



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

JOURNAL OF POLITICS & SOCIETY

Web Feature: Saturday, April 25, 2015

Editor: Chris Meyer, Executive Editor

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Religion, Intergroup Contact, and Public Opinion on Gay Rights in the United States

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Abstract

Gay rights issues have increasingly received considerable attention through the popular media and in political discourse over recent years. Using 2012 American National Election Study Data, this paper explores how religious identity and religiosity affect opinions on gay rights issues. Specifically, I look at differences in levels of support for gay rights policies that have an equality frame versus a morality frame. I find that there is a large gap in opinion between religious and non-religious people on gay rights and especially on morality framed policies. Further, I look at if knowing someone who is gay affects these opinions. My findings show that in some cases people who are more religious are more likely than people who are less religious to have their opinions on gay rights issues changed by knowing someone who is gay. In this paper I develop a theory to explain these findings, suggest new directions in future research on contact theory among LGBT individuals, and discuss the implications of my research for the gay rights movement.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2013, the gay rights movement won a major victory when the Supreme Court struck down major provisions of the Defense of Marriage Act allowing for federal benefits for same-sex couples (Liptak 2013). As progress has been made in the gay rights movement and more states have legalized same-sex marriage, these issues have also been gaining increased focus in the public sphere and public opinion on the issue is shifting. In fact, just over the past decade support for gay marriage has increased nearly 20% and there is now more support than opposition for this policy across the public (Pew 2014). A variety of other gay rights issues have also taken center stage recently, such as in 2011 when “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was repealed. As a result, gays and lesbians are now able to openly serve in the military (Bumiller 2011). Due to the increased salience of the issue nationwide, the fight for gay rights has taken on a morality politics model in which ideology and religious belief play a large role in shaping opinion on gay rights as well as policy (Haider-Markel and Meier 1996). Despite progress, a substantial and vocal opposition to gay rights progress still exists in the United States. Much of this opposition exists within groups of highly conservative and religious people. Thus, it is important to better understand how religion affects people’s opinions on gay rights issues and what specific issues elicit higher levels of support as well as what outside factors may lead to more positive views of gay rights. This paper will expand the research on religion and support for gay rights issues by analyzing opinions on a number of policies among different religious groups and non-religious people. Further, I will test the effects of knowing someone who is gay on religious people’s opinions of gay rights, a variable which will be increasingly important as more gay and lesbian individuals become more open about their identities.

Theoretical Framework

General knowledge holds that being affiliated with a religious organization leads to more opposition to gay rights policies. In reality, however, there is some heterogeneity to this assumption. For example, liberal mainline Protestant denominations tend to have relatively liberal views on gay rights, while Evangelical Protestants tend to be the most opposed to gay rights with Catholics and more moderate Protestants falling somewhere in the middle (Olson et al. 2006; Rayside and Wilcox 2012). In particular, being a member of an Evangelical Church or being a born again Christian has historically been correlated with being more conservative, more Republican, and more opposed to gay rights (Wilcox 1990). Evangelical churches have significantly different theological beliefs than other Christian traditions, so we should expect to see different patterns in support for gay rights among Evangelical and born again Christians. Further, people with high levels of religiosity, those who attend church, pray, and read the Bible more often, tend to have more conservative opinions towards gay rights (Olson et al, 2006). Religiosity may have a profound effect on opinions on gay rights, because high levels of religiosity imply greater involvement in and connection with a congregation. Churches play an important role in contributing the political beliefs and behaviors of their congregation members. Research shows that religious attendance often leads to higher levels of political participation, but this is also dependent on denominational affiliation (Djupe and Grant 2001). Moreover, churches serve as contexts in which are fertile ground for socialization and formation of political opinions on the basis of the teachings of that specific congregation (Wald et al. 1988). Regardless of whether or not clergy are willing to preach about homosexuality, high religiosity people are in greater contact with other church members and this results in greater consistency

among these groups on morally charged political issues such as gay rights (Beatty and Walter 1984; Olson et al. 2006). These findings lead me to my two initial hypotheses:

H1: In a comparison of individuals, Christians, regardless of religious tradition and religiosity, will be less supportive of gay rights policies than non-religious people.

H2: Born again Christians, however, will be less likely to support gay rights policies than other Christians.

