

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGIOSITY AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS HOMOSEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT

On June 25, 2015, the United States Supreme Court held in *Obergefell v. Hodges* and three other related cases that same-sex couples had a constitutional right to marry. While the decision did not take everyone by surprise, many have commented on the apparent rapid evolution of attitudes regarding the rights of homosexuals. Indeed, it was only 12 years before *Obergefell* that the Supreme Court struck down laws that made gay sex a crime in *Lawrence v. Texas*. Much of the opposition to these changing social norms came from, and continues to come from, conservative religious groups. This research examines the role that changing views on religion may have had on changing views on homosexuality by examining 40 years of data (1974-2014) from the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is the most comprehensive, highly validated, and long-standing survey of demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral characteristics of American residents including hundreds of different variables. This research found that 1) attitudes towards homosexual relations changed significantly over the study period; 2) eight separate measures of religiosity also changed significantly; and 3) the two changes occurred roughly at the same time (i.e. there is no apparent lag-time).

KEYWORDS: Homosexuality, Religiosity, General Social Survey

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Recent court cases (e.g. *Obergefell v. Hodges* and *Lawrence v. Texas*) have chronicled the legal status of same-sex relationships; during the twelve years between these two cases, public opinion has also shifted towards greater support for homosexuality. Opposition to homosexuality remains robust, especially among those who self-identify as religious conservatives.

Religion stands at the nexus of primary and secondary socialization. Parents are the primary source of socialization, providing a strong foundation for the development of attitudes, values, and beliefs (e.g. see Kulik, 2002; Dalhousie & Frideres, 1996; Sears, 1975). Secondary socialization involves the transmission of norms and values through social institutions, such as school and the church. However, parents also socialize their children when they pass on their own institutional effects, such as their educational and religious beliefs, creating secondary-primary socialization (Lubbers, Jaspers, & Ultee, 2009). Research in the Netherlands and in multinational samples suggests that both education and religion play important roles in developing attitudes regarding homosexuality (Kelley, 2001; Van de Meerendonk & Scheepers, 2004). Using the results of nine global and regional surveys in 75 countries, Smith, Son, and Kim (2014) identified the frequency of church attendance as a significant factor in approval of homosexuality, and some subsamples

found differences in attitudes linked to the dominant national religion. Research in the Netherlands found that support for same-sex marriage varies by religious affiliation, differences in religious practices by denomination, and strength of religious affiliation (Lubbers et al., 2009).

Between 1992 and 2000, public opinion in the U.S. on employment discrimination and military service involving homosexuals was weakly, but significantly, related to religious belief and religious practice (not defined in the study) (Brewer, 2003). GSS data from 1973-1998 found no relationship between several combined religion-traditionalism variables and the willingness to limit civil liberties for homosexuals (Loftus, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

This research examines 40 years of data (1974-2014) from the General Social Survey (GSS) that investigates the relationship between changing attitudes towards homosexuality and religious beliefs. The GSS is the most comprehensive, highly validated, and long-standing survey of demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral characteristics of American residents including hundreds of different variables. Since 1972, the GSS has utilized increasingly sophisticated multi-stage national sampling strategies to interview approximately 1500 adults in each year of the 30 years in which the survey was conducted. The cumulative number of interviews during this timeframe totals 59,599 (National Opinion Research Center (NORC), 2015). This research is descriptive and does not attempt to identify sociocultural factors that may explain co-occurring or parallel changes in religiosity and attitudes towards homosexuality, nor does it involve examining goodness of fit of these trends.

