

**Moving a Mountain:  
The Extraordinary Trajectory of Same-Sex Marriage Approval in the U.S.**

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**Abstract:**

Most public opinion attitudes in the U.S. are reasonably stable over time. Using data from the General Social Survey and the American National Election Studies, I quantify typical change rates across all attitudes. I quantify the extent to which change in same-sex marriage approval (and liberalization in attitudes toward gay rights in general) are among a small set of rapid changing outliers in surveyed public opinions. No measured public opinion attitude in the U.S. has changed more, and more quickly, than same-sex marriage. I use survey data from Newsweek to illustrate the rapid increase in the 1980s and 1990s in Americans who had friends or family who they knew to be gay or lesbian, and to demonstrate how contact with out-of-the-closet gays and lesbians was influential. I discuss several potential historical and social movement theory explanations for the rapid liberalization of attitudes toward gay rights in the U.S., including the surprising influence of Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign.

## Moving a Mountain: The Extraordinary Trajectory of Same-Sex Marriage Approval In the U.S.

Most public opinion attitudes change slowly over time (Alwin and Krosnick 1991). In contrast to the typical stability of public opinion on most issues, the liberalization of American attitudes toward gay rights has been revolutionary. Just a few years ago, many scholars (D'Emilio 2014; Klarman 2013; Rosenberg 2008) believed that same-sex marriage was so unlikely to be achieved soon in the U.S., that action pushing for same-sex marriage rights was likely to be counter-productive.

Page and Shapiro (1992) described a fundamental stability in mean public opinion across more than 1,000 repeated U.S. public opinion survey questions for 1935-1990. For Page and Shapiro, the finding that most public opinions had a stable mean over time reinforced their argument that the U.S. public was (in the aggregate) rational rather than arbitrary or capricious. I update the Page and Shapiro findings with measures of change across all public opinion attitudes from the General Social Survey 1972-2016, and the American National Election Studies for 1952- 2012, to benchmark the typical and outlier levels of public opinion change. Following Page and Shapiro I examine the mean of public opinion attitudes, rather than the variances of attitude variables.<sup>1</sup> If change in support for same-sex marriage (and toward gay rights in general) is unusual, how unusual is it?

In 1988, only 11.6% of Americans thought same-sex couples should have the legal right to marry. In 2016, 59.2% of Americans thought same-sex couples should have the legal right to marry, an approval rate that increased (since 1988) by more than 47 percentage points. Attitudes toward abortion rights reflect the more typical pattern of stability over time. In 1972 48.9% of Americans thought a poor woman should have access to legal abortion if she could not afford more children, compared to 43.9% of Americans who thought abortion should be legal in the same circumstances in 2016. I will show that public opinion support for same-sex marriage in the U.S. is an outlier in various measures of opinion change over time. Attitudes toward gay rights appear to have changed more, and more quickly, than other categories of attitudes. I quantify for the first time how unusual change in approval of same-sex marriage (and approval of gay rights in general) has been.

I use data from a variety of sources to describe some of the potential reasons why American attitudes toward gay rights liberalized as quickly as they did. My description of the potential sources of attitude change is not meant to be exhaustive. I focus below on two potential explanations for attitude liberalization toward gay rights in the U.S. The first potential explanation for liberalization of attitudes toward gay rights is the effect on public opinion of Bill Clinton's pro-gay-rights campaign promises during the presidential campaign of 1992. Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign emerges from the data as a potential source of attitudinal change toward gay rights in the U.S. because public opinion data show 1992 to be the beginning of a historic liberalization in approval of gay rights in the U.S.

Because the speed of liberalization toward gay rights in the U.S. has been historically unusual, it is especially important to examine potential sources for attitude change that are specific to gays and lesbians. General explanations for society-wide liberalization on social issues fail to account for why American attitudes toward gay rights have undergone *more* liberalization than attitudes on other issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Rising variance within political attitudes would imply polarization, which is an important subject in its own right, but a subject which is beyond the scope of this paper. Even if the U.S. has experienced polarization around political party identification (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012) or polarization around a narrow set of issues such as abortion that are closely tied to political party identification (Evans 2003), the societal average political party identification and the societal average support for abortion rights have been relatively stable over time.

Coming out of the closet, a process that is unique to gays and lesbians, is the second explanation for attitude change I focus on below. Research on Intergroup Contact Theory suggests that person-to-person contact is especially effective at dispelling prejudice against people from sexual minorities (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). I show below that in the 1990s there was a sharp rise in the percentage of Americans who reported having a gay or lesbian friend. I show that (consistent with prior literature, see Herek and Glunt 1993) having gay or lesbian friends was a potentially powerful factor in moving Americans toward more approval of gay rights.

### **Stability and Change in Public Opinion:**

The stability of most core social and political attitudes owes to several factors. The transition to adulthood tends to crystalize attitudes within the individual (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Sears and Funk 1999), meaning that on most core issues individuals have consistent attitudes over their adult lives. Society-wide demographic changes (such as immigration or cohort changes in educational attainment) that might change public opinion are necessarily slow changes. Cohort replacement is an inherently slow process, relying as it does on the mortality and senescence of the older generations (Ryder 1965). Within the general stability of American attitudes, the pace of liberalizing attitudes toward same-sex marriage stands out as an important outlier.

Perhaps because stability is usually the rule in public opinion, or because same-sex marriage attitudes changed more quickly in the U.S. than scholars anticipated, many scholars had until recently assumed that opposition to same-sex marriage in the U.S. would be insurmountable (D'Emilio 2014; Klarman 2013; Rosenberg 2008). Gerald Rosenberg (2008) argued that U.S. courts would be unable to bring about social change with respect to same-sex marriage. When Rosenberg published the second edition of his book *The Hollow Hope* in 2008, same-sex marriage in the U.S. was legal only in Massachusetts and Connecticut, and the U.S. Federal government did not recognize same-sex marriages from any jurisdiction, because of the Defense Of Marriage Act of 1996. In 2008, 39% of U.S. adults favored legalizing same-sex marriage. State referenda in the U.S. on same-sex marriage had dealt the proponents of same-sex marriage nearly three dozen losses in a row. A history of losses in statewide referenda made it difficult for scholars to visualize the possibility that same-sex marriage could become the law of the land in the U.S. just a few years later.

### **Theories of Change:**

To explain the very unusual change in public opinion toward gay rights in the U.S. I emphasize below two potential causes for opinion change that are specific to gay rights. The first source of public opinion liberalization toward gay rights I focus on below is the presidential campaign of Bill Clinton in 1992. Bill Clinton may seem to be an unlikely candidate to identify as an engine of positive change in attitudes toward gays and lesbians in the U.S. Gay rights leaders (Vaid 1995) have tended to view Clinton's presidency as unfavorable toward gay rights, because of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (which forced gay and lesbian military service people into the closet), and the Defense of Marriage Act of 1996 (which blocked recognition of same-sex marriage), both signed by President Clinton, and both of which represented fundamental setbacks for gay rights. Despite Bill Clinton's decidedly mixed reputation with respect to gay rights, time series opinion data show a distinctly pro-gay rights impact of the early years of the Clinton presidency. Starting in 1992, American public opinion reversed a long trend and became more favorable to gay rights, across all birth cohorts. Bill Clinton's advocacy for gay rights during his 1992 presidential campaign seems to have had an effect on Americans' perceptions of gay rights (Chauncey 2004; Wilcox et al. 2007).

#### a) Political Opportunity Structure

On issues where people have no personal experience to draw upon, elite opinions tend to be persuasive (Zaller 1992). Up until 1992, elite opinion in the U.S. had always been uniformly antigay. Most heterosexual Americans did not know anything about gays and lesbians because most gays and lesbians were closeted. Gays and lesbians were closeted because they were persecuted and lacked fundamental rights. The closet only enhanced the ability of politicians and conservative religious leaders to caricature gays and lesbians as dangerous and abnormal, since the closet kept heterosexual people from actually knowing gays and lesbians. Elite opinion was the only guide heterosexual Americans had about gays and lesbians, and elite opinion had always been antigay when gays and lesbians were mentioned at all. Elite allies are one key dimension that governs the ability of minority rights social movements to advance, according to the Political Opportunity Structure component of Political Process Theory (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; McAdam 1982). In his promises, if not in his deeds, President Bill Clinton was in 1992 the most important and powerful ally the gay rights movement in the U.S. had ever had.

#### b) Intergroup Contact Theory

The second source of public opinion change I examine below is the influence of gays and lesbians themselves, as they came out of the closet in great numbers in the 1990s. Coming out appears to have pushed U.S. public opinion toward a more liberal view of gay rights. Herek and Glunt (1993) found that the one-to-one interpersonal contact between friends or family members that “let you know that they were homosexual,” was the key in explaining liberalization in attitudes toward gay men. Intergroup Contact Theory is the theory that personal interaction between individuals from different groups should lead to a diminution of bias and mistrust between the groups. Gordon Allport’s (1954) book *The Nature of Prejudice* was the seminal work arguing that contact between individuals of different groups could reduce intergroup prejudice if the individuals from the different groups met in a situation of equal status, and if law or the authorities supported interaction as equals. Research on Contact Theory shows that contact with sexual minority individuals is more effective at dispelling prejudice than is contact with other kinds of minorities (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), because sexual minorities are generally decategorized (i.e. unidentifiable as minorities) at first contact. Intergroup Contact is less effective at dispelling prejudice between racial minorities or gender groups, because people enter into interactions with identifiable others by viewing the others through a specific (and potentially prejudiced) frame (Ridgeway 2011).

#### c) Frame Alignment

Research on the social movement theory of Frame Alignment (Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson 1992) emphasizes the special power of interpersonal contact and personal experience to make social movement frames resonant and convincing. Frame alignment theory suggests that gays and lesbians coming out of the closet, and interacting as gays and lesbians with their heterosexual friends, coworkers, and families, should have made favorable framing of gays and lesbians more resonant. The movement for same-sex marriage leveraged the ideas of frame alignment to put committed same-sex couples, seeking marriage, before the public (Solomon 2014; Wolfson and Polaski 2016). In order for gay rights and same-sex marriage rights to prevail in the arena of public opinion in the U.S., the gay-positive frames of commitment and love had to prevail in the public mind over the antigay frames of pathology and abnormality that had been effectively promulgated by the Christian Right for decades (Cahill 2007; Goldberg 2010). In contested political issues, for every frame there is a counter-frame. One side’s frame cannot become resonant and convincing without discrediting (to some degree) the opponents’ counter-frames.

#### d) Resource Allocation

The growing power and influence of the gay rights movement in the 1980s and 1990s represents another potential explanation for the rapid liberalization in attitudes toward gay rights. A focus on the growth of a gay rights social movement as a driver of social change would be consistent with the Political Process Theory of social change (McAdam 1982), and with Resource Allocation Theory (McCarthy and Zald 1977). It must be noted, however, that anti-gay-rights groups also had social movement organizations. Gay rights social movement groups did not operate in a vacuum of uncontested political space. Some anti-gay-rights groups had been active and influential for decades before the gay rights groups first emerged. I show below that the forces arrayed against gay rights in the U.S. were always more powerful than the forces arrayed in favor of gay rights and in favor of same-sex marriage. Even a decade into the AIDS crisis, national gay rights groups were raising only a tiny fraction of the funds being mobilized against them. In the 1990s there were no pro-gay-rights equivalents to the energy, influence, and resources of anti-gay-rights groups such as the Republican Party, the Catholic Church, the Christian right, the Mormon Church, and Christian Right group Focus on the Family (Vaid 1995). From a resource mobilization perspective (McCarthy and Zald 1977), there was no reason to believe that same-sex marriage could prevail in the U.S.

#### **Data and Methods:**

I analyze data from the General Social Survey 1972-2016 cumulative file (Smith et al. 2017b; hereafter GSS). The GSS is a repeated cross-sectional data set of face-to-face nationally representative surveys of U.S. residents 18 and older, with response rates of 61% and above.<sup>2</sup> The GSS cumulative file has more than 5,000 variables, but most of these variables relate to questions that were not asked repeatedly over time. I identified 483 GSS attitude variables that were asked at least 3 times over a span of at least 10 years.<sup>3</sup> For the racial attitude variables that were not asked of black respondents in the 1970s (Smith et al. 2017a), I made the variables consistent by dropping black respondents from later years for those variables. All GSS analyses are weighted to account for respondent family size and oversampling of minorities. The text for GSS variable “marhomo” (available 1988-2016) read: “Do you agree or disagree: Homosexual Couples should have the right to marry one another.” Valid responses were 1 (strongly agree); 2 (agree); 3 (neither agree nor disagree); 4 (disagree); and 5 (strongly disagree).

I use the terms “same-sex marriage” and “marriage equality” interchangeably, to denote a legal regime in which same-sex couples have the same legal rights and benefits from marriage as heterosexual couples. I use the term “gay rights” to refer to rights for gays and lesbians.

