Re: An Addendum about unintentional GSS wording changes in the question about marriage equality, and the effect of this change

By: Michael Rosenfeld

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In March of 2023 I had an email conversation with General Social Survey (GSS) Principle Investigator Jeremy Freese about what appeared in the 2021 and 2022 GSS multi-year cross-sectional data releases to be a new bifurcation in the GSS variable "MARHOMO," a variable containing answers to a question about approval of marriage for same-sex couples. I have relied on this variable in my research (Rosenfeld 2007; Rosenfeld 2017; Rosenfeld 2021), so I thought I should revisit the analyses here. The original wording of question MARHOMO, first fielded in 1988, was: "Do you agree or disagree: Homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another," with 5 potential answers: "Strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree."

GSS PI Freese discovered in 2020 that the word "should" had inadvertently (as far as he could tell) been left out of the MARHOMO question wording in 2006-2018, so the question was posed as "Do you agree or disagree: Homosexual couples have the right to marry one another" instead of "Do you agree or disagree: homosexual couples **should** have the right to marry one another." The word "should" is potentially important in this question, especially after 2015 (as a result of *Obergefell v. Hodges*) when same-sex couples *do in fact* have the right to marry in the US, but respondents might not believe that they *should* have that right.

Does the difference in question wording (MARHOMO with the original wording including 'should' versus MARHOMO1 without 'should') make a difference in analyses of the trends in support for marriage equality?

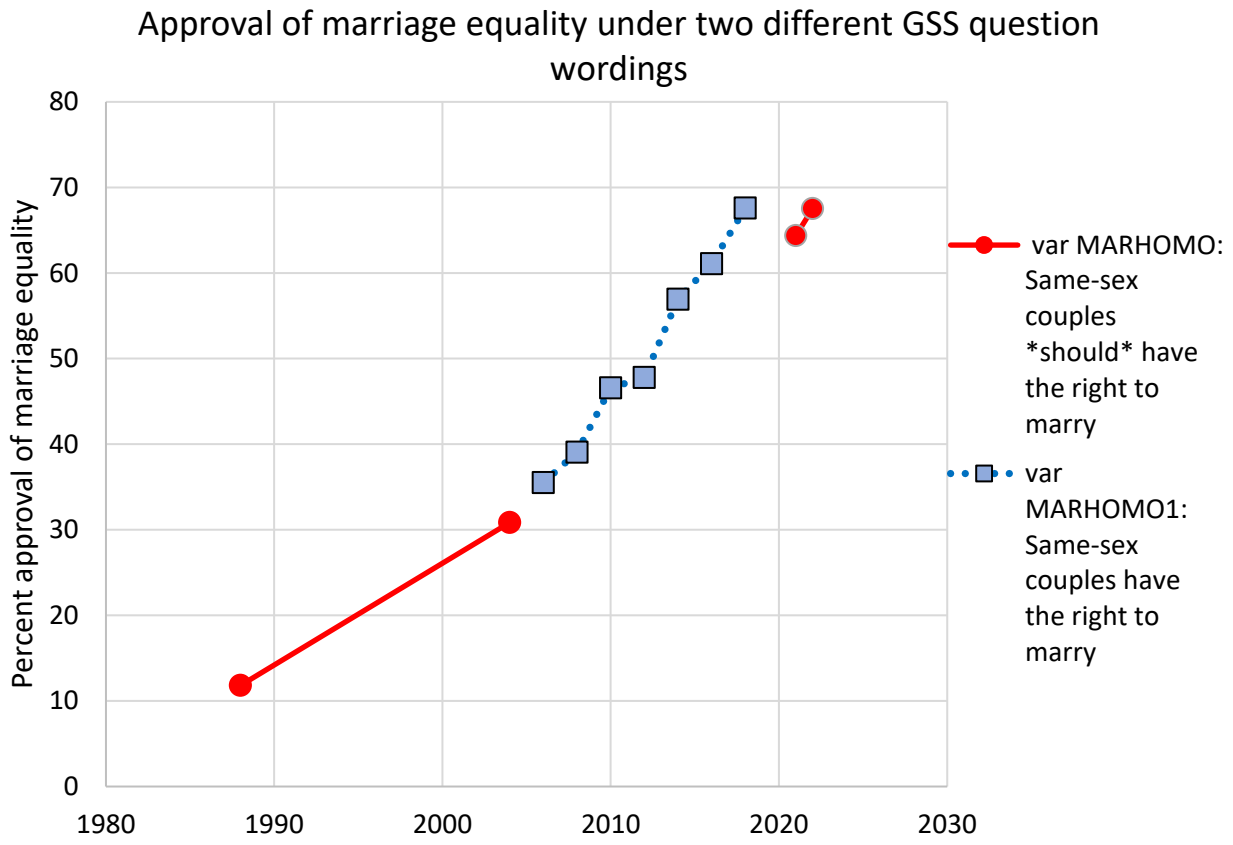

Figure 1: Approval of marriage equality under two different GSS question wordings, from weighted GSS 1972-2022 data.