RESULTS

From 1972 to 2014, the General Social Survey included nearly 5600 variables and utilized over 200 questions that measured some aspect of religious belief or expression (religiosity). During this same period there were at least 25 questions that measured some aspect of attitudes towards homosexuality. The dependent variable is limited to the basic, and most often cited in the literature (e.g. see Loftus, 2016), question on Attitudes towards Homosexual Relations (N=34,358) (“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?”). For the purposes of this research, the independent variables were limited to those for which there were four decades of data utilizing the same measure and those that were significantly related to Attitudes Towards Homosexual Relations: Religious Preference (N=59,599), Specific Denomination (N=34,935), How Often Attends Religious Services (N=59,037), Religion in Which Raised (N=56,468), Denomination in Which Raised (N=34,377), How Fundamentalist Currently (N=57,329), How Fundamentalist at 16 (N=54,763), and Strength of Affiliation (N=54,604). Ten year intervals were used to examine changes over time: 1974 (N=1484), 1984 (N=1473), 1994 (N=2982), 2004 (N=2812), and 2014 (N=2538). Correlations for the eight religiosity variables are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlations: Independent Variables: Religiosity*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Religion		.187	.632	.081	.268	.403	.502	.272
2. Denomination			.161	.659	.036	.058	.368	.277
3. Religion Raised				.158	.094	.138	.272	.405
4. Denomination Raised					.029	.038	.302	.415
5. Attends Services						.548	.295	.136
6. Strength of Affiliation							.374	.140
7. Fundamentalist Currently								.615
8. Fundamentalist at 16								

*All correlations significant at .01 levels (2-tailed), Spearman's Rho

Attitudes on homosexuality changed significantly over the 40 year period under review. Looking at 10-year intervals of GSS data (1974, 1984, 1994, 2004, and 2014), the percentage of respondents who said that homosexuality was always wrong declined from 73.1% to 40.5%, while the percentage of respondents who said that it was never wrong increased from 13.4% to 49.2% ($\chi^2[12, N=7176] = 701.208, p=.000$). Figure 1, below, illustrates these trends.

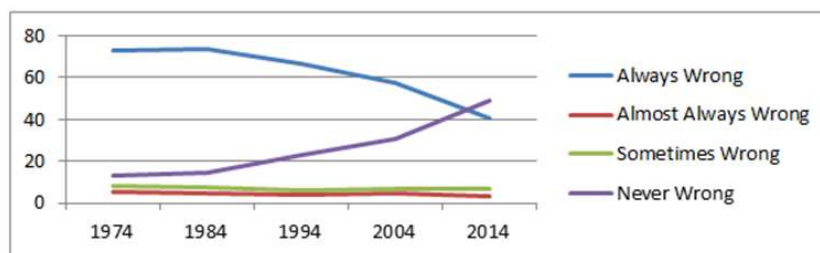


Figure 1: Homosexual Relations by Survey Years 1974-2014 (10 Year Intervals)

Table 2, below, summarizes the changes in the independent variables from 1974 to 2014.

Table 2: Relationship between Independent Variables and Survey Years (Changes Over Time)

Variable Name	χ^2 Value ^a	df	Significance
Religions	563.014	16	.000
Denominations	410.034	28	.000
Religion in which Raised	293.980	16	.000
Denomination in which raised	229.741	24	.000
Attends Religious Services	207.591	12	.000
Strength of Affiliation	308.752	12	.000
How Fundamentalist Currently	147.967	8	.000
How Fundamentalist at 16	92.902	8	.000

^a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5.

The religions to which respondents identified were significantly similar to the religions in which they were raised ($\chi^2[16, N=56,468] = 96973.03, p=.000$) and moderately strongly correlated. For example, 86.5% of those who were raised as Protestants continued to be affiliated with that religion, far more than expected (29,658 v. 19,909.7, respectively). The same was true for Catholics (75.9%), Jews (84.0%), other religions (62.3%), and no religion (53.9%, though over one-third now said they were Protestant). Overall, between childhood and adulthood, the number of Protestants declined 4.4%, Catholics 15.8%, Jews remained virtually unchanged (less than .05%), while those rose in other religions increased 43.6%, and those raised in no religion increased 115.1%. The correlation between the specific denomination in which respondents were raised and those to which they were affiliated as adults is slightly stronger.

During the period under review, the number of respondents who indicated they were Protestant increased nearly 18%, but the overall percentage of Protestants declined from 64.3% to 44.3%. The greatest differences were among those

who stated no religious affiliation: in 1974, 6.8% said they had no affiliation; in 2014, the percentage increased to 20.6%. A similar pattern was found among specific denominations: all but one denomination declined in overall percentage while “no denomination” increased from 4.4% in 1974 to 23.8% in 2014.