I use GSS variable “homosex” as an indicator of public opinion tolerance of gay rights and tolerance of gay people. The text for GSS variable “homosex” (available 1973-2016, extending 15 years further into the past than GSS variable “marhomo”) read: “What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex?” with valid responses ranging from 1 (always wrong) to 4 (not wrong at all).

I supplement the analysis of GSS data with analysis of data from the 1948-2012 cumulative data file for the American National Election Studies (2015; hereafter ANES, actual data for repeated variables

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<sup>2</sup> I rely on the cross sectional GSS data, rather than on the GSS panel data which began in 2006, because I am interested in attitudinal changes from before 2006.

<sup>3</sup> I exclude the system variables (year, weight, interview type, etc.) from the set of attitude variables, I exclude the demographic characteristics of subject or the household (subject’s race, relationship to nth person on the household roster, subject’s religious affiliation, income, education, etc.), and I exclude variables that describe behavior, health, experiences, or the subject’s current job (quality of management-employee relations at current firm, has subject ever been arrested, whether subject recycles cans and bottles, etc.).

cover 1952 to 2012). ANES studies surveyed representative samples of U.S citizens of voting age in the lower 48 states. Face-to-face was the ANES survey mode for 82.6% of respondents, the remainder were a mix of face-to-face, Internet, and telephone interviews. ANES response rates varied across survey years, survey modes, and whether the survey was conducted before or after election day. The ANES cumulative data file does not include a question about same-sex marriage, but the ANES data did include 6 repeated questions about gay rights.<sup>4</sup> The ANES cumulative data file includes 187 general attitude variables that were surveyed at least 3 times over a span of at least 10 years.<sup>5</sup> In the list of general attitudes in the ANES I excluded attitudes about candidates that were specific to one election cycle. The datasets of summary statistics from GSS and ANES attitude variables are available from the author. The GSS questions are more consistent over time compared to the ANES questions (Taylor 2013), and this results in the rate of change of the average ANES variable being greater than the rate of change of the average GSS variable, as I note below.

I measure extent of change, EC over time for each attitudinal variable by

$EC = |(P_{Y-last}) - (P_{Y-first})|$ , where  $P_{Y-first}$  is the weighted dichotomous approval or support percentage for the attitude variable in the first year it was measured, and  $P_{Y-last}$  is the weighted dichotomous approval or support percentage for the same attitude variable in the last year it was measured.

I use several measures of rate of change for each attitude variable  $Y_i$  over  $j$  measured years and  $k$  individual responses, estimated with regressions with year as the only independent variable.

$F_n(Y_{i,j,k}) = C_i(\text{Year}) + \text{const}_i + \varepsilon_{i,j,k}$ , and ignoring the constants and the errors. The measure of rate of change is the absolute value of the slope coefficient from each regression,  $RC_i = |C_i|$ . The measure of rate of change I use in figures 1 and 3 below is derived from weighted ordered logistic regressions (Long and Freese 2001; Winship and Mare 1984), regressing each attitude variable on year, and using the absolute value of the coefficient for year as a measure of each variable's change per year on the log odds scale. Ordered logistic regression is indifferent to the number of ordinal categories involved in each particular attitude question, which is important because the GSS and ANES attitude questions varied between 2 and 100 potential answers.<sup>6</sup> Ordered logistic regression is a weighted average of the  $k-1$  possible dichotomous logistic regression coefficients that can be constructed from an ordinal variable

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<sup>4</sup> ANES surveys were late in including a question about same-sex marriage, which is why the ANES cumulative file through 2012, which was designed to include only questions that had been asked in at least 3 separate time series studies, did not include data from questions about same-sex marriage. Separate ANES time series surveys had fielded questions about same-sex marriage in 2008-09, and again in 2012.

<sup>5</sup> By limiting the analysis to attitudes that were measured at least 3 times over a span of at least 10 years, I eliminate some rapid changing variables whose referent was temporal and subject to change, so as to focus on attitude stability (or change) for questions where the referent was stable over time. For an example of public opinion change with respect to unstable referents, Page and Shapiro (1992) report that the percentage of Americans who thought the Vietnam War was "a mistake" rose by about 30% in four years between 1967 and 1971. The Vietnam War itself changed during that time, as setbacks on the battle field led to rapid erosion of Americans' expectations that the war could be won. ANES variable VCF0826 was a general question about involvement in war that was made specific to Vietnam for 1964-72, "Do you think we did the right thing in getting into the fighting in Vietnam or should we have stayed out?" Answers were "No, should have stayed out," and "Yes, did the right thing." In 1964-72, the percentage of Americans who thought the US should have stayed out of Vietnam rose from 22.5% to 56.9%.

<sup>6</sup> Empirically, the ordered logit coefficients in GSS and ANES attitude variables were uncorrelated with the number of categories in each attitude variable.

with  $k$  ordered categories.<sup>7</sup> Ordered logistic regression requires no collapsing of categories, and excludes only the out-of-order “other” and “don’t know” answers.

Additional measures of public opinion rate of change over time include a) standardized ordinal attitudes regressed on year via Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression (after first transforming the  $Y_i$  into standardized variables, with mean 0 and standard deviation 1), and b) unstandardized dichotomized versions of the variables regressed on year via OLS regression. The unstandardized OLS regression slope is the percentage point change in approval rate per year. The substantive findings are robust across the different indices of rate of change.

Two measures of rate of change, ordered logistic regression and standardized OLS use all the ordinal categories of each attitude variable. The unstandardized OLS measure of rate of change, and the measure of extent of change, both require variables to be reduced to dichotomies. For variables with neutral middle categories such as the GSS same-sex marriage variable “marhomo,” I coded the “neither approve nor disapprove” category along with the “disapprove” categories. An alternate set of measures of change, available from the author, that drops the neutral categories entirely when generating the dichotomous measures, would make the variables with neutral categories (such as “marhomo”) appear to have faster rates of change and greater extents of change.

I examine survey data from Newsweek (1985; 1994; 1996; 1997; 2000; 2008) which included questions about whether respondents had gay or lesbian friends, gay or lesbian coworkers, or gay or lesbian family members. The Newsweek data allow for an analysis of the timing of when gays and lesbians came out of the closet in the U.S. The Newsweek data also allow for an examination of the potential effect of gays and lesbians coming out of the closet on American attitudes about same-sex marriage. Questions about whether Americans had gay or lesbian friends, coworkers, or family members were not included in ANES, and were not asked often enough or early enough in GSS to allow for analysis of change over time.<sup>8</sup> One of the reasons that emergence from the closet is under-studied among scholars who do quantitative analyses of public opinion and gay rights in the U.S., is that the big omnibus attitude surveys in the U.S. (such as GSS and ANES) failed to include the relevant questions early enough. My analysis of the Newsweek data therefore fills an important gap in the empirical literature on public opinion and gay rights in the U.S. I use data from the National Center on Charitable Statistics (2016) to describe the revenue of national gay rights and the revenue of national anti-gay-rights groups in the U.S. since 1989.

### **Results Part 1: Documenting the Outlier Status of Attitude Change toward Gay Rights**

[Tables 1 and 2 here]

Table 1 shows summary data on the extent of change, and the rate of change (by different measures) of the 483 GSS attitude variables. The mean change from first observation to last was 8.27 percentage points, and the median extent of change in approval (or disapproval) of each attitude variable was 5.44 percentage points. The mean slope for GSS variables was 0.34 percentage points

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, with ordinal categories 1, 2, and 3, there are two choices for inclusive dichotomous logit regression: 1 vs (2 and 3 combined); or (1 and 2 combined) vs. 3. Tests reject the validity of the proportional odds assumption for most attitude variables, which simply means that most of the categorical variables (with more than 2 categories) change over time in ways more complicated than a single ordered logit coefficient can fully describe. Long and Freese point out (2001 p.152) that the proportional odds assumption does not usually hold.

<sup>8</sup> In 2006, GSS fielded a module of questions about whether subjects had gay friends, family or coworkers, but these questions were not repeated in subsequent years.

change per year, and median variable changed at a rate of 0.24 percentage points per year. The standardized OLS regressions show that the mean attitude variable changed by a very modest 0.0085 standard deviations per year (or 0.0064 standard deviations per year at the median). Stability would appear to be the rule across the broad set of public opinions measured by the GSS.

Among the different categories of variables, the gay rights attitudes had the largest extent of public opinion change, and the fastest rate of change. In the linear OLS regression slope ninety five percent of the 483 GSS attitudes had slopes that corresponded to less than change of 0.97 percentage points per year. The six gay rights questions in the GSS changed by an average of 1.01 percentage points per year. Approval of same-sex marriage (GSS variable “marhomo”) changed by 1.76 percentage points per year in the OLS regression. The approval of same-sex marriage, which increased by more than 47 percentage points in approval, was the single largest extent of change recorded in the GSS data.<sup>9</sup>

Table 2 shows a similar analysis for the 187 ANES attitude variables. Compared to the GSS, the ANES data have a greater average extent of change for attitude variables (12.24 percentage points in ANES compared to 8.27 percentage points in GSS), in part due to the fact that the ANES covers a longer span of time (1952-2012) than the GSS (1972-2016). The average ANES attitude variable was measured over a span of 32.5 years, compared to a 25.2 year span for the average GSS attitude variable. Compared to the GSS, ANES attitude variables also had a higher average rate of change by each measure of rate of change, in part because the ANES variables are less consistent over time in question wording and answer order than are questions in the GSS.<sup>10</sup> The mean rate of change for ANES attitude variables was 0.43 percentage points change per year in approval (or disapproval) compared to 0.34 percentage points change per year in the GSS, and the median change per year was 0.27 percentage points per year in ANES (compared to 0.24 percentage points per year in the GSS). As with the GSS data, the gay rights variables in ANES appear to have changed more and more rapidly than other variable categories, by every measure of extent and rate of change.

The categorization of attitude variables I present in Table 1 and 2 (gay rights, race, religion, government, abortion) is necessarily somewhat arbitrary; a different classification of attitude variables in to groups could yield another group of attitudes that changed as much or as quickly as the attitudes toward gay rights have changed. My point is not that the attitudes toward same-sex marriage (and toward gay rights in general) changed more than any other attitudes have changed. Rather, I argue that attitudes toward same-sex marriage (and toward gay rights in general) are among a small set of outliers, the fast changing attitudes in a sea of mostly stable and slow changing American attitudes.

[Figure 1 here]

Figure one shows a scatterplot of 483 GSS attitude variables, indexed by extent of change on the Y axis, and indexed by rate of change using weighted ordered logistic regressions of each variable on

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<sup>9</sup> A different measure of extent of change that dropped the middle neutral categories of variables that had them (treating “neither approve or disapprove” as “don’t know”), would put several variables, including the intermarriage variables “marblk,” “marhisp,” and “marasian” at a greater extent of change than “marhomo,” because in the intermarriage variables, the neutral category “neither favor nor oppose” was generally the most common answer.

<sup>10</sup> The ANES has more variables whose wording has changed over survey waves, which could contribute to apparent (but misleading) estimates of attitude change. Two outliers from Figure 3 serve as examples. ANES variable VCF0675, trust in the media, saw answer options in reverse order in 2008. ANES variable VCF0225, from 1970-1984 asked respondents how much they supported “the women’s liberation movement.” In 1986 and after, the same question referred to “the women’s movement.”

year in the X axis. Both extent of change and rate of change are important. Some public opinions changed slowly over a long period of time and other public opinions changed erratically or sharply over a short period of time.<sup>11</sup> Figure 1 shows that public opinion toward same-sex marriage is an outlier both in extent of change (Y axis) and in rate of change (X axis).

The majority of variables are in the lower left corner of Figure 1, representing little extent of change, and weak rate of change over time.<sup>12</sup> Same-sex marriage approval (GSS variable “marhomo”) was the single furthest outlier on the Y axis, as same-sex marriage went from 11.63% approval in 1988 to 59.17% approval in 2016, for a change of 47.55 percentage points. Among the variables in Figure 1 which changed most in extent of approval over time are several variables that document long term decline in Americans’ confidence in fundamental institutions: Congress (“conlegis”), and the executive branch of the federal government (“confed”); see Chanley et al (2000) and Smith (2012).<sup>13</sup>

Figure 1 shows that increased approval for marijuana legalization, GSS variable “grass,”<sup>14</sup> is an outlier but not as much of an outlier in rate of change as approval of same-sex marriage. Schnabel and Sevell (2017) find change in attitudes toward marijuana legalization and change in approval of same-sex marriage to be more similar, because they (reasonably) trimmed the marijuana legalization variable to cover the same years as the GSS data on same-sex marriage approval. Approval of marijuana legalization in the U.S. increased in the 1970s but declined in the 1980s, before increasing sharply after 1990.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The log odds transformation in the ordered logit regressions exaggerates changes when approval rates are close to zero or one; a change of approval rate from 0.1% to 1% would yield a large log odds coefficient, but such a change would be small on the Y axis, and probably would represent little or no substantive change in public opinion. The Y axis measure of extent of change is positively correlated with the range of years across which each attitude was measured, while the X axis rate of change is negatively correlated with the range of years across which each attitude was observed.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that the extent of change and rate of change measures I employ here are measures of sustained change in one direction, and therefore understate the change in variables whose change during one period was reversed during a later period. For instance, McAdam (1996 p.351) reported on Gallup data about “the most important problems confronting the country.” The percentage of Americans who picked “Civil Rights” or “Racial Problems” as the most important problem rose from approximately 5% to 50% within 1963 (from before to after the March on Washington). By 1965, the percentage of Americans who picked Civil Rights as the most important problem had returned to below 20%.