Figure 1 shows GSS measures of approval of marriage equality with question wording that started out with the original formulation in 1988 and 2004, diverged to the alternate wording without "should" in 2006-2018, and then returned to the original wording in 2021 and 2022 after the discrepancy was discovered. The question wording difference seems to have a modest effect on the percentage of respondents who approve marriage equality (defined as a combination of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' answers), especially seen in the apparent drop from 2018 (67.6% approval in MARHOMO1) to 2021 (64.4% approval in MARHOMO, with the original wording).

Even though Figure 1 shows what appears to be a drop in support for marriage equality in the US across the two different question wordings from 2018 to 2021, the difference may not have been due to the difference in question wording alone. The COVID-19 pandemic years wreaked havoc on GSS survey administration. GSS had traditionally been primarily an in-person survey, but had to switch during the pandemic to online and phone survey modes, so the difference between 2018 and 2021 could be an artifact of survey administration differences (General Social Survey 2023a; General Social Survey 2023b). I have shown elsewhere that he pandemic survey administration changes in the GSS have potentially large effect on outcomes

even among GSS variables that were reported to be least affected by the survey administration changes (Rosenfeld 2023).

In my work using the GSS variable MARHOMO, I was mainly interested in the historically unprecedented rate of change and total change over time in individual support for marriage equality. In Figure 1, both MARHOMO and MARHOMO1 wordings show steep rates of increasing approval over time. In a paper in *Socius* (Rosenfeld 2017) I showed in Table 1 that in the 1972-2016 GSS data, the weighted rate of liberalization per year in attitudes towards marriage equality was 1.76 percentage points of support per year, assuming that the marriage equality question had always had the original MARHOMO wording, which was what the GSS documentation at the time (incorrectly) showed. This rate of change made attitudes towards marriage equality one of the fastest changing attitudes in US history. In a later publication (Rosenfeld 2021), using GSS 1972-2018 data, I showed that marriage equality was the single fastest changing attitude in US history, changing at 1.88 percentage points per year again relying on the GSS documentation showing that MARHOMO wording had been consistent through 2018.

Table 1: Summary Data on Extent of Change and Rate of Change in GSS Public Opinion Variables through 2018 plus the new corrected MARHOMO through 2022

		Extent of Change	Rate of Change
GSS attitude variables categories:	Number of attitude variables averaged in each category	A) Absolute Value percentage point change (end point to end point difference)	B) Absolute Value percentage point change per year
Gay Rights	6	39.64	1.07
Race	41	13.75	0.51
Religion	29	9.14	0.36
Government	77	8.42	0.32
Abortion	10	5.39	0.28
Other	341	7.45	0.31
All attitudes mean	504	8.55	0.34
The old version of MARHOMO through 2018, including both wording variants		56.44	1.88
The new version of MARHOMO through 2022, using only the original wording		55.73	1.67

Source: Weighted GSS data for attitudes on 504 separate issues, 1972-2018, plus the new corrected MARHOMO through 2022 including only the original wording.

Table 1 reprints Table 8.1 in my recent book (Rosenfeld 2021) using GSS data through 2018, with the addition of a new final row showing change over time and extent of change in the marriage equality approval variable MARHOMO when the instances of the alternative wording version of the marriage equality question (MARHOMO1 in 2006-2018) are excluded. The corrected MARHOMO slope is a liberalization of 1.67 percentage points per year, still an outlier among the broad set of American attitudes but not quite as much of an outlier as previously measured. The mean rate of change among all 504 GSS attitudes through 2018 was 0.34 percentage points per year, increasing approval or disapproval in each measured attitude per year.

The MARHOMO1 slope (not shown) was changing at a rate of 2.68 percentage points per year, higher than the rate of change of the fastest changing previously measured attitude. As quickly as attitudes about marriage equality were changing in the 1988-2022 period, the actual policy liberalization towards marriage equality from 2006 to 2018 (the period covered by the MARHOMO1 wording) was changing even faster.