Over the 40 year period, the data on affiliations with specific denominations revealed a pattern similar to religious affiliations: except for those indicating other or no specific affiliations, all denominations declined. The most important data for explaining the significance of these changes over time are among Baptists, whose number increased 14.6%, but whose overall total share declined 33.8% to 29.4%. While there were more Baptists than expected in 1974 (322 v. 309.8, respectively), there were fewer than expected in 2014 (369 v. 408.3, respectively). The other large change occurred among those with no religious affiliation: there were 42 in 1974 and 299 in 2014, an increase of 611.9%; this group comprised 4.4% of the total in 1974, far fewer than expected (116.0), and 23.8% in 2014, far more than expected (152.8).

This 40 year period also produced significant changes in the religions in which respondents were raised ($\chi^2[16, N=11,299] = 293.98, p=.000$) (no attempt was made to disaggregate the data to estimate the age of respondents when they said they “were raised” in a particular religion. In each decade, respondents ranged in age from 18 to 89+. Explaining the social context in which respondents were raised in a particular religion is beyond the scope of this research.). In 1974, 66.3% of respondents reported they were raised as Protestants, 27.1% as Catholic, and 2.6 % as none. In 2014, 50.2% of the respondents said they were raised as Protestants, 34.4% Catholics, and 8.1% as none.

The number of respondents raised as Baptists increased 3.7% during this period, though as a percent of all respondents declined from 37.3% to 35.7%. The greatest changes occurred among those raised as Episcopal (14.9% of respondents in 1974, 22.0% in 2014) and other (2.2% to 11.7%).

One interesting finding that is not particularly explanatory is the changes in the African Methodist denomination. In 1974, 22.1% of the respondents reported that they were raised in this denomination; in 2014, 12.9%. However, in 1974, no respondents reported being affiliated with this denomination and in 2014 just 1% self-identified as African Methodists. Of the 1160 respondents raised as African Methodists during the 40 year period, only 47 reported being affiliated as adults.

Overall attendance at religious services declined during this period. In 1972, 30.4% of the respondents said they attended religious services once to several times a week, more than expected (450 v. 407.2, respectively); by 2014, only 24.0% attended that often, far fewer than expected (606 v. 694.3, respectively). In 1974, 12.2% of the respondents said they never attended religious services, far fewer than expected (181 v. 263.2, respectively); that percentage increased to 26.5% by 2014, many more than expected (669 v. 448.8, respectively). This decline in participation is also reflected in strength of respondents’ religious affiliations. Nearly 40% of respondents reported a strong affiliation in 1974, slightly more than expected (584 v. 572.9, respectively); in 2014, 36.3% had a strong affiliation, fewer than expected (908 v. 978.8, respectively). Those with no affiliation accounted for far fewer than expected in 1974 (101 v. 186.5, respectively), while in 2014 there were far more than expected who reported no affiliation (522 v. 318.6, respectively). How often respondents attended religious services and their strength of religious affiliation are significantly and moderately correlated.

How fundamentalist respondents were in the survey years was significantly similar to how fundamentalist they were when they were at age 16 ($\chi^2 [4, N=53,525] = 43,337.05, p=.000$) and moderately strongly correlated ($\rho=.615, p=.000$). For example, 76.6% of those who considered themselves fundamentalist at age 16 were still fundamentalist as an adult, many more than expected (13,472 v. 5499.1, respectively). Among those who identified as

liberal at 16, 73.1% remained liberal, also more than expected (8522 v. 3072.1, respectively). Over the 40 year period, those who identified as fundamentalist at 16 peaked at 35.0% in 1984 then declined to 30.0% in 2014. Those who identified as liberal increased from 15.4% of the total in 1974 to 22.1% in 2014. The pattern for those who identified as fundamentalist currently followed a similar pattern: peaked in 1984 at 26.4% and declined to 24.2% in 2014. Those who currently identified as liberal increased from 19.6% to 33.5% during the study period.