<sup>13</sup> GSS question wording: “I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them? Answers were “A great deal,” “Only some,” and “Hardly any.” For the dichotomous measure of extent of change, I coded the first two categories together. The Supreme Court is missing from the list of institutions that Americans trust dramatically less than they used to. The GSS question about confidence in the Supreme Court, GSS variable “conjudge” showed only slight decline in confidence over time, with an ordered logit change coefficient of 0.0045, much smaller than the average of 0.017 across all variables. In 2016, 19.4% of Americans had “hardly any” confidence in the Supreme Court, compared to 52.6% who had hardly any confidence in Congress, and 42.2% who had hardly any confidence in the executive branch of the federal government.

<sup>14</sup> GSS variable “grass” wording: “Do you think the use of marijuana should be made legal or not?” with answers “legal,” or “not legal.” Limiting the GSS marijuana legalization variable to 1988 and after would yield an absolute value ordered logit (rate of change) regression coefficient of 0.068, compared to 0.066 for same-sex marriage approval. On the extent of change Y axis (which examines only end points), same-sex marriage change 1988-2016 would still be greater than the extent of change in marijuana legalization approval (measured in the same time frame), as same-sex marriage had lower approval in 1988.

<sup>15</sup> Every comparison of attitude change over time depends on arbitrary inputs (such as the years over which the attitude was measured), plus arbitrary decisions made by the researcher (such as how to compare variables with 5 categories, like “marhomo” to variables with two categories such as “grass”). Same-sex marriage attitude change is clearly an outlier in change in the GSS, but the exact extent of the outlier status depends on the measure used.

Among the 10 abortion attitude variables in Figure 1, only one of the variables, “geneabr” changed substantially. Between 1990 and 2004, fewer Americans said they would have an abortion if they or their partner was carrying a fetus with a “serious genetic defect.” The other abortion and abortion rights attitudes recorded in the GSS changed only modestly (Wilcox and Carr 2010).<sup>16</sup>

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 2 shows the time trends in weighted GSS data for approval of abortion rights in the left panel, and approval of gay rights in the right panel. Consistent with what we see in Figure 1 and Table 1 above, the abortion rights questions were all relatively flat or slightly declining in approval over time, except for GSS variable “geneabr” whose approval rate declined sharply. Among the GSS gay rights questions, approval of same-sex marriage shows the sharpest upward slope, which again is consistent with the summary of rate of change and extent of change measures in Figure 1.

[Figure 3 here]

Figure 3 shows a scatter plot of all 187 ANES general attitude variables that were fielded at least 3 times over a span of at least 10 years. Despite the tendency for ANES attitude variables to be recorded as having changed more than GSS attitude variables (in both rate of change and extent of change measures), none of the ANES attitude variables are above and to the right of same-sex marriage approval (from the GSS) in Figure 3. None of the ANES attitude variables dominate the increasing approval of same-sex marriage in both X axis (rate of change) and Y axis (extent of change) measures. ANES included 6 general attitude questions about gay rights. All of the gay rights attitude measures in ANES underwent historically impressive liberalization.

Figure 3 indicates several of the ANES Civil Rights attitude questions whose approval changed decisively over time, particularly in the 1960s. Some of the Civil Rights attitudes changed at a faster rate (X axis) than attitudes toward same-sex marriage, though none of the Civil Rights attitudes changed as much over time (Y axis) as attitudes toward gay marriage in the U.S. changed between 1988 and 2016 (measured in the GSS). Attitudes toward open housing, and whether whites had the right to exclude blacks from neighborhoods (ANES variable VCF0819)<sup>17</sup>, changed sharply from 1964 to 1976, with whites becoming more approving (in principle) of integration. In 1968, the first Fair Housing Act was passed (Massey and Denton 1993). Between 1970 and 1986, Americans became less hostile toward black militants (ANES variable VCF0215). And between 1964 and 1992, Americans became more sympathetic to the Civil Rights movement, by agreeing less with the statement that the Civil Rights movement had pushed too fast (ANES variable VCF0814).

Some race-related public opinions (such as willingness to tolerate integration) changed at historically rapid rates during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and immediately after. In subsequent decades the trends in American public opinion about race and Civil Rights have been less clear. While support for old fashioned racism continued to decline, white opposition to government aid to blacks (and opposition to affirmative action in particular) increased (Bobo et al. 2012). There is, in the

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<sup>16</sup> Evans (2003) noted that American attitudes about abortion had become more polarized, i.e. the variance of the abortion attitude variables increased over time, a finding which does not contradict my finding that the average support for abortion rights has been remarkably flat over time.

<sup>17</sup> ANES question VCF0819 wording: “Some people say that Negroes should be allowed to live in any part of town they want to. How do you feel? Should Negroes be allowed to live in any part of town they want to, or not?” Valid answers were “White people have a right to keep Negroes out of their neighborhoods if they want to,” and “Negroes have a right to live wherever they can afford to, just like anybody else.”

public opinion record and in the ethnographic record (Hochschild 2016), evidence of a long simmering white backlash against Civil Rights.

## Results Part 2: Explanations for Change in Attitudes toward Gay Rights

[Figure 4 here]

Figure 4 shows the national average of American adults who thought that gay sex was “always wrong.” GSS variable “homosex” is closely related to attitudes about gay rights and same-sex marriage. In 2006 (for example), of the GSS respondents who said that gay sex was “always wrong,” only 13% thought that same-sex marriage should be legal. Of 2006 GSS respondents who said that gay sex was “almost always wrong,” an answer that is only subtly different from “always wrong,” approval of same-sex marriage was much higher: 41%. Of 2006 GSS respondents who said that gay sex was “not wrong at all,” 84% said that same-sex marriage should be legal. How Americans feel about gay rights is closely related to the way they feel about the morality of gay sex.

The year 1991 stands out as the approximate high water mark for American intolerance toward gays and lesbians. From 1973 to 1991, Americans steadily became more hostile toward gay and lesbian people, with 77% of American adults agreeing in 1987 and again in 1991 that sex between two people of the same sex was “always wrong.” After 1991, there was a sharp reversal, as a rapid increase in tolerance toward gays and lesbians enabled crucial breakthroughs in gay rights.

I superimpose historical markers on the attitude trend data in Figure 4 in order to identify which historical events were most proximate to periods of greatest attitude change. I start with a historical event that did not have much apparent effect on attitudes towards gay rights at the time, but became important several decades later: the defeat of Ronald Reagan’s ultra-conservative Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork in 1987. Bork was nominated to fill the seat of retiring Justice Lewis Powell. Bork had been a steadfast opponent of almost every Civil Rights victory in the U.S. since the 1940s (Gitenstein 1992). Bork also had a sharply antigay judicial record, but since gays and lesbians had lost almost every U.S. court battle up to that point (Murdoch and Price 2001), Bork’s antigay judicial record was not so unusual. With Bork’s defeat in the U.S. Senate,<sup>18</sup> Reagan nominated Douglas Ginsburg, but had to quickly withdraw Ginsburg’s nomination when reports of Ginsburg’s marijuana use surfaced. Reagan’s third choice to fill Powell’s seat was Anthony Kennedy. Kennedy was confirmed 97-0 in the Senate.

Anthony Kennedy had (like Bork) ruled on several cases involving gay rights, and had (like Bork) ruled against the gay plaintiffs in every case, so he may not have appeared to be so different from Bork on the issue of gay rights in 1987. Hardly anyone in the top echelons of U.S. political life was actively promoting or was even sensitive to gay rights in 1987. Over the next 30 years, Kennedy’s view of gay people and gay rights would evolve, paralleling the liberalization of attitudes toward gay rights in the U.S. as a whole. Kennedy would go on to author the majority opinion in the four gay rights victories in the Supreme Court: *Romer v. Evans* (1996); *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003b, overturning *Bowers v. Hardwick*); *U.S. v. Windsor* (2013, striking down part of the Defense of Marriage Act of 1996); and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015, making marriage equality the law across the U.S.). Yet at the time of Kennedy’s confirmation in 1987, Kennedy had a record of no particular distinction on gay rights issues. In fact, the

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<sup>18</sup> After losing his confirmation battle in the U.S. Senate in 1987, Bork continued to be just as implacably hostile to gay rights (see, for instance, Bork 2004). There is little doubt that if Bork had been confirmed to the Supreme Court instead of Kennedy, that the 5-4 decisions in *Obergefell v. Hodges* and in *U.S. v. Windsor*, both favoring gay rights by margins of a single vote with Kennedy in the majority, would have been decided against marriage equality with Bork on the court (Mogill 2015).

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force was one of the few groups that opposed Kennedy's confirmation (Gitenstein 1992 p.319).

### **AIDS**

The AIDS crisis broke into the national consciousness in 1981 and 1982 when the first infections of the previously unknown immune-suppressing HIV virus (and its devastating associated opportunistic infections) were reported. Gay men were one of the groups that were especially victimized by AIDS, and they realized that their legal disabilities, including the inability to marry their life partners, left them all too often without the health care, medical access, hospital visitation rights, inheritance rights, and other legal rights that they needed. Gay men were forced, in the midst of the extreme crisis of AIDS, to organize themselves politically (Chauncey 2004). AIDS, and the Reagan administration's inattention to AIDS demonstrated to gay men that they needed to raise money and resources for political advocacy to gain rights, including marriage rights, that many gay men had dismissed as unnecessary or unattainable in the past (Chauncey 2004; Shilts [1987] 2000). Gay men needed to come out of the closet in order to do the political organizing and fundraising that the AIDS crisis demanded of them (Schmalz 1992b). Figure 4 shows, however, that the early years of the AIDS crisis, 1981-1988 did not immediately make Americans more tolerant of gay rights. In 1980, 74% of Americans said gay sex was "always wrong." In 1988, 77% of Americans said gay sex was "always wrong."

### **The role of Bill Clinton**

Figure 4 shows that the first great drop in American hostility toward gay people occurred around 1992, coincident with Bill Clinton's first campaign for the presidency of the U.S. In 1991, 77.4% of Americans told the GSS that sex between two people of the same sex was "always wrong." In 1993, the percentage of Americans saying that gay sex was "always wrong" had dropped to 66.1%, a drop of more than 11 percentage points in two years, a large and highly statistically significant drop. Only 5% of public opinion attitudes measured in the GSS have changed by as much as 1 percentage point per year. The average rate of change of attitudes in the GSS is 0.36 percentage points per year, see Table 1 above. Bill Clinton is not remembered fondly by gay rights activists (Vaid 1995) because of two Clinton policies that fundamentally hindered progress on gay rights: Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT), which put gay and lesbian military service people into the closet, and the Defense Of Marriage Act (DOMA) of 1996, which blocked Federal recognition of same-sex marriages.

During his 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton promised to repeal the ban on gay people serving in the military. Clinton's promise on gays in the military went unfulfilled during his administration, but the promise itself may have been influential and impactful. In 1992, Clinton attended a fundraising meeting of gay leaders from Los Angeles, and he told them, in an emotional statement, that he would happily give up his political career if he could find a cure for AIDS. Bill Clinton felt their pain. According to The New York Times' Schmalz, people made video tapes of that speech, and thousands of copies of Clinton's speech were circulated in the gay community. No main party presidential nominee had ever spoken from the heart before, affirming gay people and their struggles<sup>19</sup>. In Bill Clinton's nationally televised speech accepting the Democratic nomination in 1992, he referred to the gay community explicitly as part of a common America, a common America that the Republican party was (in Clinton's view) seeking to divide:

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<sup>19</sup> Bill Clinton's emotional speech making to gay rights leaders would have been mostly invisible to heterosexual Americans. Clinton's endorsement of gay rights goals surely helped gay rights leaders organize. Clinton's endorsement of gay rights may also have helped gays and lesbians feel secure enough to come out of the closet in greater numbers.

