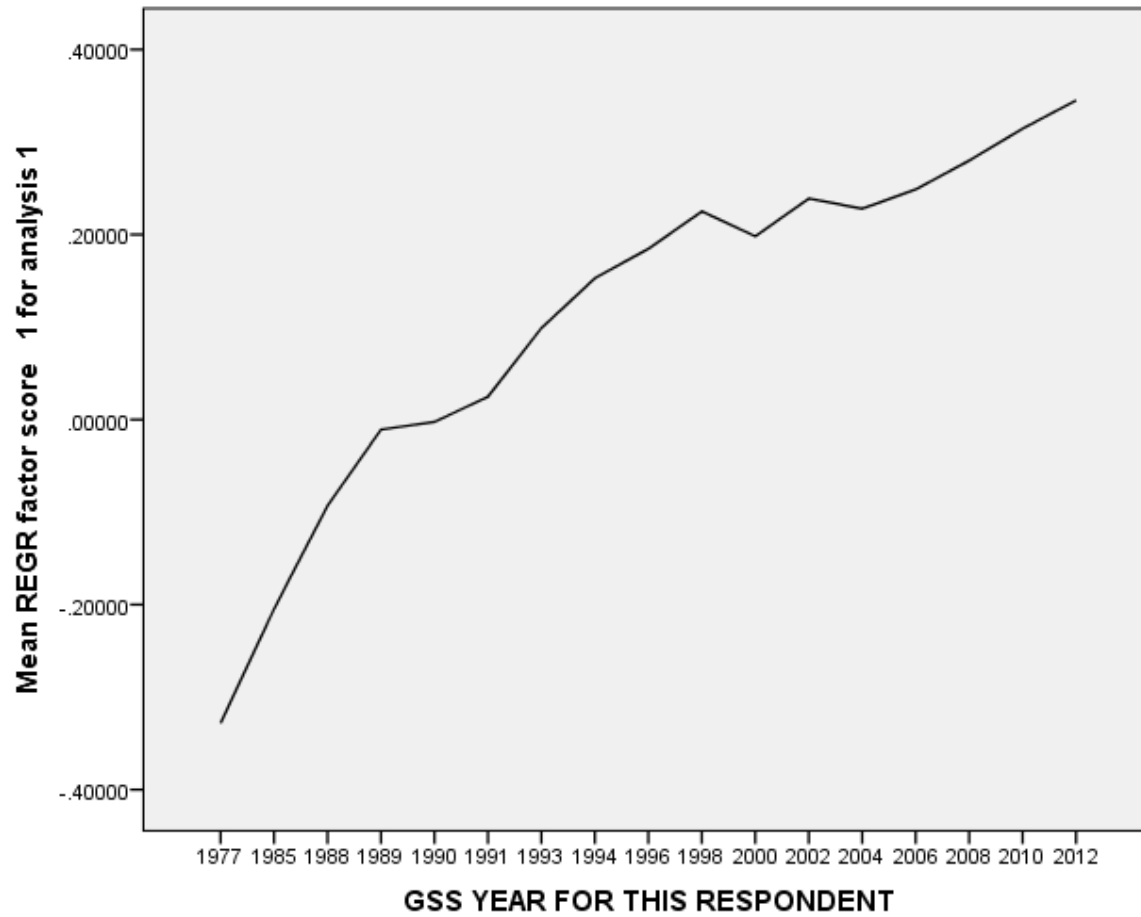


Table 1

Means for attitudes toward gay and lesbian civil rights and factors predictive of support for gay and lesbian civil rights (standard deviations)

Variables	Total [N=12372]	Survey Year			Correlation with Survey Year
		1977 to 1984 [N=12372]	1985 to 1994 [N=12372]	1995 to 2012 [N=12372]	
<i>Attitudes toward gays and lesbians</i>					
Allow homosexuals to make a speech	0.78 (.40)	0.66 (.47)	0.70 (.45)	0.75 (.43)	
Allow homosexuals to teach	0.72 (.45)	0.55 (.50)	0.60 (.49)	0.68 (.47)	
Allow homosexual books in library	0.69 (.46)	0.58 (.49)	0.62 (.48)	0.67 (.47)	
Cronbach's alpha	0.82				.210***
<i>Independent Variables</i>					
Highest year of education	12.81 (3.15)	11.95 (3.19)	12.38 (3.16)	12.81 (3.14)	.168***
Religious attendance	3.80 (2.70)	3.98 (2.64)	3.96 (2.65)	3.80 (2.70)	-.060***
Political party identification	2.73 (2.05)	2.52 (2.0)	2.66 (2.05)	2.73 (2.05)	.035***
<i>Women's roles</i>					
Better man work, woman stay home	2.67 (.86)	2.23 (.82)	2.58 (.861)	2.67 (.85)	
Preschoolers suffer if mom works	2.54 (.82)	2.17 (.80)	2.43 (.82)	2.54 (.81)	
Working mother hurts children	2.79 (.88)	2.46 (.96)	2.71 (.90)	2.79 (.88)	
Cronbach's alpha	0.74				.191***
<i>Cohorts</i>					
Millennials	0.05 (.21)				
Generation X	0.19 (.40)				
Baby Boomers	0.44 (.50)				
Silent Generation	0.32 (.47)				

\*\*\* p < .001

Table 2  
 Unstandardized coefficients for factors predictive of attitudes toward gay and lesbian civil rights

Characteristics	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)	Model (5)	Model (6)	Model (7)
Year	.020***	.012***	.014***	.019***	.020***	.015***	.008***
Cohort							
Millennials		.031					.072
Generation X		.015					.043*
Baby Boomers (ref)		----					----
Silent Generation		-.479***					-.173***
Education			.113***				.088***
Religious attendance				-.067***			-.053***
Political identification					-.001		
Women's roles						.295***	.190***
R <sup>2</sup>	.052	.100	.173	.085	.052	.135	.240
[N]	[12372]	[12337]	[12307]	[12236]	[12284]	[12337]	[12209]

\*p < .05, \*\*\* p < .001