Table 3, below, summarizes the relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable:

Table 3: Relationship between Independent Variables and Dependent Variable (Homosexual Relations)

Variable Name	χ^2 Value ^a	df	Significance
Religions	3711.85	12	.000
Denominations	780.29	21	.000
Religion in which Raised	1505.59	12	.000
Denomination in which raised	714.58	18	.000
Attends Religious Services	2925.69	9	.000
Strength of Affiliation	3261.98	9	.000
How Fundamentalist Currently	3078.48	6	.000
How Fundamentalist at 16	1410.88	6	.000

Nearly 75% of Protestants (74.8%) said that homosexual relations were always wrong, more than expected (15,220 v. 13,194.3, respectively), while each other religious category had fewer than expected responses: Catholics (60.3%), 4979 v. 5353.9; Jews (27.7%), 177 v. 413.5; other (51.1%), 721 v. 913.9; and none (31.8%), 1173 v. 2394.4.

Baptists (81.4% of the subtotal), African Methodists (76.5%), and other denominations (80.6%) were more likely than expected to say that homosexual relations are always wrong (5674 v. 5200.2, 124 v. 120.8, and 3609 v. 3340.8, respectively), while Methodists (71.1%), Lutherans (67.0%), Presbyterians (62.7%), Episcopalians (50.0%), and no denomination (66.4%) were less likely than expected to say such relations are always wrong.

Since the religion in which respondents were raised is significantly correlated to their current religion, it is no surprise that the relationship to homosexual relations is similar. Those raised as Protestants (71.5% of all Protestants) were more likely than expected to say that homosexuality was always wrong (15,137 v. 13,721, respectively) and the other religious categories were the opposite (i.e. less likely than expected).

The results for the denomination in which respondents were raised were slightly different than current denominations. Again, the 78.2% of Baptists who said that homosexual relations were always wrong and the 69.7% of African Methodists were more likely than expected to respond in this manner, and so were the 75.5% of Episcopalians (2985 v. 2820.9, respectively). Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and other denominations were less likely than expected to say that homosexual relations were always wrong.

Nearly one-half (46.4%) of those who never attend religious services said that homosexuality was always wrong (far fewer than expected: 2630 v. 3673.4, respectively) while 82.8% of those who attend once to several times a week said that it was always wrong, far more than expected (7936 v. 6206.1, respectively). Conversely, 41.1% of those who never attend services said that homosexuality is never wrong – fewer than who said it was always wrong, but more than expected (2332 v. 1336.4, respectively), and those who attend services most often said it was never wrong (9.6%), far fewer than expected (920 v. 2257.8, respectively).

Strength of affiliation to a particular religion or denominations is also directly related to attitudes on homosexuality. Among those with a strong affiliation, 78.4%, more than expected (9641 v. 7915.4, respectively), believe that homosexual relations are always wrong, while 31.5% of those with no religious affiliation say that such relations are always wrong, fewer than expected (1140 v. 2327.5, respectively).

Both how fundamentalist respondents were at the time of the survey and when they were 16 significantly impact attitudes on homosexuality. A total of 82.7% of those who identify as fundamentalist say that homosexual relations are always wrong, more than expected (8765 v. 6915.5, respectively); similarly, 78.1% of those who were fundamentalist at age 16 were also more likely than expected to say homosexual relations are always wrong (8716 v. 7240.0, respectively). Less than one-half, 45.5%, of those who identify as liberal said that homosexual relations are always wrong, far fewer than expected (3914 v. 5613.8, respectively) while 53.7% of those who were liberal at age 16 agreed that it was always wrong, but still fewer than expected (3854 v. 4661.3, respectively).

The two largest religious groups, Protestants and Catholics, showed significant changes in their attitudes about homosexual relations in each of the years under review ($p=.000$ in each decade). In 1974, 78.5% of the Protestants said that homosexuality was always wrong, more than expected (694 v. 646.3, respectively) while 71.6% of the Catholics agreed (slightly fewer than expected: 249 v. 254.4, respectively). By 2014, 57.6% of the Protestants said it was always wrong, still more than expected (419 v. 294.6, respectively), and less than one-third (33.2%) of Catholics agreed, again fewer than expected (126 v. 154, respectively). The percentage of Protestants who said that homosexual relations are never wrong increased from 9.8% in 1974 to 33.6% in 2014, while the percentage of Catholics increased from 12.9% to 53.4% during the same period. Figure 2 compares the overall 40 year trend for those who said that homosexual relations are always wrong with responses from Protestants and Catholics. The trends reveal the degree to which changes in attitudes by Protestants and Catholics drove the overall changes.