“The New Covenant is about more than opportunities and responsibilities for you and your families. It's also about our common community. Tonight every one of you knows deep in your heart that we are too divided. It is time to heal America. And so we must say to every American: Look beyond the stereotypes that blind us. We need each other - all of us - we need each other. We don't have a person to waste, and yet for too long politicians have told the most of us that are doing all right that what's really wrong with America is the rest of us- them. Them, the minorities. Them, the liberals. Them, the poor. Them, the homeless. Them, the people with disabilities. Them, the gays. We've gotten to where we've nearly them'ed ourselves to death. Them, and them, and them. But this is America. There is no them. There is only us. One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” (Clinton 1992)

The effect of Clinton's embrace of gay people on the biggest stage in American political life was electrifying, according to Schmalz's (1992b) reporting at the time. The fact that Bill Clinton's first campaign for the presidency coincided with a historically important liberalizing reversal in the trend of American attitudes toward gays and lesbians is suggestive, but does not prove that Bill Clinton's campaign was the cause of the attitudinal change. Compared to the wall of enthusiastic antigay discrimination that had come from prior administrations, Bill Clinton's talk of ending military discrimination against gays (even if he was not able to achieve it) has been seen by some reporters at the time and by subsequent scholars as revolutionary (Schmalz 1992a; Schmalz 1992b; Wilcox et al. 2007).

The bitter taste of DADT and DOMA led gay rights activists (Vaid 1995) to overlook the fact that in 1992 Bill Clinton was (at the time of his first presidential campaign) the most gay-positive leader the U.S. had ever had, by a wide margin. Bill Clinton's pro-gay-rights statements represented a change in the U.S. political opportunity structure (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996) in favor of gay rights activists. Frame Alignment theory (Benford and Snow 2000) helps to explain why Bill Clinton's symbolic embrace of gay people would have undermined the previously dominant political frame of stigma, abnormality, and perversity that American political leaders had previously applied to gays and lesbians. Elite opinion leaders (among whom the U.S. president is the most elite and therefore the most influential) have a powerful effect on public opinion, especially in areas where the public lacks personal experience (Zaller 1992). Before gays and lesbians in the U.S. had come out of the closet in sufficient numbers to turn the tide of opinion in the U.S. in favor of gay rights, elite opinion was probably the most important influence on Americans' views about gay rights.

[Figure 5 here]

### **Cross-generational evidence of a Period Shift toward Gay Rights:**

Figure 5 shows GSS data on the proportion of U.S. adults who say sexual relations between two adults of the same sex is “always wrong” (GSS variable “homosex”), by birth generation. The separation between the generations in Figure 5 demonstrates a powerful generational gap in attitudes about gay and lesbian people. The earlier the birth cohort, the more likely Americans were to think that sex between two people of the same sex was “always wrong.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The attitudinal difference between birth cohorts visible in Figure 5 means that cohort replacement can and did contribute to society-wide attitudinal change toward gay rights, even without individuals changing their attitudes (Rosenfeld 2007; Ryder 1965). Cohort replacement is an important factor in liberalization of American attitudes towards gay rights, however Baunach (2011) has estimated that less than half of the recorded liberalization is due to cohort replacement.

From 1973 to about 1990, with every passing year, the GI generation, the Silent Generation and the Baby Boom generations were becoming more intolerant of gay sex. Even as people from the Silent Generation began to experience mortality and were replaced in adult society by Baby Boomers and then by young adults from Generation X, American society was making everyone, regardless of birth cohort, more hostile to gay rights.

And then, around 1992, the GSS data record an important transition. Instead of adults within each generation becoming more hostile toward gay rights as they aged (as had been the case 1973-1990), American adults started to become less hostile toward gay rights as they aged. After 1992, an important historical change occurred that started making adults more open to gay rights with every passing calendar year. Note how in Figure 5 around 1992, the Silent Generation (whose average age was about 60), the Baby Boomers (average age about 40), and the Generation Xers (average age about 20) all started becoming less hostile to gay rights at the same time.<sup>21</sup> From 1992 to the present this trend in greater tolerance toward gays and lesbians within birth cohorts has continued. Figure 5's simultaneous (in historical time) changes across the birth generations is classic evidence for historical, or period-specific effects. From 1992 forward, the historical climate allowed Americans from all birth cohorts to become less hostile toward gay rights with each passing year.<sup>22</sup>

### **Coming Out of the Closet**

[Figure 6 and Table 3 here ]

Figure 6 documents the sharp rise in the percentage of Americans who reported having a gay or lesbian friend or acquaintance from 1985 to 2008, from Newsweek survey data. In 1985, 22.6% of American adults said they had a gay or lesbian friend or acquaintance. In 2008, 67.0% of American adults said they had a gay or lesbian acquaintance. The percentage of American adults who reported having a gay or lesbian coworker, or a gay or lesbian family member, rose with a similar slope after 1994.

The dramatic rise in 1985-2008 in the percentage of Americans who knew someone who was gay or lesbian is almost certainly due to gays and lesbians coming out to their friends, coworkers, and families during the 1980s and 1990s. The AIDS crisis in the 1980s spurred gay people to come out of the closet. Table 3 shows that having a gay or lesbian friend or acquaintance, or a gay or lesbian family member, are especially powerful predictors of believing that same-sex marriage should be legal.<sup>23</sup>

Model 4 of Table 3 controls for factors known to predict support for gay rights that were included in the Newsweek surveys. In Model 4 of Table 3, recent birth generations were more supportive of marriage equality, Republicans were least supportive of marriage equality, residents of the Northeast of the U.S. were sharply more supportive of marriage equality than were residents of the

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<sup>21</sup> The first few years when a birth generation appears in the GSS data for a given survey year, there are too few respondents and the average attitudes are measured with too much error. I trim the plot to reflect survey years with at least 100 respondents from the specified birth generation.

<sup>22</sup> When generation X youth turned 18 and were first captured in the GSS in the late 1980s and early 1990s there followed a sharp liberalization of their cohorts' attitudes about gay people. A generation later when the Millennials started turning 18 and were first captured in the GSS, their cohorts also demonstrated a sharp liberalization of attitudes toward gay people as the cohort aged from 18 to 22. Going away to college (for those who are privileged to do so) and traveling outside the orbit of one's family of origin exposes young people to a more diverse set of others, and (through the experience of independence) builds appreciation for the privacy rights of others (Rosenfeld 2007).

<sup>23</sup> The wording from the Newsweek surveys about marriage equality was "Do you think there should or should NOT be legally sanctioned gay marriages?"

South, and so on (Baunach 2011; Loftus 2001; Rosenfeld 2007). Even after controlling for the other factors that are known to be associated with support of gay rights, having gay or lesbian friends, and having gay or lesbian relatives remained highly significant predictors of support for marriage equality in Model 4 of Table 3.

Model 4 of Table 3 is important because it helps to dispense with an alternative hypothesis, that people who had gay or lesbian friends (or who were aware of gay or lesbian relatives) were simply the people who supported gay rights and marriage equality in the first place. Herek and Glunt (1993) found that gay men were more likely to come out to friends and family that they knew would be supportive. If gays and lesbians only came out to those who were already committed supporters of gay rights, i.e. if having a gay friend was redundant to supporting gay rights in the first place, then including the predictors of support for gay rights in Model 4 would have driven the coefficients for having a gay or lesbian friend to insignificance. Table 3 and Figure 6 suggest that the process of coming out of the closet for gays and lesbians probably impacted a broad population of Americans beyond the initial edge of those who may have seemed most likely to be receptive and supportive.

The coefficient 0.74 from Model 4 for having a gay or lesbian friend or acquaintance is large enough to potentially be associated with a substantial change in individual attitudes. If an individual were otherwise expected to have a 35% chance of supporting marriage equality, then adding a gay or lesbian friend or acquaintance would increase the predicted chance of supporting marriage equality to 53% (according to Model 4).<sup>24</sup>

[Figure 7 here]

Model 4 of Table 3 is consistent with a causal argument that gays and lesbians coming out of the closet helped to change minds and move otherwise skeptical Americans toward more support of marriage equality, though cross-sectional data do not lend themselves to causal inference. Figure 7 superimposes the Newsweek data on the rising proportion of Americans who had gay or lesbian friends or acquaintances, with the GSS data on the rising proportion of Americans who approved of same-sex marriage. Figure 7 shows that the slopes of the two trends are similar, with the trend in gay friends and acquaintances preceding the trend in approval of same-sex marriage by about 17 years. The percentage of Americans with a gay or lesbian friend crossed the 50% threshold around 1995, while the percentage of Americans who approved of same-sex marriage crossed the 50% threshold around 2012.

The time delay between the two trends in Figure 7 suggests that even if having gay or lesbian friends or acquaintances had a causal effect on attitudes about gay rights, the effect of interpersonal contact percolated slowly into Americans' views of gay rights. Adults' prior held beliefs can be difficult to dislodge (Alwin and Krosnick 1991). Qualitative research on heterosexuals' views of homosexuality suggests that interaction with gays and lesbians is not unidirectional in always leading to more liberalism toward gay rights (Hart-Brinson 2016; Ocobock 2013).

The apparent influence on public opinion of having a gay or lesbian friend, coworker, or family member directly supports Intergroup Contact Theory. Frame Alignment theory is also consistent with the analysis above of how gays and lesbians coming out of the closet may have liberalized U.S. public opinion toward gay rights. Frame Alignment theory is sensitive to the way that personal experience (in this case, the personal experience of heterosexuals who had gay or lesbian friends, family, or coworkers)

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<sup>24</sup> The relationship between  $P_2$  and  $P_1$  given coefficient  $\text{Beta}=0.74$  is as follows: 
$$0.53 = \frac{\left(\frac{0.35}{1-0.35}\right)e^{0.74}}{\left[\left(\frac{0.35}{1-0.35}\right)e^{0.74}\right]+1}$$

can have made more salient the pro-gay political frames, while diminishing the salience of anti-gay political frames (Gamson 1992).

[Figures 8 and 9 here]

### **Gay Rights Groups' Resource Disadvantage**

Of the Theories of Social Change I discussed in the introduction, Political Opportunity Structure and Frame Alignment are most consistent with President Bill Clinton's influence, while Frame Alignment and Intergroup Contact Theory are most consistent with the grass roots story of gays and lesbians reshaping public opinion by coming out of the closet. The fourth theory of social change, Resource Allocation Theory, is an alternate theory that I examine briefly here.

In examining the resources allocated to the gay rights movement, it is important to note that the gay rights movement did not operate in isolation. There was a powerful, religious based social movement which opposed gay rights. Figure 8 shows the annual revenue, in 2015 dollars, of the top U.S. national gay rights and anti-gay-rights social movement groups, based on data from the National Center for Charitable Statistics (2016). The line in the middle of Figure 8 represents \$100 million in revenue per year. The explicitly antigay Christian Right group Focus On The Family *averaged* more than \$150 million in revenue per year (in 2015 dollars) from 1990 to 2010 (for a total of more than \$3 billion in revenue during that period).<sup>25</sup> The top five national gay rights groups did not reach \$50 million *combined* (in 2015 dollars) in annual revenue until 2008. Figure 8 does not include the state level subsidiaries of the national groups (Focus on the Family had many), nor does Figure 8 include the larger general interest conservative organizations such as the Republican Party and the larger broad based religious groups such as the Catholic Church, each of which devoted substantial resources against same-sex marriage. Figure 8, therefore, probably understates the resource disparity between the highly resourced anti-gay-rights groups, and the more modestly resourced gay rights groups.

Figure 9 combines the anti-gay-rights and the pro-gay-rights groups from Figure 8 into two revenue totals, to facilitate comparison. Figure 9 demonstrates that in the early 1990s, the top gay rights organizations combined revenue was dwarfed by the revenue of the social movement groups that opposed gay rights, by a factor of more than 10 to 1. By 2010, the gay rights groups had increased their fundraising ability dramatically, but they still collected barely a third of the revenue that the anti-gay-rights groups were collecting every year. The strength of the gay rights social movement, at least in terms of monetary resources, cannot by itself explain how the gay rights social movement eventually earned victories over the powerful and well-resourced anti-gay-rights social movement.

### **Case Study: Same-Sex Marriage in Massachusetts**

The battle over same-sex marriage in Massachusetts has been well described (Solomon 2014), and therefore the Massachusetts case provides the opportunity to test the applicability of Frame Alignment Theory, Intergroup Contact Theory, and the relevance of Resource Allocation theories to this specific case. The Massachusetts Supreme Court ordered the legislature of Massachusetts to legalize same-sex marriage in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health* (2003a). Following the *Goodridge* decision, a several year-long political battle ensued, with opponents of same-sex marriage pushing for a state constitutional amendment to overturn same-sex marriage in the state, and supporters of same-sex marriage organizing to block the potential amendment.

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<sup>25</sup> Although Focus on the Family had a broad conservative agenda besides opposition to same-sex marriage and opposition to gay rights, text analysis of their website by Cahill (2007) showed that the vast majority of Focus on the Family's literature and programs were focused on opposition to gay rights.

Opponents of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts started out in 2004 with many political and organizational advantages. Outspoken opponents of Massachusetts same-sex marriage in 2004 included Massachusetts Republican Governor Romney,<sup>26</sup> the Catholic Church (the most influential nongovernmental organization in Massachusetts), Republican president (and presidential candidate) George W. Bush, and a broad array of well-funded religious and Christian Right organizations such as Focus on the Family (Solomon 2014). According to Solomon (2014 p.13), Massachusetts Catholic bishops instructed every priest in Massachusetts to read a letter from the pulpit calling the *Goodridge* decision “a national tragedy.”