As there is variation among people of different religious traditions, Christians and non-religious people alike also have diverging opinions on different types of gay rights issues. Loftus (2001) finds varying trends between the judgments of the morality of homosexuals versus support for the expansion of civil liberties for homosexuals. Specifically, questions on the morality of homosexuality typically refer to it as a practice and behavior, while questions dealing with equality and civil liberties questions identify gays as a minority group. Thus, equality issues generally receive more support than morality issues. Further, when looking at gay marriage and civil union policy more specifically, research shows that using language to evoke a civil union or equal rights frame rather than a marriage or special rights frame produced more support for gay rights (Price et al. 2005). However, the effect observed in this study is dependent on the ideological makeup of the group in a discussion; that is, whether or not the participants are conservative or liberal. Thus, we should expect religious people, who are typically more conservative than non-religious people, to be more likely to evoke a morality frame when thinking about gay rights issues. Overall, support for equality as opposed to support for traditional values result in opposite opinions on gay rights: support for equality leads to support for gay rights while support for traditional morality results in opposition to gay rights (Wilcox and Wolpert 2000). It is not clear from the literature, however, how big the difference is in

support for morality versus equality framed gay rights issues among Christians and how this compares to people who are not religious. Thus, in this paper I will expand the knowledge on differences in support among Christians and non-Christians for gay rights issues that evoke different frames. This leads me to my third hypothesis:

H3: Christians and non-religious people will both more likely to support gay rights issues with an equality frame than with a morality frame. However, the differences in support for equality issues over morality issues will be larger among Christians than non-religious people.

Next, I turn to a discussion of how contact with gays and lesbians among heterosexuals affects these relationships between religion and gay rights. Intergroup contact theory is a prevalent explanation of racial attitudes and tolerance. When someone has a friend, colleague, or family member of a different race, he or she will be less likely to have negative stereotypes about people of that race, and consequently more support for government policies such as affirmative action (Sigelman and Welch 1993). This theory has been expanded to research on the politics of gay rights (Skipworth et al. 2010). The literature indicates that knowing someone who is gay does have an effect on opinion on gay rights policy, but there is not a clear consensus on what that effect is. Herek and Capitano (1996) find that the more people report relationships with someone who is gay and the closer these relationships are, the more positive their attitudes are towards gay men. Community context may also have a significant effect on support for gay rights. Overby and Barth (2002) find that an increase in gays in one's community leads to warmer feelings towards gays and lesbians. However, this may be dependent on regional context as when controlling for region, southerners do not have as warm of feelings towards gays after contact as those that live in other parts of the country (Barth and Overby 2003). In later research, Barth et al. (2009) find, however, that community context may not have that large of an impact

for gay rights opinions, as compared to race, because there is not large enough of a divide between straight and gay America. That is, context has a large and negative effect on black-white relationships, but despite the oft-proclaimed culture war this same type of gap does not exist between gays and straights. Further, they note that, “contact makes a difference, but its effect is not definite, particularly in social contexts in which strong antigay messages are also common” (361). Many religious institutions are places in which this is common. Skipworth et al. (2010) confirm these results by finding a great amount of variation in the effect of the contact hypothesis between people of different religions and ideologies. In particular, white, southern, Evangelicals are most likely to have their opinions on same sex marriage minimally affected by knowing someone who is gay. Thus, among religious people, especially those with high religiosity and who are Evangelicals or born again Christians, we should expect to see little effect of contact on opinion. This leads me to my final hypotheses:

H4: Born again Christians will be less likely than other Christians to have their opinions on gay rights policies positively affected by knowing someone who is gay.

H5: Individuals with high levels of religiosity will be less likely than individuals with low levels of religiosity to have their opinions on gay rights policies positively affected by knowing someone who is gay.

Before I continue, it is important to note some of the methodological concerns when measuring the contact hypothesis. There is the possibility of a self-selection bias in contact that may change the direction of causality. That is, those who support gay rights policy or feel positively towards gays in general may choose to come into contact with gays and lesbians, while those who feel negatively towards gays and lesbians may not choose contact. Moreover, if these individuals who do not support gay rights come into contact with a gay or lesbian, he or

she may not reveal his or her sexual orientation. Literature on race and the contact hypothesis has addressed this issue at length and the research shows that selection bias is not significant in traditional methods of testing the contact hypothesis (Powers and Ellison 1995). Nevertheless, I will consider these issues when I discuss the results of my analyses.