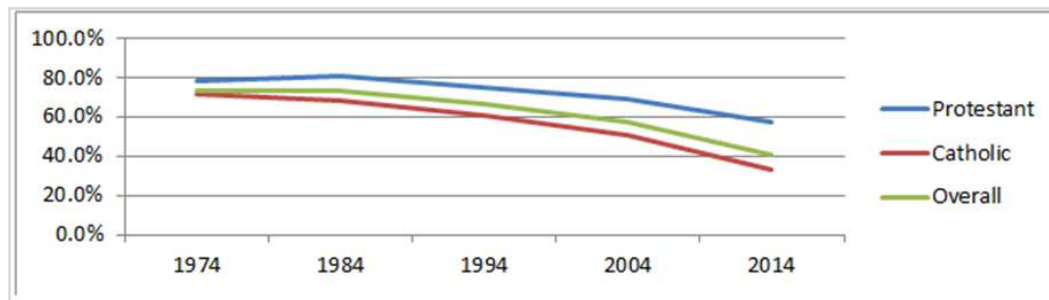


Figure 2: Homosexual Relation (Always Wrong) by Relation by Survey Years

The three largest denominations to which respondents were affiliated (Baptist, Methodist, and other) accounted for 67.9% of the total, and each declined significantly in each decade ($p=.000$, except 1984 where $p=.007$). In 1974, 83.7% of the Baptists, 78.2% of the Methodists, and 86.3% of those affiliated with other denominations felt that homosexual relations are always wrong. By 2014, 64.8% of Baptists, 35.9% of Methodists, and 68.6% of other denominations thought these relationships were always wrong. While the relationships are significant the results are suspect since 38% of the cells have values less than the expected counts. Still, the trends are in the right direction though not as meaningful as religious affiliation (this should not be a surprise since these data disaggregate the larger category of "Protestant"). Table 3 reveals these trends.

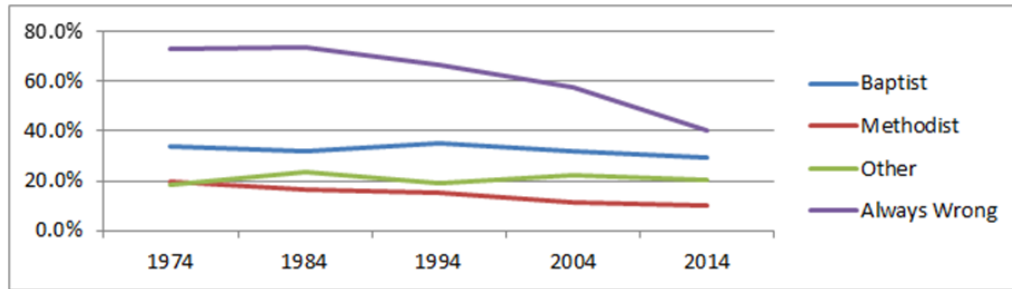


Figure 3: Homosexual Relations (Always Wrong) by Denomination by Survey Years

The religion in which respondents were raised revealed a similar trend as their current religious affiliation (remembering that they are significantly, but not strongly, correlated). In 1974, 76.8% of those raised Protestant and 68.7% of those raised Catholic opposed homosexual relations – more Protestants than expected (696 v. 662.4, respectively) and fewer Catholics than expected (257 v. 273.4, respectively). By 2014, 49.9% of those raised Protestant and only 30.6% of those raised Catholic said that homosexuality was always wrong – still more Protestants than expected (416 v. 339.6, respectively) and still fewer Catholics than expected (170 v. 224.9, respectively). Once again, changes in religious affiliation – in this case, the religion in which one was raised – helps explain the decline in opposition to homosexual relations. Figure 4 summarizes these trends for the study period.