Compared to the enormous power of the organizations arrayed against them, proponents of marriage equality in Massachusetts in 2004 had substantially fewer organizational and political assets. Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry refused to support marriage equality in Massachusetts in 2004, calling instead for a civil unions “compromise,” a compromise which the Supreme Court of Massachusetts had already explicitly rejected. Despite their organizational and resource limitations, and despite being opposed by the Governor and the Catholic Church, advocates of marriage equality in Massachusetts managed to win enough votes in Massachusetts constitutional conventions over three legislative sessions to derail potential Massachusetts constitutional amendments that could have overturned the *Goodridge* decision (Solomon 2014). The longer the process to pass an anti-gay-marriage state constitutional amendment in Massachusetts dragged on, the weaker the movement against marriage equality in Massachusetts became.

The political position of Massachusetts opponents of same-sex marriage eroded over time for several reasons. First, popular support for same-sex marriage was increasing nationwide (and presumably also in Massachusetts) at a rate that had rarely been seen in the history of popular attitudes in the U.S. Second, Massachusetts had, starting in 2004, actual same-sex married couples in nearly every legislative district. Marriage equality supporters worked diligently to introduce Massachusetts legislators to the same-sex married couples in their districts (Solomon 2014). Some of the Massachusetts legislators had never talked to an out-of-the-closet gay or lesbian person before. Same-sex married couples, through their lived examples of familial commitment and devotion, undermined every demeaning stereotype that gays and lesbians in the U.S. had faced. Ultimately, it did not matter how much money and organizational resources were devoted to opposing marriage equality in Massachusetts if the apocalyptic claims of same-sex marriage opponents could be effectively countered by the in-person examples of the same-sex couples themselves. The proponents of same-sex marriage won the political framing battle by emphasizing the traditional family values of love and commitment (Wolfson 2004; Solomon 2014).

### **Discussion:**

Consistent with Page and Shapiro’s (1992) results from an earlier generation of public opinion data, average support for public opinion issues in the GSS and the ANES are generally stable over time. In contrast to the general stability of most public opinions over time, attitudes toward same-sex marriage are a fast changing outlier. No public opinion in the GSS or the ANES appears to have changed more quickly *and* more extensively than have attitudes towards same-sex marriage in the GSS. Note, however, that the rank order of the outliers in opinion change depends somewhat on arbitrary timing decisions of when questions were asked, and on arbitrary coding decisions implicit in how change is measured. A few Civil Rights attitudes changed at a faster rate (but over a shorter time span, and

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<sup>26</sup> By the time of the third Massachusetts special constitutional convention in 2007, Republican Mitt Romney had been replaced as Massachusetts governor by Democrat and marriage equality supporter Deval Patrick.

therefore with a lower extent of change) compared to attitudes toward same-sex marriage. Gay rights attitudes, as a group, appear to have changed more and more rapidly than other identifiable groups of attitudes in the GSS and in the ANES.

I identify two factors that seem to have contributed to the unusually rapid liberalization of American attitudes toward gay rights. The first factor, Bill Clinton's path-breaking endorsements of gay rights on the campaign trail in 1992, fits temporally with the timing of the crucial reversal in the trend in acceptance of gays and lesbians in the U.S. Bill Clinton may seem to be an unlikely actor in liberalizing attitudes toward gay rights in the US. Bill Clinton's contributions to liberalizing discourse about gays and lesbians were overshadowed by his later signing into law two enormous gay rights setbacks, DADT and DOMA.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, Bill Clinton's presidential campaign in 1992 emerges from the GSS data as a period when attitudes toward gay rights in the U.S. began to undergo a historically significant reversal. After 1992, Americans in every birth generation became more tolerant of gay rights every year, whereas prior to 1992 Americans in each birth cohort were becoming slightly more hostile to gay rights every year. Bill Clinton's promise to end the ban against gays in the military (even if unfulfilled during his presidency), and Bill Clinton's symbolic embrace of gay people in his nomination acceptance speech in 1992 represented a shift in elite discourse in the U.S. A change in elite discourse can be very influential in altering public perceptions, and in opening space for insurgent social movements to take hold and grow (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; Zaller 1992; Page and Shapiro 1992).

In this paper I focus on the theories of social change and attitude change that are particular to gay rights. More general forces for social and attitudinal change, such as intergenerational liberalization and cohort replacement (Baunach 2011; Inglehart 1990; Rosenfeld 2007) clearly play a role in explaining liberalization of attitudes toward gay rights. The general theories of social and attitudinal change, however, do not (by themselves) explain why gay rights attitudes changed more quickly than other attitudes in the U.S.<sup>28</sup>

Gays and lesbians coming out of the closet is the social change process that is most particular to gay rights, and which therefore helps to explain the uniqueness of the rapid liberalization of American attitudes toward gay rights. The Newsweek data show that having friends or acquaintances who were gay and lesbian helped move Americans (even those in demographic categories less inclined to be favorable toward gay rights) into more support for same-sex marriage. The Massachusetts same-sex marriage case study, drawing on Solomon's (2014) excellent history, shows how same-sex couples who came out of the closet and who wanted to marry (and who did marry), helped to overturn a previously

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<sup>27</sup> Barack Obama, as president, helped to overturn DADT (by promoting and signing new legislation that allowed gays and lesbians to serve in the military on an equal basis), and he helped overturn DOMA (by speaking out in favor of marriage equality, and by having the executive branch's lawyer, the Solicitor General, refuse to defend DOMA; see Kaplan and Dickey 2015). Because of what was accomplished for gay rights during his presidency, Barack Obama has a more elevated reputation as a gay rights advocate than President Bill Clinton. When evaluating Bill Clinton and Barack Obama for their support of gay rights, it might be easy to draw the conclusion that Barack Obama's support of gay rights was far superior to President Bill Clinton's. However, and without diminishing Obama's historically important achievements for gay rights, Bill Clinton became U.S. president 16 years before Barack Obama did. Bill Clinton became president during a different time, a time when popular opinion in the U.S. was dramatically more hostile toward gay rights. President Bill Clinton's gay rights record deserves to be evaluated in the context of what was possible (in terms of the Political Opportunity Structure) at the time he was president.

<sup>28</sup> Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2005) point out that Americans who increasingly thought homosexuality was inborn and stable, rather than acquired and unstable, were more likely to support same-sex marriage. How did Americans come to believe that homosexuality was inborn and stable? I suspect that personal contact with gay and lesbian friends has been persuasive. Recent birth cohorts who grow up in a world where the gays and lesbians in their birth cohorts are mostly out of the closet, are especially comfortable with homosexuality (Hart-Brinson 2016).

dominant frame that gay people were abnormal and pathological, in favor of a more gay-positive frame that same-sex couples wanted to marry because of love and interpersonal commitment. Interpersonal contact with out-of-the-closet gays and lesbians made the more gay-positive frames of love, commitment, and traditional values especially resonant to heterosexual Americans. Social movement frames that square with an individual's personal experience have more narrative fidelity (Gamson 1992), and are more persuasive.

The Massachusetts case study and the national data on nonprofit organizations both highlight the extent to which U.S. gay rights organizations have always been under-resourced compared to the groups that have opposed gay rights. Despite a profound resource disadvantage, gay rights groups won victories in legislatures, in the courts, and in ballot measures (in 2012 in Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, and Washington) that a few years earlier seemed unattainable. The achievement of legalizing same-sex marriage in the U.S. seems to owe a great deal to the power of interpersonal contact between heterosexuals and out-of-the-closet gays and lesbians.

If gays and lesbians coming out of the closet influenced their friends and coworkers and extended families to be more supportive of gay rights, their one-on-one influence would be consistent with Frame Alignment theory (Benford and Snow 2000) and Intergroup Contact Theory (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Bill Clinton's embrace of gay rights on the largest public stage may have influenced US public opinion; Clinton's effect on public opinion would be consistent with the Political Opportunity Structure component of Political Process Theory (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996), as well as with Frame Alignment theory. I have not found evidence for Resource Allocation theory in explaining the public opinion shift toward gay rights, because gay-rights groups were always underfunded compared to anti-gay-rights groups.

Almost any social movement victory can be described, after the fact, as having resulted inevitably from openings in the political opportunity structure (Goodwin and Jasper 1999), or having prevailed because its framing of the issues was more effective. It is important not to overstate the certainty with which social movement strategy and tactics lead to policy results. Same-sex marriage was concretized into a national policy in the U.S. by *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), a 5-4 Supreme Court decision. Anthony Kennedy wrote the majority opinion in *Obergefell* and was the only Republican appointee in the *Obergefell* majority. Anthony Kennedy was on the U.S. Supreme Court due to a series of political accidents and events that had nothing to do with gay rights. Had the public not found out that U.S. intelligence agents had sold arms to Iran in order to illegally fund the Nicaraguan Contras (the "Iran-Contra Affair"), the Republicans might not have lost their majority in the U.S. Senate in 1986. Had the U.S. Senate still had a Republican majority in 1987, Robert Bork (President Reagan's first choice) would likely have been confirmed to the U.S. Supreme Court instead of Anthony Kennedy (Gitenstein 1992). Had Bork been on the Supreme Court instead of Kennedy, the *Obergefell* case would likely have been decided differently (Mogill 2015). Public opinion change, even change as dramatic as the public opinion liberalization toward same-sex marriage in the U.S. was not, in and of itself, sufficient to ensure that same-sex marriage would become legal across the U.S.

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Table 1: Summary Data on Extent of Change and Rate of Change in GSS Public Opinion Variables

		Extent of Change	Rate of Change	Rate of Change	Rate of Change
		A) Absolute Value percentage point change (end point to end point difference)	B) Absolute Value percentage point change per year (from weighted OLS)	C) Absolute Value SD change per year (from weighted STD OLS)	D) Absolute Value log odds change per year (from weighted ordered logit)
GSS attitude variables	N				
Gay Rights	6	32.75	1.01	0.022	0.047
Race	40	12.26	0.30	0.015	0.032
Religion	24	8.61	0.35	0.0084	0.016
Government	73	8.03	0.31	0.0080	0.016
Abortion	10	5.70	0.30	0.0066	0.014
Other	330	7.44	0.32	0.0077	0.016
All attitudes mean	483	8.27	0.34	0.0085	0.017
all attitudes 50 pctile		5.44	0.24	0.0064	0.014
all attitudes 75 pctile		11.37	0.50	0.012	0.024
all attitudes 90 pctile		19.96	0.79	0.018	0.038
all attitudes 95 pctile		25.44	0.97	0.023	0.047
all attitudes 99 pctile		39.07	1.53	0.035	0.066
Comparison: attitudes about same-sex marriage		47.55	1.76	0.037	0.066

Source: Weighted GSS data, 1972-2016. Column A uses dichotomous versions of the variables, and only examines the first and last year, as in the Y Axis of Figure 1. Column B uses dichotomous versions of the variables, fitting the best fit line to data from all years. Column C uses all ordinal categories of the variables, and all years. Column D uses all ordinal categories and all years, see the X axis of Figure 1.

Table 2: Summary Data on Extent of Change and Rate of Change of ANES Public Opinion variables:

		Extent of Change	Rate of Change	Rate of Change	Rate of Change
ANES variables		A) Absolute value percentage point change end point to end point	B) Absolute value percentage point change per year (from weighted OLS)	C) Absolute value SD change per year (from weighted STD OLS)	D) Absolute value log odds change per year (from weighted ordered logit)
	N				
Gay Rights	6	28.28	1.21	0.027	0.056
Abortion	1	4.29	0.11	0.0028	0.0056
Race	25	8.19	0.44	0.014	0.029
Religion	11	6.84	0.28	0.0088	0.017
Government	43	18.70	0.64	0.015	0.030
Other	101	10.20	0.30	0.0084	0.016
All attitudes mean	187	12.24	0.43	0.011	0.022
all attitudes 50 pctile		9.49	0.27	0.0081	0.016
all attitudes 75 pctile		18.71	0.58	0.016	0.032
all attitudes 90 pctile		27.59	1.00	0.025	0.050
all attitudes 95 pctile		34.88	1.43	0.032	0.064
all attitudes 99 pctile		49.63	1.76	0.055	0.118
Comparison: GSS attitudes about same-sex marriage		47.55	1.76	0.037	0.066

Source: Weighted ANES data. Column A uses dichotomous versions of the variables, and only examines the first and last year, as in the Y Axis of Figure 3. Column B uses dichotomous versions of the variables, fitting the best fit line to data from all years. Column C uses all ordinal categories of the variables, and all years. Column D uses all ordinal categories and all years, see the X axis of Figure 3.