Data

The data used in this paper come from the 2012 American National Election Studies (ANES).[†] My dependent variables are opinions on four gay rights issues. I look at support for laws to protect gay and lesbians against job discrimination as well as if they should be able to serve in the military. Further, I test opinions on whether or not gays and lesbians should be able to adopt children and on gay marriage. The question on gay marriage provides three possible responses. Either gays and lesbians should have no legal recognition of their relationships, should be able to form civil unions, or should be able to legally marry. I also create two separate indices measuring support for equality framed gay rights issues and morality framed gay rights issues. The equality index includes the questions on job discrimination and military service. The morality index includes questions on gay marriage and adoption. I create these distinctions, because these issues will evoke different frames from respondents in which they think about gay rights issues (Loftus 2001; Price et al. 2005). Because the question on adoption only had two possible responses, all of the variables were recoded from one to two before the additive index was created. To account for this one to two scale for the question on gay marriage question, I coded those who supported gay marriage or civil unions together. This allows me to make comparisons of coefficients for a variety of independent variables in my regression models

[†] The wording of the 2012 ANES questions used to create my key variables is located in the Appendix.

across these two different dependent variables. I also use these four individual policy issues as dependent variables in a number of my analyses.

The independent variables that I look at in my analyses are measures of religion as well as if the respondent knows someone who is gay. My measure of religion takes two dimensions: religiosity and religious belief. First, I created an index of religiosity. This includes measures of the importance of religion, the use of religion as guide, prayer habits, views of the Bible, and church attendance. The index is scaled from one to three, with three being the most religious. To measure religious belief, I used a general variable of Christian religious belief coded as a dummy variable with one equaling being a Christian and zero equaling not being religious. A second variable for religious belief was also used to measure if the respondent was a born again Christian or practiced a different Christian tradition. These different measures of religion allow me to get at various aspects of religious identity and belief. To test the contact hypothesis I include a dummy variable that measures if someone does or does not have a family member, friend, neighbor or co-worker who is gay. I also use interaction variables that measure the effect of knowing someone who is gay on these different variables that measure religion.

When I use regression analyses to test Hypotheses 4 and 5, I control for demographics including gender, age, education, and marital status. Following the example of Olson (2006), I excluded demographic variables for income and employment status, which he found insignificant. The literature suggests that there are a number of attitudinal measures that are consistent predictors of support for gay rights (Brewer 2003; Loftus 2001; Olson et al. 2006), so I also controlled for these attitudes to the extent that the ANES data allows. These include a feeling thermometer towards gays, whether one should be worried about equality, whether one

should be more tolerant towards those with different moral values, and whether there should more of an emphasis on traditional family values.

Religious Tradition and Opinion on Gay Rights

To test Hypothesis 1, that Christians will be less supportive of gay rights policies than non-religious people, I ran cross tabulations of my two measures of religious tradition on my dependent variables. The results are displayed in Table 1. All of the analyses produced statistically significant relationships ($p < .01$, two-tailed test). Among those who say that they are Christian, 73.5% support laws that protect gays from discrimination and 85.9% support gays being able to serve openly in the military. As is expected, for both of these policies, people who do not classify themselves as religious are more supportive of both job discrimination laws (80.7%) and allowing gays to serve in the military (88.7%). However, as we move to policies that have a morality focus, there are larger gaps in the differences of opinion between religious and non-religious individuals. 77% of non-religious respondents support gay people being able to adopt children, while only 58% support this policy. Furthermore, nearly double the number of non-religious people support gay marriage as compared to religious people. It is interesting to note that Christian respondents were relatively split, compared to non-religious people, in their response to this question. Civil unions were the most popular response with 39% of religious people supporting the practice, and the least popular response was support for neither marriage nor civil unions at 28% of respondents. Support for gay marriage fell in the middle at 32.7%. It is clear that the data support Hypothesis 1. Across all of the gay rights policies that I look at, Christians are less supportive of the policy than non-religious people.