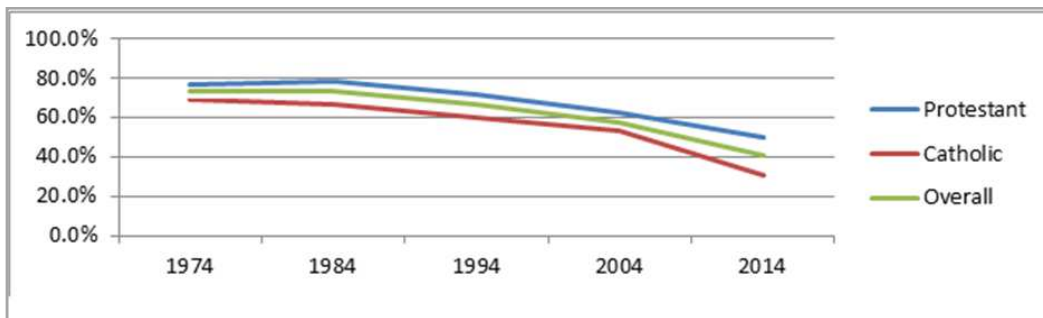


Figure 4: Homosexual Relations (Always Wrong) by Religion in Which Raised by Survey Years

The denominations in which respondents were raised also reflected the decline in religiosity and corresponding decline in opposition to homosexual relations, though not nearly as directly as religious affiliation but more closely aligned than respondents' current denomination (even though denomination at 16 and current denomination are significantly and moderately strongly correlated). Among Baptists, the largest denomination, 82.3% said that homosexual relations were always wrong in 1974, more than expected (283 v. 264.1, respectively). For those raised as Methodists, 74.7% opposed these relations, fewer than expected (79 v. 87.5, respectively), and 60.0% of those raised as Episcopal, the third largest denomination in this analysis, agreed (more than expected, 110 and 104.4, respectively). By 2014, opposition to homosexual relations declined to 55.6% among those raised as Baptists, 31.5% for Methodists, and 58.7% for Episcopalians – more than expected for Baptists (178 v. 157.3, respectively) and Episcopalians (118 v. 98.8, respectively), and slightly less for Methodists (23 v. 25.9, respectively). Figure 5 illustrates these data.

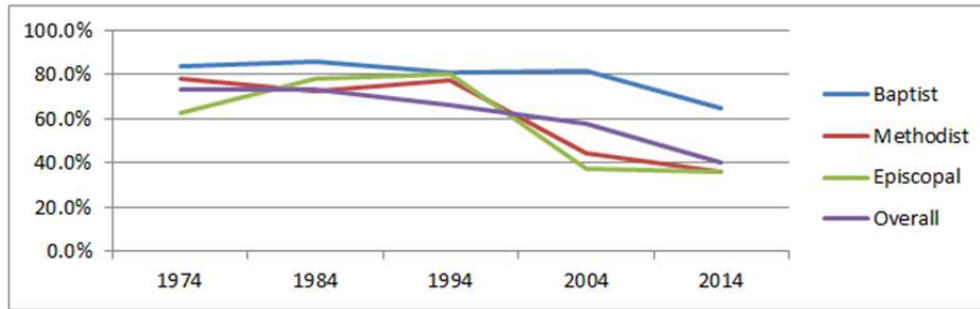


Figure 5: Homosexual Relations (Always Wrong) by Specific Denominations in Which Raised by Survey Years

Among those who said they never attend religious services in 1974, 61.3% said that homosexual relations were always wrong (fewer than expected: 100 v. 119.1, respectively), while 82.2% of those who attend once to several times a week said such relations are always wrong (more than expected: 346 v. 307.5, respectively). By 2014, only 23.7% of those who never attend said the relations were always wrong, far fewer than expected: 106 v. 181.3, respectively), and 71.2% of those who attend most often opposed homosexual relations (far more than expected: 274 v. 155.8, respectively). These relationships are significant in each of the decades ($p=.000$), and the figure below illustrates how closely declines in opposition to homosexuality are paralleled by declines in attendance at religious services over time.