Table 3: Gay Acquaintances and Gay Family as Predictors of Same-Sex Marriage Approval; Newsweek surveys 1994-2008; Coefficients and (SE) from unweighted logistic regression:

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Has Gay or Lesbian Friend or Acquaintance	0.93*** (0.08)			0.74*** (0.09)
Has Gay or Lesbian Coworker		0.53*** (0.08)		0.10 (0.09)
Has Gay or Lesbian Family member			0.74*** (0.09)	0.55*** (0.10)
Generation (compared to pre-Baby Boom)				
Baby Boom b. 1946-64				0.84*** (0.16)
Gen X and Millenials, b. after 1964				1.80*** (0.24)
Age				0.14** (0.005)
Region (compared to NE)				
Midwest				-0.38** (0.12)
South				-0.65*** (0.12)
West				-0.33** (0.13)
Party ID (compared to Republican)				
Democrat				0.99*** (0.11)
Independent				0.81** (0.11)
Other				0.74* (0.29)
Education (compared to <HS)				
HS				0.005 (0.17)
Some College				-0.04 (0.18)
BA+				0.27 (0.18)
Race (compared to White)				
Black				-0.29 (0.16)
Other				-0.19 (0.17)
Female				0.36*** (0.08)
N	2789	2789	2789	2789
Model df	1	1	1	18
Model chisquare (compared to constant only)	137.0	42.5	65.2	453.8

Source: Newsweek Princeton Research Polls from 1994, 1996, 2000, and 2008, unweighted. Weighted logistic regression yields a similar substantive result. Question wording: "Do you think there should or should NOT be legally sanctioned gay marriages?" and "Do you have a friend or acquaintance who is gay or lesbian," etc.

\*\*\* P<0.001; \*\*P<0.01; \* P<0.05, two tailed tests.

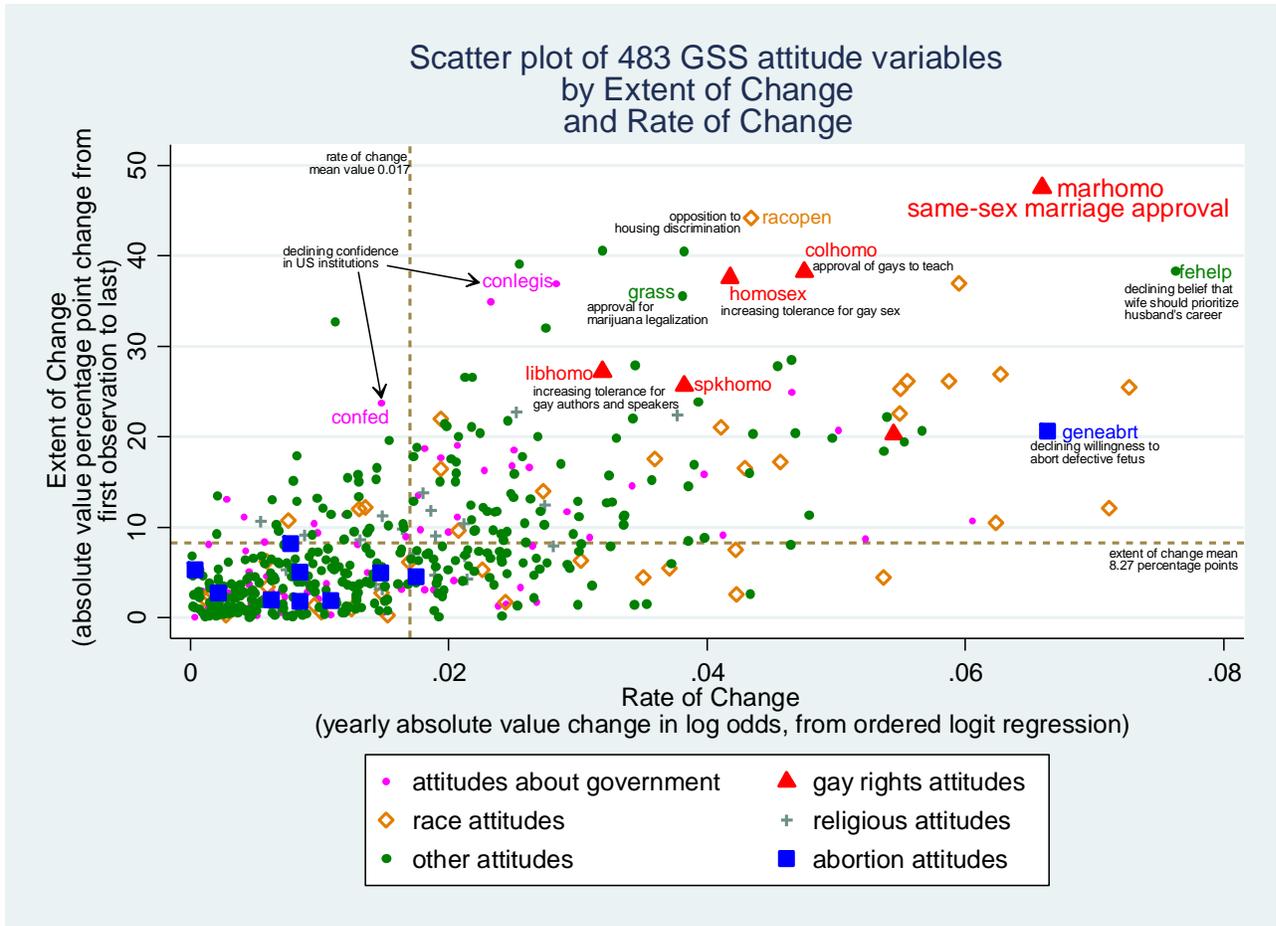


Figure 1

Source: Weighted data from GSS cumulative file 1972-2016. This figure includes all 483 GSS attitude variables that were asked at least 3 times, with first instance and last instance at least 10 years apart. For the Y axis, I converted all the GSS attitude variables to dichotomous variables, approve versus disapprove. The X axis reflects the absolute value of the coefficient for year in 483 separate ordered logit regressions of each attitude variable on year. The ordered logit regressions take all ordinal categories and all survey years into account.

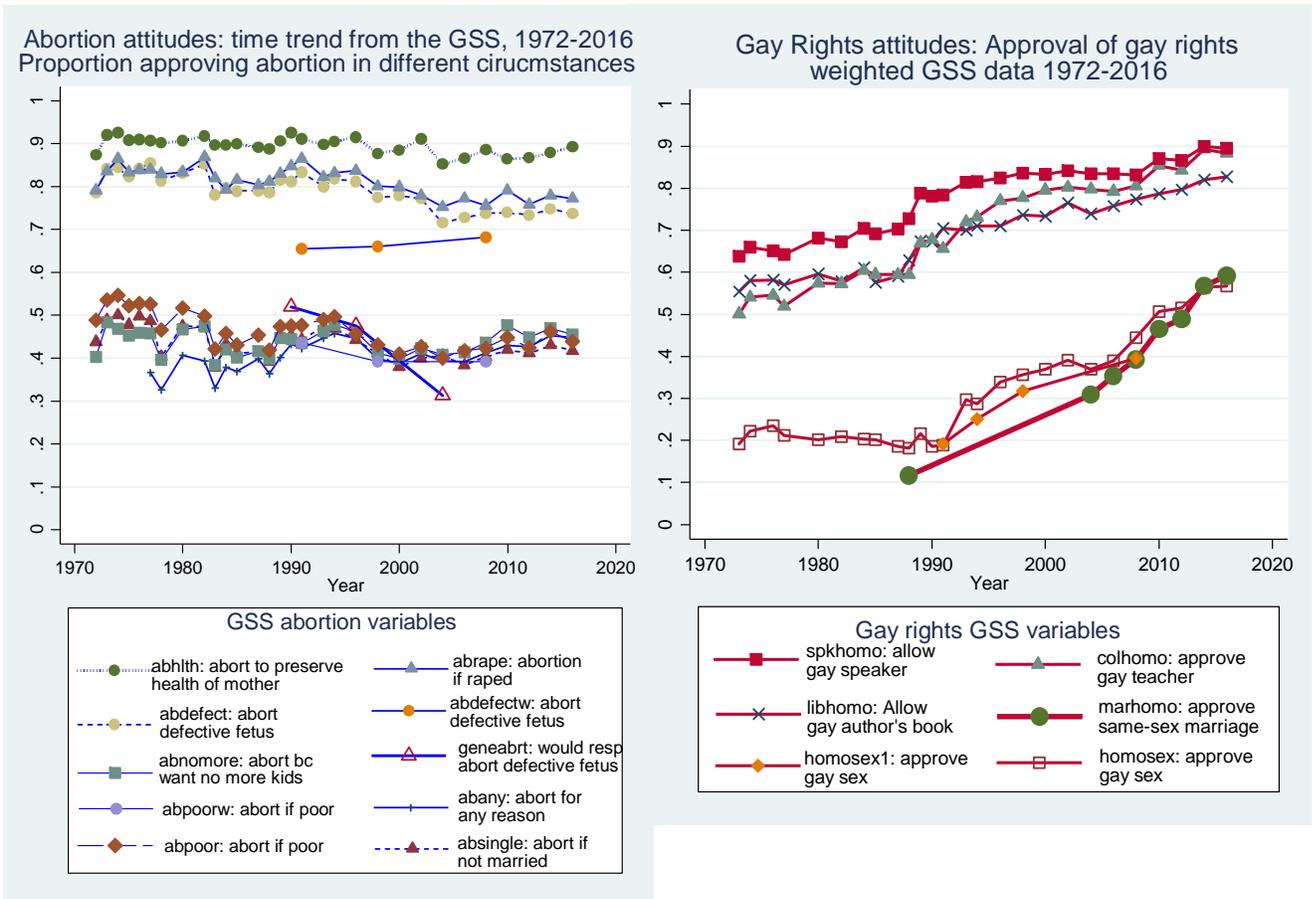


Figure 2: Abortion Attitudes and Gay Rights Attitudes, Time Trends Compared.

Source: Weighted data from the GSS, including all 10 GSS abortion attitude variables, and all 6 GSS gay rights variables that were fielded at least 3 times over at least a 10 year span. Variables are recoded into dichotomies so that 1 equals approval, and 0 equals disapproval (of abortion or abortion rights on the left, and of gay rights on the right). GSS variables “abpoor” and “abpoorw” both asked about abortion for poor women; “abpoor” framed the question positively, asking if “it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if the family has very low income and cannot afford any more children;” whereas “abpoorw” framed the question negatively, asking if “it is wrong or not wrong for a woman to have an abortion if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children.” The left panel above shows that a similar percentage of respondents approved abortion rights for poor women whether the question was posed positively or negatively. GSS variables “abdefect” (positively framed) and “abdefctw” (negatively framed) were both questions about whether a woman should have legal access to abortion if “there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby.” GSS variable “homosex” (positively framed) and “homosex1” (negatively framed) were both questions about “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex.” Of the 16 variables represented in the figure above, 11 were fielded as dichotomous approve/disapprove questions. The questions that produced abdefectw, abpoor, homosex, and homosex1 were offered to respondents with 4 answer options, I have coded the more approving two answers as approval For GSS variable homosex, that means “sometimes wrong” and “not wrong at all” as approve, contrasted with “always wrong” and “almost always wrong” as disapprove. For GSS same-sex marriage variable marhomo, the only one of the 16 variables that had a neutral middle category, I coded “strongly agree” and “agree” as approval, versus “neither agree nor disagree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree” as disapproval.

