

Public Attitudes toward Homosexuality

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Public opinion on homosexual behavior is sharply divided and rapidly changing. As Table 1A shows, in 2010, 44% believed that “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex” were “always wrong” and 41% held to the opposite judgment that homosexual behavior was “not wrong at all.” Just 11% were in the middle, saying it was either “almost always wrong” or “wrong only sometimes.” Public opinion is thus highly polarized on this issue with few people sharing the middle ground.

From 1973 through 1991 there was little change in public attitudes towards homosexual behavior. From two-thirds to three-quarters consistently said it was “always wrong” while 10-15% considered it “not wrong at all.” After 1991 attitudes began to shift toward greater acceptance of homosexual behavior. In 1991, 72% considered it “always wrong” and this declined to 44% in 2010, a drop of 28.6 percentage points. Likewise, from 1991 to 2010, the percent saying homosexual behavior was “not wrong at all” rose from 14% to 41%, a gain of 26.8 percentage points.

Much of the societal division over this issue and a major impetus for the rise in acceptance over the last 19 years come from the large differences across age groups. As Table 2A shows, acceptance is much higher among members of more recent cohorts. In 2010, 26% of those under 30 said homosexual behavior was “always wrong” while 63% of those 70+ thought so, a generation gap of 36.5 percentage points. Likewise, 50% of those under 30 believed that homosexual behavior was “not wrong at all,” while only 18% of those 70+ shared this opinion, a generation gap of 32.2 percentage points.

Public opinion is also quite divided on the issue of gay marriage. As Table 1B shows, in 2010, 46% agreed that “homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another,” 40% disagreed, and 14% were in the middle either neither agreeing nor disagreeing or saying they didn’t know. The trend towards greater tolerance regarding homosexuality is also reflected in the rising support for gay marriage. As Table 1B shows, in 1988 11% agreed with gay marriage and support rose to a plurality of 46% in 2010, a gain of 35.2 percentage points. Again, as with approval of homosexual behavior in general, there is a large generation gap on the issue. As Table 2B shows, in 2010, 64% of those under 30 backed gay marriage, while only 27% of those 70 and older did so, a difference of 37.0 percentage points. This large cohort difference has been a major contributor to the rising support for gay marriage as new cohorts of young adults expand the number of pro-gay marriage supporters.

The data in this report are from the General Social Surveys (GSSs). The GSSs are full probability, in-person samples of adults living in households in the United States. Data has been collected by NORC at the University of Chicago. Core support for the GSS comes from the National Science Foundation. Information on the GSS and the GSS data files are available at <http://www.norc.org/GSS+Website>.

Table 1: Trends in Attitudes Regarding Sexual Orientation

A. What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex – do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?

	1973	1974	1976	1977	1980	1982	1984	1985	1987	1988
Always Wrong	69.7%	66.1%	67.1%	69.4%	70.6%	71.0%	72.1%	73.3%	75.0%	74.6%
Almost Always	6.5	5.3	6.0	5.6	5.8	4.8	4.3	4.0	4.0	4.3
Sometimes Wrong	7.4	8.1	7.6	7.2	5.7	6.2	6.8	6.8	6.1	5.3
Not Wrong at All	10.7	12.3	14.8	13.1	13.6	13.5	12.8	12.7	11.6	12.2
Don't Know, etc.	5.8	8.2	4.4	4.9	4.4	4.5	4.0	3.2	3.3	3.6
	1503	1485	1499	1531	1467	1505	1474	1535	1466	981
	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004
Always Wrong	70.8%	72.8%	72.1%	62.2%	63.7%	56.6%	54.3%	53.7%	53.5%	56.4%
Almost Always	3.8	4.7	3.5	3.9	3.5	4.7	5.5	4.1	4.9	4.7
Sometimes Wrong	6.0	5.5	3.7	7.3	5.5	5.5	6.8	7.4	7.1	6.7
Not Wrong at All	14.6	12.3	13.8	20.7	21.5	25.9	26.2	26.4	30.4	29.1
Don't Know, etc.	4.8	4.7	6.8	6.0	5.8	7.3	7.2	8.4	4.1	3.1
	1035	911	997	1065	2027	1917	1891	1865	935	876
	2006	2008	2010							
Always Wrong	53.4%	49.2%	43.5%							
Almost Always	4.6	2.9	3.4							
Sometimes Wrong	6.4	6.3	7.5							
Not Wrong at All	30.7	35.5	40.6							
Don't Know, etc.	5.1	6.2	4.9							
	1998	1358	1278							

Table 1 (continued)

B. Do you agree or disagree,,, Homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another.

	1988	2004	2006	2008	2010
Strongly Agree	2.5%	11.6%	15.0%	15.2%	20.8%
Agree	8.2	18.5	20.0	23.7	25.1
Neither Agree nor Disagree	13.9	13.6	13.3	12.9	12.6
Disagree	24.1	19.9	15.6	15.5	15.4
Strongly Disagree	43.5	34.0	35.0	31.8	24.8
Don't Know, etc.	7.8	2.3	1.1	1.0	1.4
	1417	1211	1996	1357	1280

Source: General Social Survey, NORC/University of Chicago

Table 2: Age Differences in Attitudes Regarding Sexual Orientation, 2010

A. Approval of Homosexual Behavior

	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-60	70+
Always Wrong	26.0%	41.0%	41.6%	53.5%	44.1%	62.5%
Almost Always Wrong	5.7	1.2	4.1	3.3	1.6	6.3
Sometimes Wrong	14.5	6.4	4.9	4.6	9.6	5.5
Not Wrong at all	50.2	46.6	43.7	35.3	39.4	18.0
Don't Know. Etc.	3.5	4.8	5.7	3.3	5.3	7.8

B. Gay Marriage

Agree+Strongly Agree	64.2	52.4	42.1	41.5	36.9	12.5
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Source: General Social Survey, NORC/University of Chicago