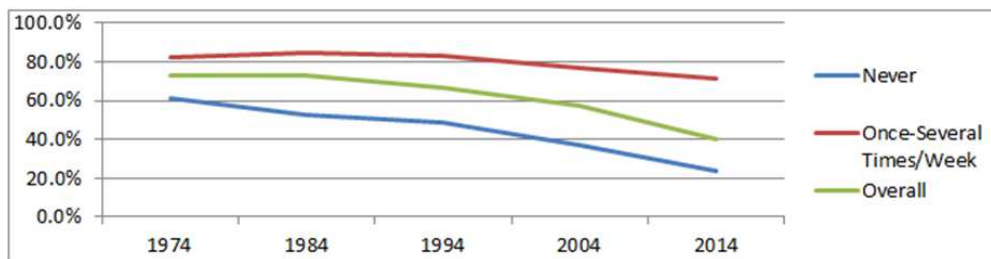


Figure 6: Homosexual Relations (Always Wrong) by How Often Attends Religious Services by Survey Years

Strength of affiliation to a particular religion is also significantly related to attitudes towards homosexuality in each of decades ($p=.000$). In 1974, 83.5% of those who said their affiliation was strong also said that homosexual relations were always wrong, more than expected (459 v. 403.4, respectively). Among those who said they had no religious affiliation, 40.2% said it was always wrong, fewer than expected (35 v. 63.8, respectively). In 2014, 77.6% of those with a strong affiliation said homosexuality was always wrong, many more than expected (2171 v. 1737.8, respectively), while 28.1% of those with no affiliation shared that view, far fewer than expected (239 v. 527.7, respectively). The overall decline in opposition to homosexuality closely parallels the decline in strength in religious affiliation as seen in Figure 7.

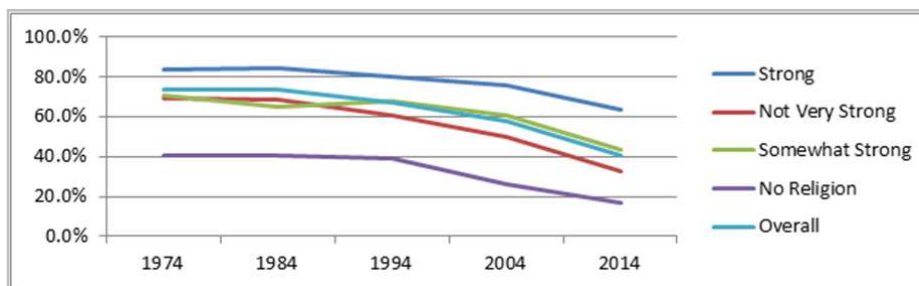


Figure 7: Homosexual Relations (Always Wrong) by Strength of Religious Affiliation by Survey Years

How fundamentalist respondents were at age 16 is significantly related to attitudes towards homosexuality in each

of the decades under review ($p=.000$ in each decade). In 1974, 83.0% of respondents who said they were fundamentalist at age 16 believe that homosexual relations were always wrong, more than expected (352 v. 310.3, respectively). Among those who were liberal at age 16, 61.6% said such relations were always wrong, fewer than expected (117 v. 139.1, respectively). For those who said they were fundamentalist at age 16 in 2014, 58.4% opposed homosexuality, more than expected (288 v. 198.8, respectively), while 29.8% of the liberals shared that view, fewer than expected (104 v. 140.7, respectively). Changes in the degree of fundamentalism at age 16 and attitudes towards homosexuality closely track the overall decline in opposition to homosexuality, as shown in Figure 8.