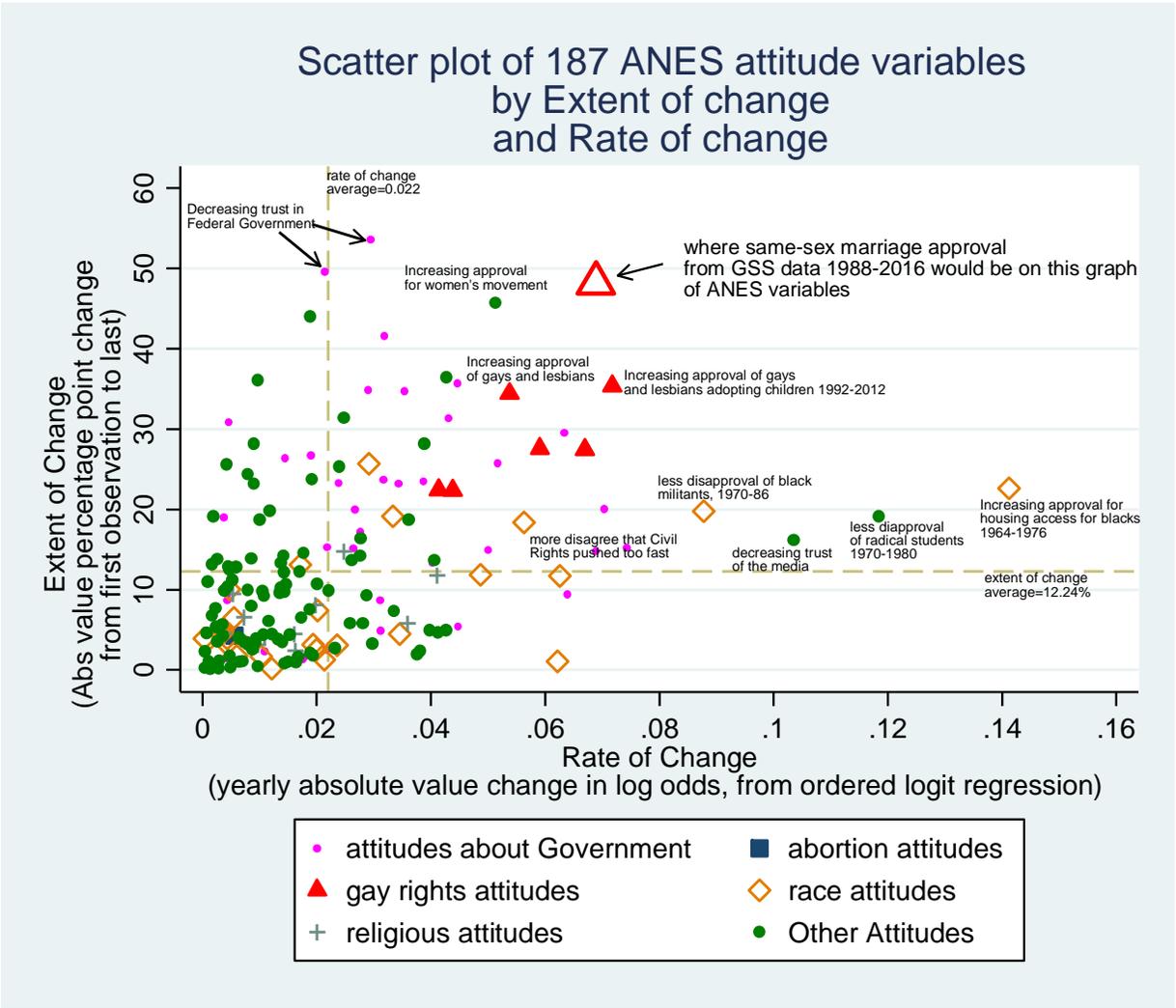


Figure 3

Source: Weighted data from ANES cumulative file 1978-2012. This figure includes all 187 ANES attitude variables that were asked at least 3 times, with first instance and last instance at least 10 years apart. For the Y axis, I converted all the ANES attitude variables to dichotomous variables, approve versus disapprove. The X axis reflects the absolute value of the coefficient for year in 187 separate ordered logit regressions of each attitude variable on year. The ordered logit regressions take all ordinal categories and all survey years into account.

Proportion of GSS subjects who say Gay sex is 'Always Wrong'  
 Weighted data 1972-2016 with 95% CI  
 and historical markers

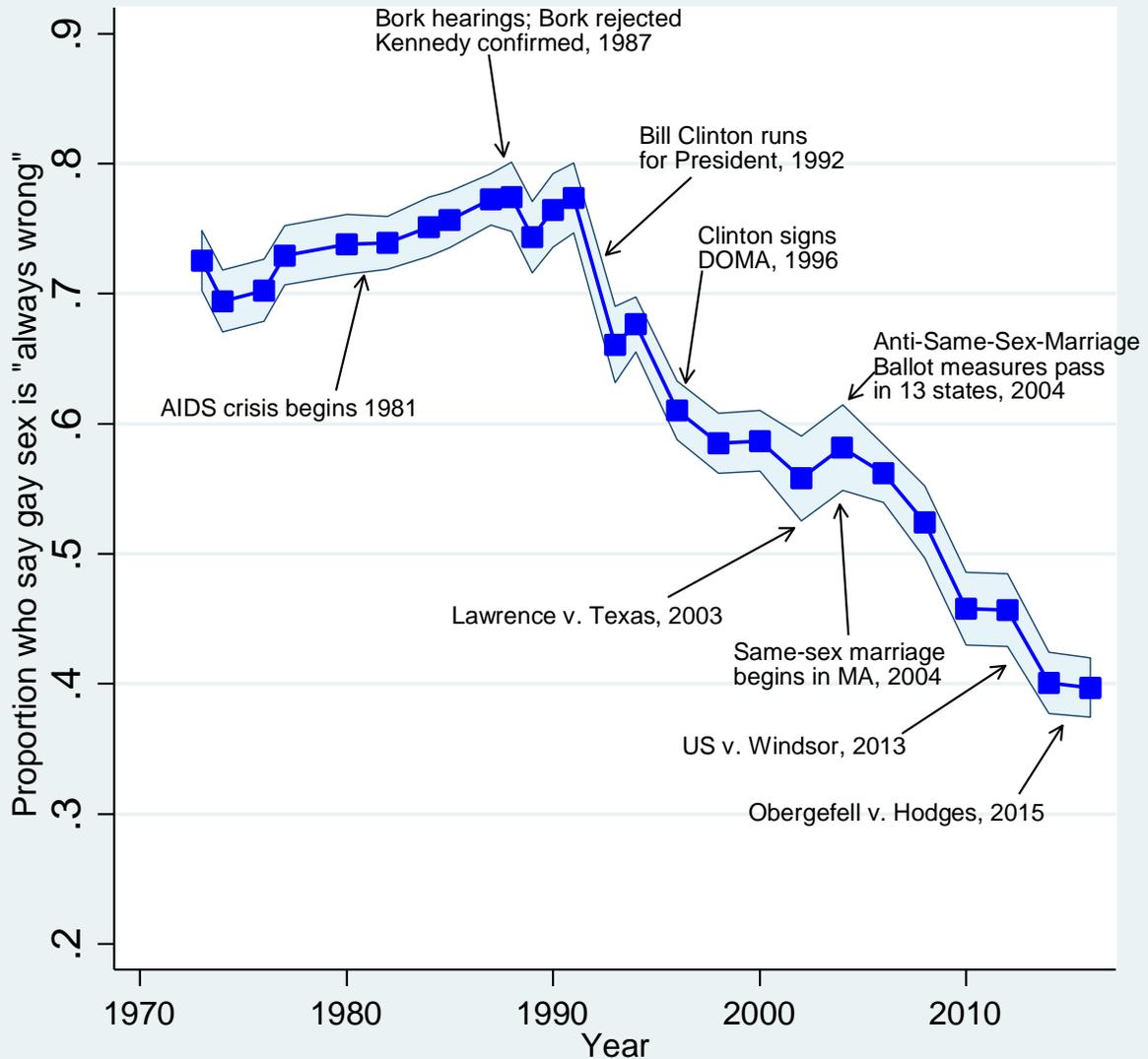


Figure 4. Weighted GSS data, variable "homosex:" "What about the sexual relations between two adults of the same sex?" with potential answers "always wrong," "almost always wrong," "sometimes wrong," and "not wrong at all." The above figure shows the percentage who answered that gay sex was "always wrong."

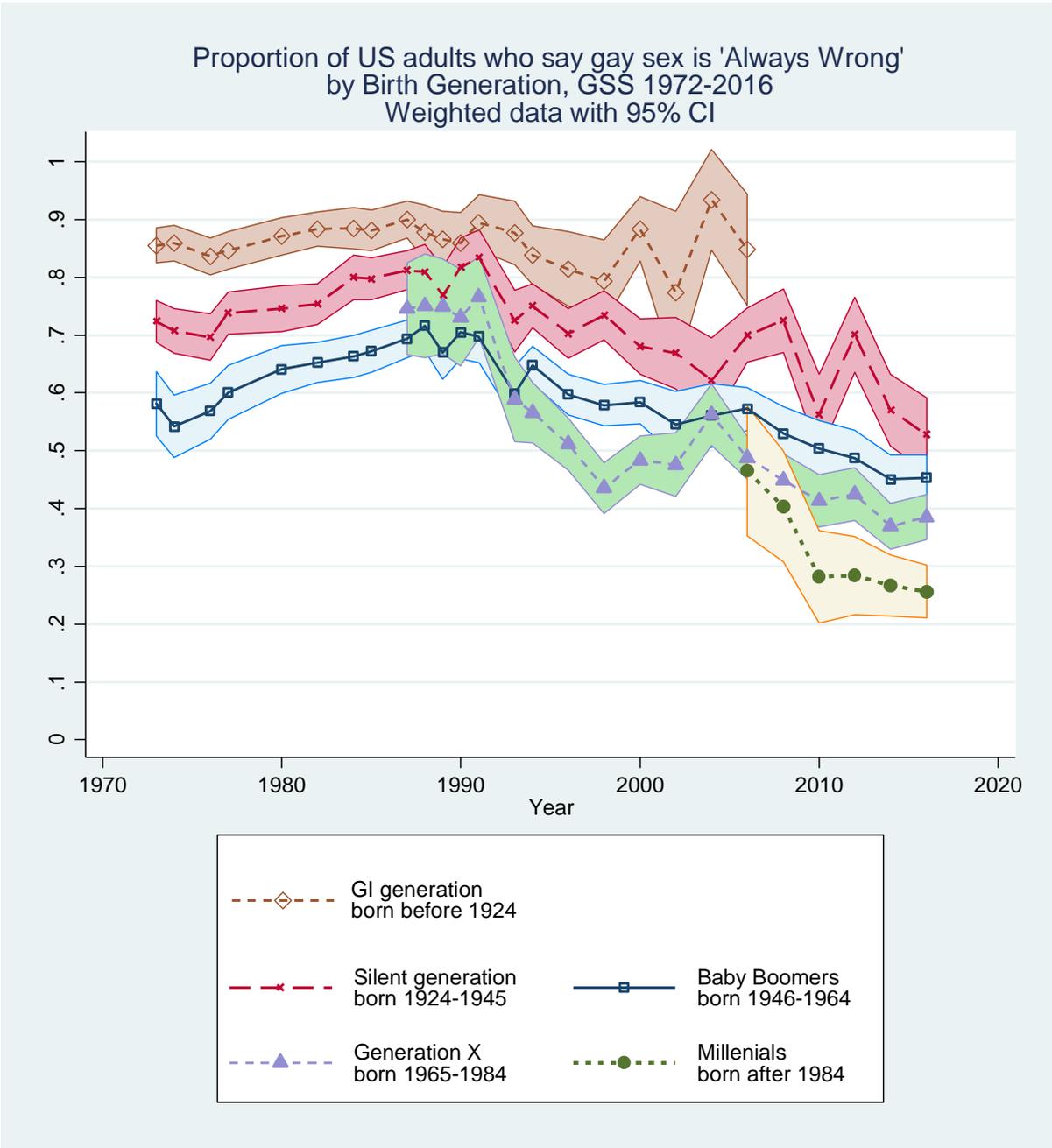


Figure 5. Weighted GSS data, variable “homosex:” “What about the sexual relations between two adults of the same sex?” with potential answers “always wrong,” “almost always wrong,” “sometimes wrong,” and “not wrong at all.” The above figure shows the percentage who answered that gay sex was “always wrong.”

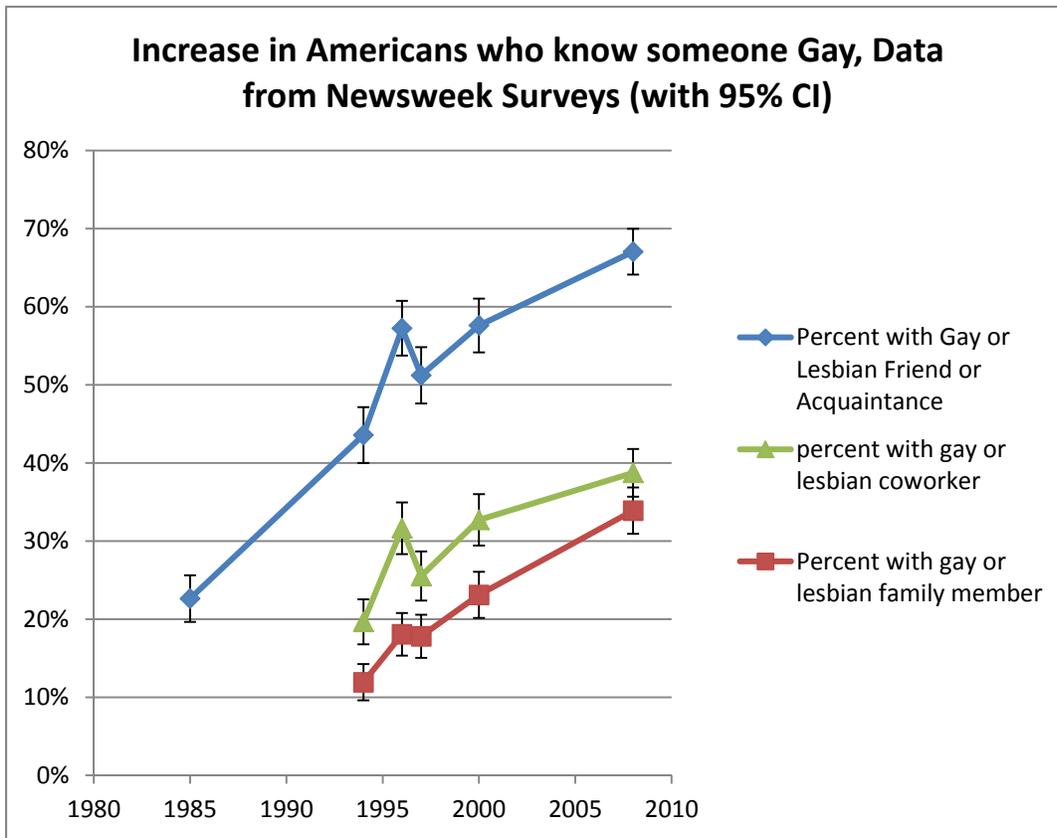


Figure 6. Weighted Newsweek data 1985-2008. “Please tell me which, if any, of the following apply to you. Do you work with someone you know is gay or lesbian?” “Do you have someone in your family who is gay or lesbian?” “Do you have a friend or acquaintance who is gay or lesbian?”