Table 1: Support for gay rights issues among non-religious people and Christians

	Military Service	Job Discrimination	Adoption	Marriage	Civil Unions
Non-religious	88.7%*	80.7%*	77.1%*	60.9%*	23.9%*
All Christians	85.9%*	75.5%*	58.4%*	32.7%*	39.2%*
<i>N</i>	5200	5133	5156		5256

*p<.01

As discussed, it is clear from the literature that not all Christians have the same beliefs. There is a large amount of variation on the opinions of gay rights policy among Christians based on denomination (Olson et al. 2006; Rayside and Wilcox 2012; Wilcox 1990). In particular, born again and Evangelical Christians tend to be more conservative than other Christians (Beatty and Walter 1984). I repeat the cross tabulation analyses done in the comparison of Christians and non-religious on born again Christians and other Christians. The results are displayed in Table 2. On all of the gay rights issues that I measure support of, born again Christians are less supportive than other Christians of these issues and the results are statistically significant ($p < .01$, two-tailed test). 55.3% of born again Christians support protections against job discrimination for gays and lesbians and 73.2% support gays being able to serve in the military. Meanwhile, support for these issues from other Christians is at 76.8% and 88.4%, respectively. As in the comparison between all Christians and non-religious, I find bigger gaps in levels of support as we move to results on morality framed issues. Only 35.2% of born again Christians support gays being able to adopt which is only a little more than half that of all other Christians. This gap grows larger for support of gay marriage. 14.9% of born again Christians support gay marriage, while 41.2% of other Christians support this policy. Thus, it is clear that there are large differences in the amount of support for gay rights policies between born again Christians and other Christians as well as between non-religious people and all Christians. This confirms both Hypothesis 1 and

Hypothesis 2. Further, we see drastically different levels of support for equality and morality framed gay rights issues.

Table 2: Support for gay rights issues among born again Christians and other Christians

	Military Service	Job Discrimination	Adoption	Marriage	Civil Unions
Other Christians	88.4%*	76.8%*	66.7%*	41.2%*	39.7%*
Born Again Christians	73.2%*	55.3%*	35.2%*	14.9%*	33.2%*
<i>N</i>	2990	2979	2987		2995

*p<.01

Equal Rights versus Morality Issues

My findings so far and previous research leads me to the formulation of Hypothesis 3: Christians will be more supportive of equality framed issues than morality framed issues. The equality issues I test are job discrimination and military service, and morality issues are gay marriage and adoption. To test this hypothesis I use mean comparisons. Table 3 presents the mean level of support for equality and morality gay rights issues among the groups represented by my variables measuring religious tradition. The coefficients show the level of support for gay rights issues from 1 to 2, with 1 being strongly opposed and 2 being strongly supportive. First, let us look at the results comparing Christians and non-religious people. Again, there is a very small difference of .03 between Christians and non-religious on their mean support for equality framed gay rights issues. On the other hand, for morality framed issues the difference is much larger at 0.15. This gap grows for morality issues, because there is only a small change in support among non-religious as you move from equality to morality framed issues, but among Christians the drop in support is more substantial between these two types of issues. This supports the theory

that issues that evoke moral frames are much more likely to receive less support among Christians, while this does not have as large of an effect on those who are not religious.

Table 3: Mean comparisons of opinion on equality and morality framed gay rights issues

	Equality Frame	Morality Frame	Difference
Non-religious	1.84*	1.80*	0.04
All Christians	1.81*	1.65*	0.16
Difference	0.03	0.15	
<i>N</i>	5126	5084	
Other Christian	1.83*	1.74*	0.09
Born Again	1.64*	1.42*	0.22
Difference	0.19	0.32	
<i>N</i>	2977	2981	

*p<.01

When comparing the difference between born again Christians and those of other Christian traditions, I find that the gap in levels of support between these two groups is larger for both equality and morality framed issues than between all Christians and non-religious. This illustrates the large amount of variation between people who identify as Christian but are from different Christian traditions. Further, morality issues are far more salient for born again Christians than other Christians. The mean for born again Christians on morality framed issues is 1.42, which is the lowest out of any group analyzed. Further, this is .22 lower than their level of support for equality issues. This is also the biggest difference in support between the two types of gay rights issues among all of the groups that I analyze. All of these findings support my third hypothesis. Among all of the groups that I measured, individuals are more likely to support equality framed gay rights policies.

