

## Attitudes toward Gay Marriage: The Influence of Sociodemographic Characteristics, Religious, and Political Attitudes

This project explores contemporary attitudes toward gay marriage within the context of attitudes toward marriage and divorce reform. We explore three major theoretical perspectives about attitudes toward gay marriage. First, we explore the effects of sociodemographic characteristics on attitudes. Much previous research indicates that younger people, women, and the more educated are more supportive of gay marriage, while Blacks are generally opposed. Second, we explore the relationship between social, religious, and political attitudes and attitudes toward gay marriage. Again, past research is clear that the more religious, particularly the more extrinsically religious and of more fundamentalist background, and those who are more politically conservative are generally far more opposed to gay marriage. However, this paper extends on previous research about attitudes toward gay rights and gay marriage in particular, by examining directly the relationship between willingness to strengthen marriage for heterosexual couples and attitudes in opposition to gay marriage. Thus, we explore the relationship between attitudes representing a number of policy-relevant domains and attitudes toward gay marriage. We examine the effects of religiosity and political conservatism, but also attitudes about marriage and divorce, attitudes about the sources of blame for contemporary “family breakdown, and finally, attitudes toward strengthening marriage policy and marriage promotion.

We further contribute to research by showing how one’s strength of attachment to marriage and parenthood strongly shape attitudes toward gay marriage. Thus, third and last, we explore how marriage, cohabitation, and parenthood history influence support or opposition for gay marriage. We argue that those who invest more in the institutionalization of the family, via marriage and parenthood, are more likely to be opposed to gay marriage, than those who are more deinstitutionalized or willing to form relationships outside the bounds of legal marriage, such as cohabitators. In general, we situate these three goals within a larger “threat” model in which those who feel more threatened regarding the perceived strength of heterosexual marriage are more likely to oppose gay marriage. With this perspective, we explore whether the married, parents, the more religious, and those with more permissive attitudes about social policies to strengthen and promote marriage are less supportive of gay marriage. A key strength of our data are the numerous questions about attitudes toward marriage, divorce, marriage and divorce law reform, and the desirability of social policy initiatives to promote heterosexual marriage. The policy implications of this work address the inter-relationships between concerns about marriage and family, attitudes toward marriage promotion policies, and potential opposition or support of gay marriage.

### **Data**

The data are from a three-state attitude survey conducted in 1997-1997, shortly after the TANF reform, the federal Defense of Marriage Act, and the beginning of active media attention on marriage promotion for heterosexual couples. Attitude surveys of a random sample of residents in Louisiana, Arizona, and Minnesota were conducted with a

response rate of 67%. These states were chosen because they were on the forefront in the implementation or consideration of marriage promotion and strengthening policies. In the same year, 1997, Louisiana passed a covenant marriage law and a constitutional ban on gay marriage. Arizona also passed covenant marriage, and Minnesota considered, but then voted down a covenant marriage reform.

## **Dependent Measure**

*Attitudes against gay marriage.* We measure attitudes toward gay marriage by responses to the question about whether “homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another.” This 5-response Likert item ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

## **Independent Measures**

*Sociodemographic characteristics.* We measure the gender of the respondent, race/ethnicity, age, state of residence, educational attainment, and employment and income status. Race/ethnicity is a three category dummy variable with white as the excluded category, followed by two dummies measuring Black, and other race/ethnic combinations.

*Religious, political, and family attitudes.*

*Political conservatism.* We measure how the respondent classifies her or his political orientation, ranging on a 5-point scale from very liberal to very conservative.

*Religiosity.* We measure a respondent’s religiosity based on how often they attend religious services. The item ranges from (1) never to (8) several times a week.

*Marriage and Divorce attitudes.* We measure attitudes toward marriage and divorce with likert-scale items that sum disagreement with the following four items: “When married people realize that they no longer love each other, they should get a divorce and get it over with;” “one reason for divorce is that young couples focus too much on the happiness they expect from marriage and not enough on the hard work a successful marriage requires;” “if a couple has children, they should stay married, no matter what;” and “society would be better off if divorces were harder to get.” The alpha coefficient is .60.

*Family Breakdown attitudes.* We measure respondents’ attitudes about the reasons the divorce rate increased with a focus on identifying perceptions about the blameworthiness of the source of increased divorce. Responses to the individual items ranged from (1) not a reason at all to (4) one of the most important reasons for the increase in divorce. Thus, we summed answers to the following items: “one reason for the increase in divorce is that there has been a rise in irresponsibility, selfishness, and the loss of family values in our culture;” “women have gotten more interested in careers and self-advancement than in families and children;” “men can’t make commitments anymore to their families, wives, and children;” “people have little respect for the

spiritual importance of marriage;” and “people put too much emphasis on their own self-interest and not enough on the needs of their partners and children.” The alpha coefficient is .66.