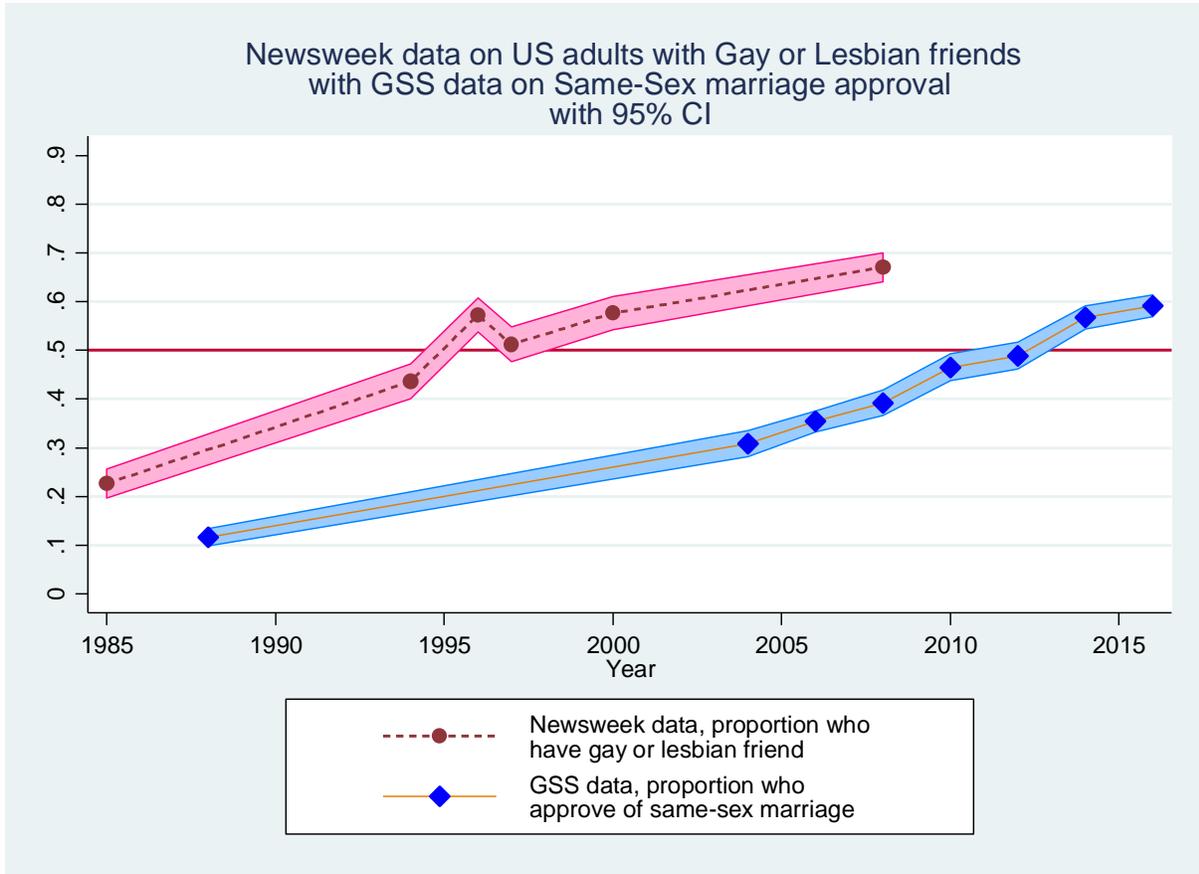


Figure 7.

Source: Weighted data from GSS and from Newsweek. Newsweek question: "Do you have a friend or acquaintance who is gay or lesbian?" GSS variable "marhomo:" "Do you agree or disagree that Homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another," with middle category "Neither agree nor disagree" counted as disapproving of same-sex marriage.

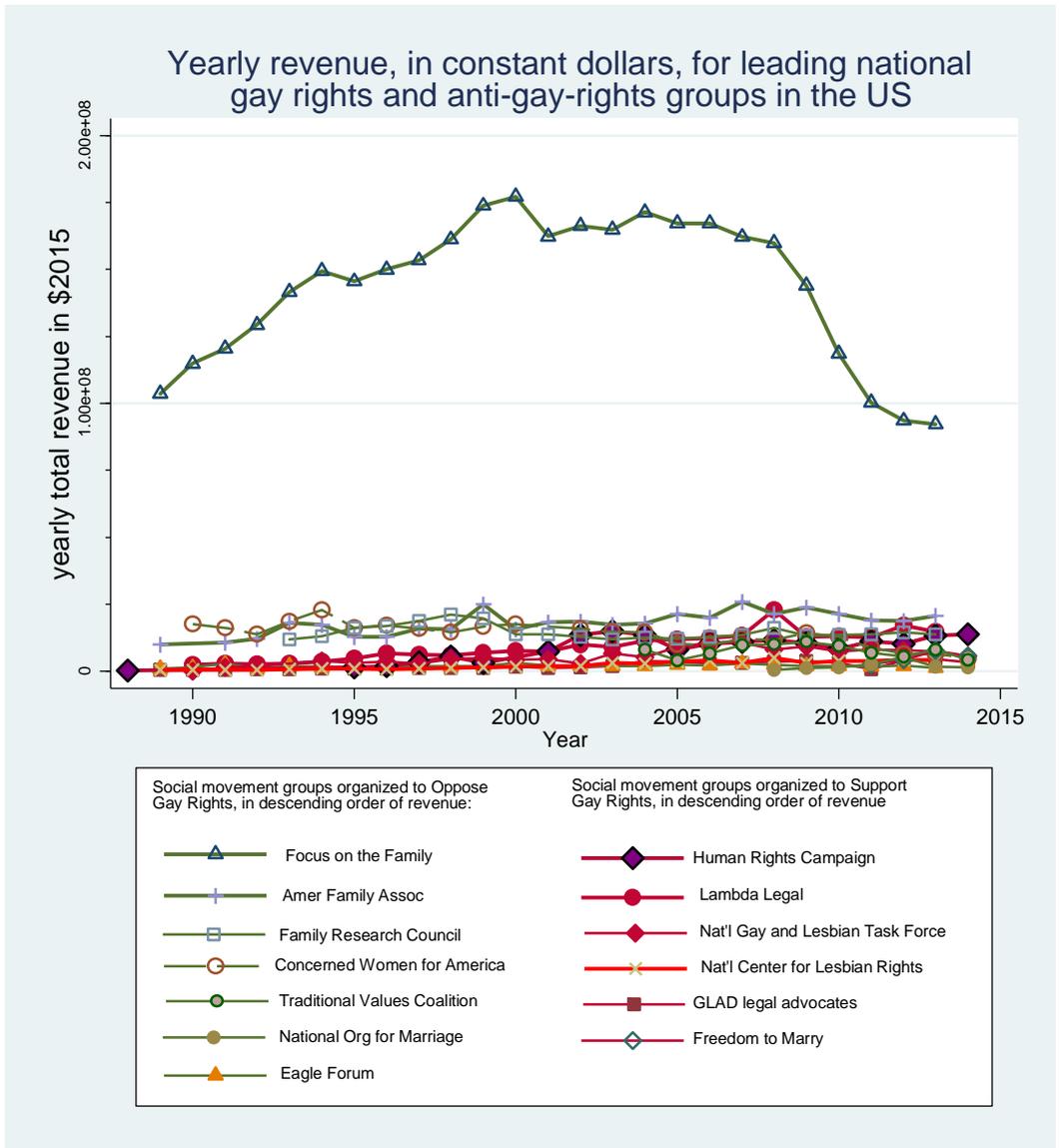


Figure 8

note: The line in the middle is \$100,000,000 per year, the line at the top is \$200,000,000 per year. Data from National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS; 2016), compiled by the author, all revenue values inflated to 2015 U.S. dollars. All of the above 13 national organizations were 501c(3), except for the Traditional Values Coalition, which was 501c(4) in the U.S. tax code. Local organizational offshoots (Focus on the Family had many) are not counted above, only the main national organizations' incomes are included. For organizations founded before 1989, the above chart shows annual revenue back only as far as 1989 or 1990, because of data availability limitations from NCCS. The above organizations obtained their tax exemptions in the following years: Focus on the Family (1978); Concerned Women for America (1981); Family Research Council (1993); Eagle Forum (1981); Traditional Values Coalition (1984); American Family Association (1982); National Center for Lesbian Rights (1989); GLAD (1980); Human Rights Campaign (1987); Lambda Legal (1974); National LGBTQ Task Force (1989); Freedom to Marry (2011); and National Organization for Marriage (2008). Some years' revenues missing above for Traditional Values Coalition and Human Rights Campaign.

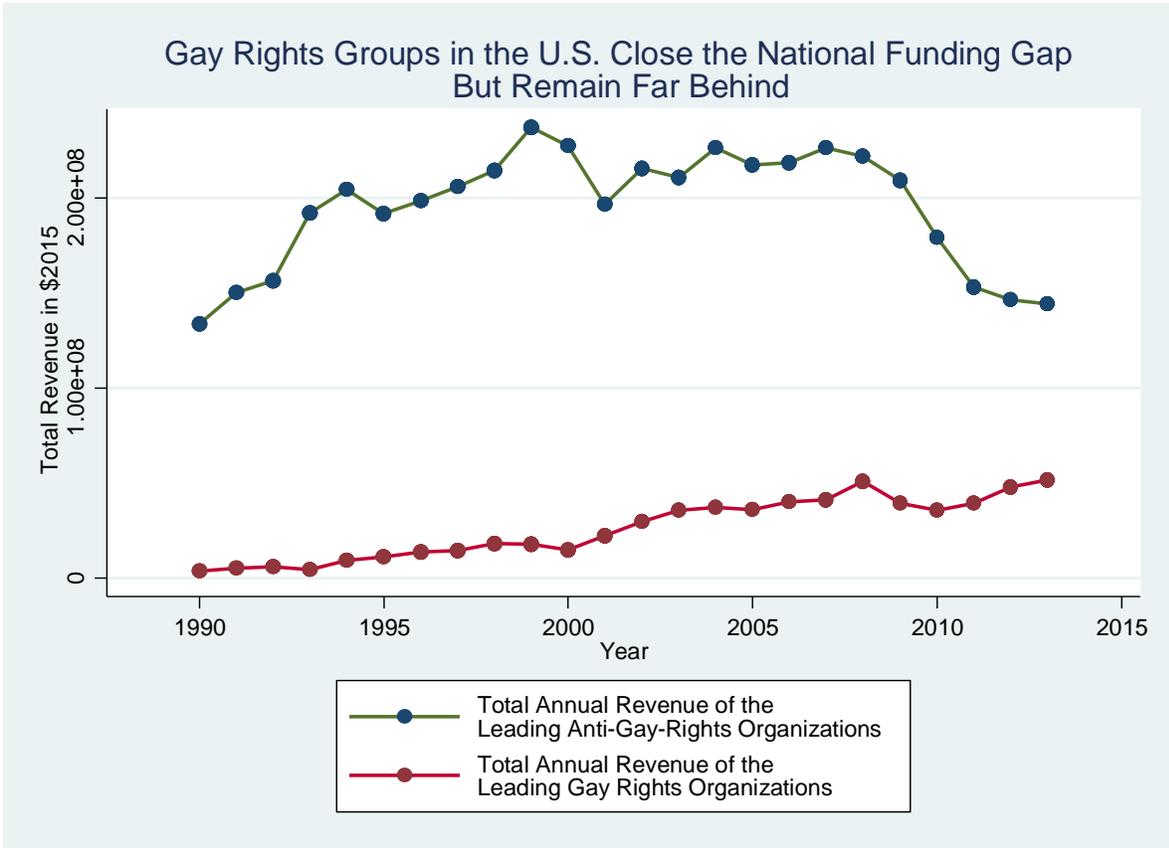


Figure 9

Source: NCCS data, top U.S. national gay rights and anti-gay-rights groups from figure 8, revenue (in 2015 dollars) combined within years.