It is possible that factors other than religion are affecting some of the relationships presented in Tables 1-3. In Table 4, I add control variables to ensure I address some key possibilities and use regression analyses to shed some light on attitudes other than religion that affect opinion on gay rights issues. It presents two different regression models that use different measures of religion as independent variables. Standard errors are in parentheses and p values are superscripts. They are bolded if at least marginally statistically significant ($p < .1$). In Model 1 I use the dummy variable that indicates a respondent is a born again Christian. Model 2 contains my religiosity index. As described in the data section of this paper, higher levels of religiosity signify more intense religious beliefs. Both models control for a variety of demographic characteristics as well as attitudinal measures. One attitudinal measure of particular interest when thinking about the higher levels of support for equality framed issues over morality framed issues is that measuring feelings towards equality. A positive coefficient for this variable shows that those who do not think that we should be less worried about equality are more supportive of gay rights than those who think we should worry less about equality. This variable is positive and significant for the equality frame dependent variable for both Model 1 and Model 2. Thus, as would be expected feelings towards general equality play a role in forming opinions on gay rights issues that evoke equality frames. However, when morality frame is the dependent variable, the equality variable is not statistically significant for both models. This shows that whenever someone is evaluating their support for a morality framed gay rights issue, their feelings towards equality have no significant effect on how they form their opinion. This helps to explain why individuals are less supportive of legal marriage and adoption for gays and lesbians. They do not view their opposition to these issues as necessarily meaning that they are also in opposition to equality.

Table 4: Multivariate Regression Estimates for Support of Morality and Equality Framed Gay Rights Issues

	Model 1.1: Morality Frame	Model 1.2: Equality Frame	Model 2.1: Morality Frame	Model 2.2: Equality Frame
Religiosity			-.175 ^{.000} (.010)	-.047 ^{.000} (.017)
Born Again	-.157 ^{.000} (.017)	-.080 ^{.000} (.015)		
Contact	.025 ^{.126} (.016)	.007 ^{.636} (.014)	-.089 ^{.003} (.029)	-.023 ^{.383} (.026)
Religiosity x Contact			.060 ^{.000} (.014)	.025 ^{.046} (.013)
Born Again x Contact	.015 ^{.559} (.016)	.041 ^{.084} (.024)		
<i>Attitudinal</i>				
Feeling Towards Gays	.007 ^{.000} (.000)	.005 ^{.000} (.000)	.006 ^{.000} (.000)	.004 ^{.000} (.000)
Feelings Towards Equality	.003 ^{.590} (.006)	.029 ^{.000} (.005)	.003 ^{.451} (.004)	.023 ^{.000} (.003)
Feelings Towards Traditional Values	.054 ^{.000} (.006)	.009 ^{.116} (.006)	.028 ^{.000} (.004)	.008 ^{.039} (.004)
Tolerance of Opposing Views	-.042 ^{.000} (.006)	-.027 ^{.000} (.005)	-.047 ^{.000} (.004)	-.027 ^{.000} (.004)
<i>Demographic</i>				
Gender	.014 ^{.275} (.012)	.031 ^{.005} (.011)	.026 ^{.005} (.009)	.019 ^{.016} (.008)
Age	.004 ^{.076} (.002)	.002 ^{.358} (.002)	-.001 ^{.411} (.002)	.002 ^{.197} (.001)
Education	.017 ^{.001} (.006)	.012 ^{.018} (.005)	.019 ^{.000} (.004)	.011 ^{.001} (.003)
Marital Status	.014 ^{.388} (.017)	.021 ^{.147} (.014)	.024 ^{.041} (.011)	.016 ^{.119} (.010)
Constant	1.26 ^{.000} (.039)	1.42 ^{.000} (.035)	1.70 ^{.000} (.032)	1.59 ^{.000} (.029)
N of observations	2,716	2,715	4,853	4,835