*Strengthen Marriage Policy attitudes.* We measure respondents’ willingness to strengthen heterosexual marriage with a summed measure of 6 items addressing their perceptions of covenant marriage. The responses are a 5-point Likert scale with the highest value representing strong agreement with the following statements: “covenant marriage is a more traditional form of marriage in which men are the head of the household;” “covenant marriage will strengthen family life;” “A covenant marriage will be better for children than a standard marriage;” “covenant marriages will last longer than standard marriages;” “spouses in a covenant marriage will be less likely to cheat on one another.” The last item measured disagreement with the statement “covenant marriage is pointless because people who want to get divorced will always find a way to do so.” The alpha coefficient is .81.

*Marriage, cohabitation, and parenthood histories.* We measure a respondent’s marriage history with a dummy variable measuring whether the respondent is currently married or widowed (excluded), never married, or divorced or separated. We measure cohabitation history with a single dummy variable, measuring whether the respondent ever-cohabited. We measure parenthood with a dummy variable indicating that the respondent has had at least one child.

## **Preliminary Findings**

One third of the respondents strongly disagree that gays should be allowed to marry. In fact, a full 61% of respondents oppose gay marriage. However, 28.3% support gay marriage, and a full 11% are neutral and potentially receptive to political or social persuasion.

We examined the effects of the multivariate models with a variety of statistical techniques. We used both multinomial and binomial logistic regression, Tobit regression and classic regression model techniques. In most cases, the preliminary findings we present below were robust. Thus, in what follows, we present tentative results from our initial models, using basic regressions to measure attitudes against gay marriage.

*Sociodemographic characteristics.* Consistent with previous research, women are significantly less likely than men, and blacks are significantly more likely than whites, to oppose gay marriage. Age is associated positively and significantly with opposition to gay marriage, and education is associated negatively and significantly. We find no significant effects of current employment status nor earnings on attitudes toward gay marriage.

*Political, religious, and marriage attitudes.* We find very strong, significant associations with political conservatism, religiosity, marriage and divorce attitudes, attitudes toward the source of blame for the rise in divorce, and attitudes toward marriage

strengthening for heterosexual couples on opposition to gay marriage. Each attitude set significantly improves the model. In some preliminary interaction tests, we find significant, strong interactions between attitudes toward marriage strengthening policies and gender and race, such that Blacks and men who are more supportive of covenant marriage-like policy elements are uniquely, strongly opposed to gay marriage.

***Marriage, cohabitation and parenthood histories.*** The effect of parenthood is significantly and positively associated with opposition to gay marriage, net of all other controls. Further, while the never-married and the divorced and separated are not different from the currently married in attitudes toward gay marriage, one's cohabitation history has significant effects. Cohabitation in one's past or present is associated significantly and negatively with opposition to gay marriage.

***Main conclusions at this point.*** We find strong support for previous research about the effects of sociodemographic characteristics, religiosity and political conservatism on opposition to gay marriage. But we contribute to this literature by exploring more directly the effects of attitudes toward the contemporary causes of the rise in divorce and "family breakdown" and attitudes toward heterosexual marriage-strengthening policies. Last, we find strong support for our "threat" model that detachment from marriage and parenthood significantly reduces antagonism toward gay marriage. In fact, a significant interaction between cohabitation history and parenthood indicates that respondents who have cohabited and have never had children are the most supportive of gay marriage, while people who are parents and have never-cohabited are the least supportive. In the full paper, we will explore the meanings of these findings for thinking about the bifurcation in the general population in attitudes toward family and social policy in general, that may be tied to differing levels of attachment to religion and marriage as institutions.

***Future Analyses.*** We want to explore some differing conceptions of attitude domains, specifically those that address attitudes toward gender and sexuality. We also want to explore interaction effects more systematically with especial attention to how attitudes interact with marriage, cohabitation and parenthood histories. We want to situate our paper and its findings within the broader literature of attitudes toward family and social change, and literatures on Americans' ambivalence toward gay marriage, but shifting support for gay civil liberties. Our contribution to both these fields of study is an exploration of the relationship of important demographic phenomena, such as age, gender, race, union, and parenthood histories with the dynamics of attitudes.