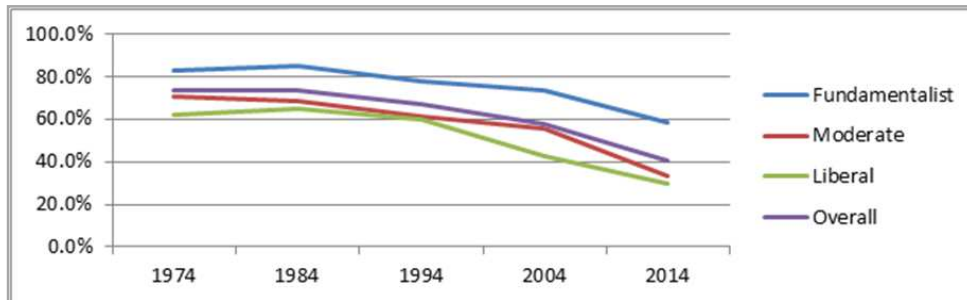


Figure 8: Homosexual Relations (Always Wrong) by How Fundamentalist R was at Age 16 by Survey Years

How fundamentalist respondents were in the current survey years is significantly and moderately strongly correlated with how fundamentalist they were at age 16, so it is not surprising that the trends are similar. The more fundamentalist subjects were the more likely they would find homosexual relations to be always wrong, as described above. But as survey respondents became less fundamentalist, their opposition to homosexuality declined steadily in each decade ($p=.000$ in each decade). In 1974, 85.2% of those who identified as fundamentalist opposed homosexual relations, more than expected (345 v. 296.3, respectively). Among those who identified as liberal, 50.6% said homosexual relations were always wrong, fewer than expected (124 v. 179.2, respectively). By 2014, 69.3% of self-identified fundamentalists opposed homosexuality while only 22.6% of liberals shared that belief, far fewer than expected (122 v. 222.9, respectively). Figure 9 reveals how closely these trends compare with declines in overall opposition to homosexual relations

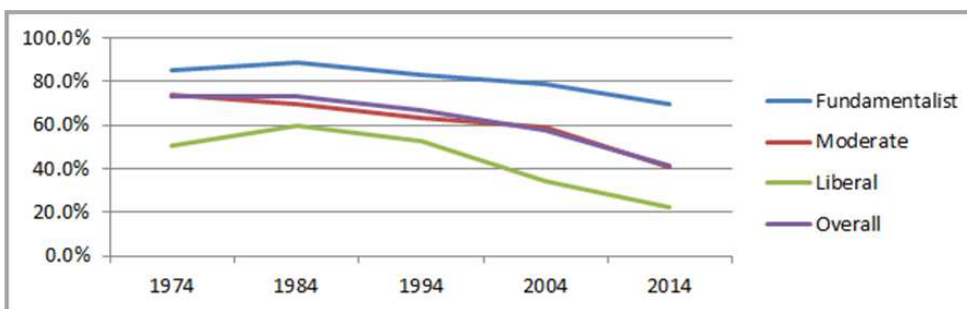


Figure 9: Homosexual Relations (Always Wrong) by How Fundamentalist R is Currently by Survey Years

CONCLUSIONS

From a sociological perspective, religion is recognized as an important social institution, one that, along with education, plays a major role in the transmission and reinforcement of attitudes, values, and beliefs including those related to homosexuality. This research filled two gaps in the existing literature on the relationship between religious beliefs and

attitudes towards homosexuality. First, there is an absence of research on a variety of measures of religiosity and attitudes towards homosexuality using common definitions and survey techniques. Second, there is an absence of research on this topic using data from the United States. What little research there is uses measures from multiple surveys across a variety of nations, most notably Western Europe and Scandinavia.

Three trends are clearly revealed in these data. First, attitudes on homosexuality have changed significantly between 1974 and 2014: the number and percent of respondents to the GSS who said that homosexual relations are always wrong declined steadily while those who said that such relations are never wrong increased steadily. In fact, in 2014, these trend lines crossed, so that more respondents said it was never wrong than said it was always wrong, one year before the Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, making same-sex marriages constitutionally protected. Second, each of the eight religiosity variables revealed a decline during the study period. Since 1974, GSS respondents are less likely to be affiliated with a religion or specific denomination, feel less strongly affiliated with a religion or specific denomination, attend religious services less often, and are less likely to identify as fundamentalist and more likely to identify as liberal. Third, the decline in religiosity closely parallels the decline in opposition to homosexual relations. These trends appear to co-occur; analyses that look at annual changes, rather by decade, reveal no lag-time between declines in religiosity and declines in opposition to homosexuality. Subsequent analyses will examine the goodness of fit of these trends and composite measures of religiosity.

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