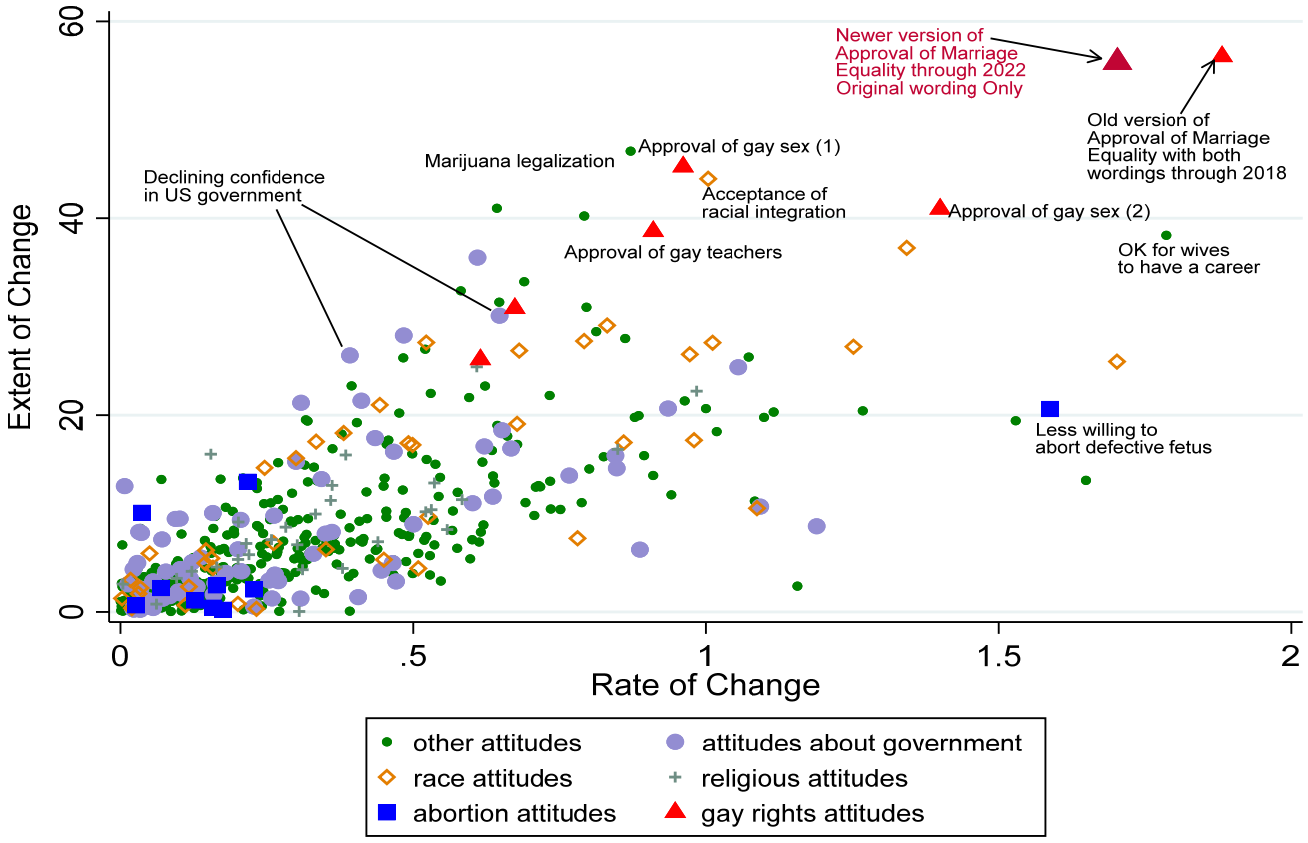

Figure 2: Weighted rate of change and extent of change of all 504 GSS Variables through 2018, plus the recalculated new version of MARHOMO with original wording only through 2022.

Figure 2 is a graphic representation of the same data as Table 1 (adapted from Rosenfeld 2021, Figure 8.2). All 504 GSS variables measured at least 3 times and over at least 10 years in the 1972-2018 GSS are represented here. In the upper right-hand corner is the old measurement of change in approval of marriage equality, combining both wording versions of MARHOMO through 2018. Next to it, still a far outlier in the set of all attitudes but not quite as far as it once

appeared to be on the X axis, is the recalculated liberalization of MARHOMO through 2022, using only the original wording.

For the purpose of measuring attitudes towards marriage equality, the MARHOMO original wording (including 'should') is the correct and more appropriate wording because the original wording inquires more directly about the attitudes of the survey subject. The apparently inadvertent MARHOMO1 wording is a question more about what the marriage equality policy *is*, rather than what the subject thinks the policy *should be*.

Combining the two different wordings (as they were combined into one variable in the data releases before 2020, due to the GSS failure to identify the inadvertent wording change in the surveys) yielded a slight over-estimate of the rate of change in *attitudes* in the GSS data through 2016 and through 2018 by conflating attitudes with assessment of policy changes.

Now with the ability to correct the GSS time series data about approval of marriage equality using only MARHOMO data from questions with the original wording, I can reconfirm that American attitudes towards marriage equality remain one of the fastest changing attitudes in American history. The extent of change, from 11.8% support in 1988 to 67.5% support in 2022, a difference of 55.7%, would be easily the greatest extent of change of any attitude in the GSS through 2016 or 2018. I have not yet recalculated the rate and extent of change of every GSS attitude through 2022 for comparison, as the radical shifts in GSS administration during the pandemic make comparisons with pre-pandemic values somewhat dubious.

Furthermore, the inadvertent wording change reported here only affected MARHOMO, not the other GSS questions about gay rights. As Table 1 and Figure 2 show and as I have previously shown (Rosenfeld 2017; Rosenfeld 2021), the gay rights questions as a group have liberalized much more over time than any other identifiable group of attitudes in US history, and this remains true after re-estimating MARHOMO change over time with the original wording only.

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