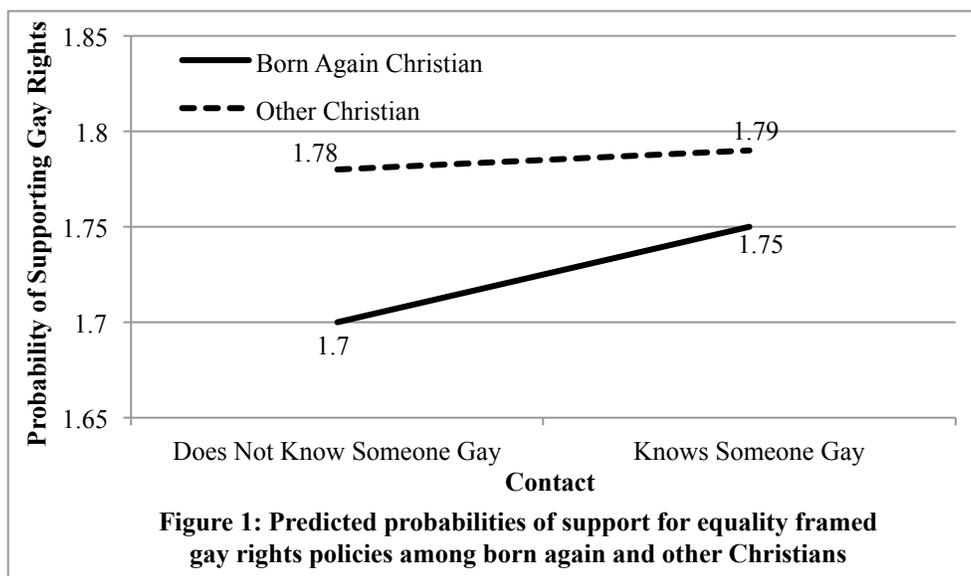
Notes: Coefficients are from ordinary least squared regressions with standard errors in parentheses and p values as superscripts (bolded if p<.1).

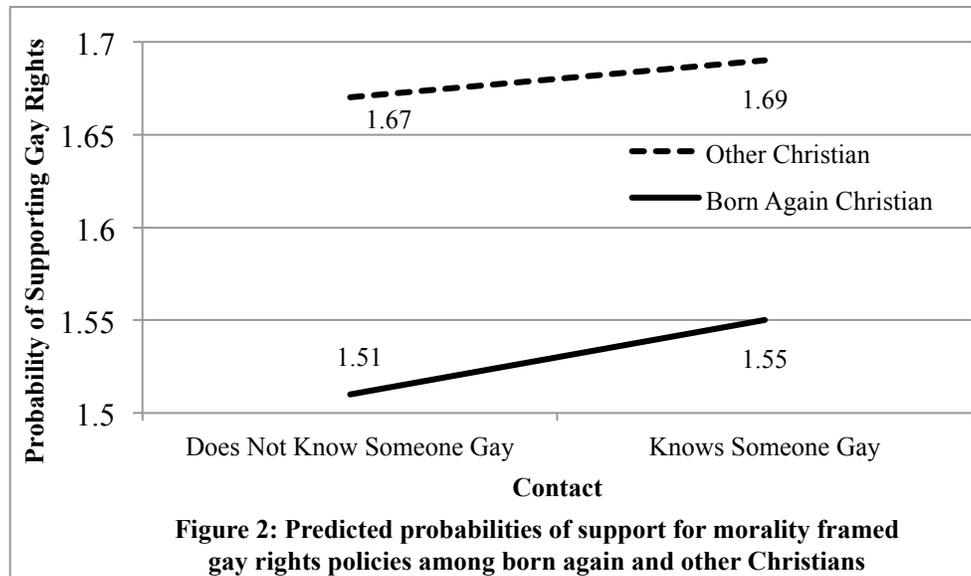
Contact Theory and Gay Rights

I also use the regressions presented in Table 4 to test Hypotheses 4 and 5. These hypotheses state that people with high levels of religiosity and born again Christians will be less likely than people with low levels of religiosity and other Christians to have their opinion on gay rights issues changed by knowing someone who is gay. Not only do these models include a measure of religion and control variables, there is also a variable measuring whether or not the respondent knows someone who is gay and also a variable showing the interaction between the measure of religion and contact with someone who is gay. This allows me to analyze the contact hypothesis among these different religious groups.

I will first discuss Hypothesis 4, which is directly tested in Model 1. Because of the interaction effect, the coefficient for born again Christians represents people who are born again and do not know someone who is gay. For both dependent variables, this coefficient is negative and significant, but as expected is larger for morality issues (-.157) than for equality issues (-.080). Next, the coefficient for the interaction between being a born again Christian and knowing someone who is gay is not statistically significant for predicting support of morality variable issues. However, for the same interaction variable with equality issues as the dependent variable the coefficient is both positive and marginally statistically significant ($p < .1$). Further, the coefficient for contact, which measures the effect for Christians who are not born again and know someone who is gay, is statistically insignificant. This shows that among Christians who do not consider themselves to be born again, knowing someone who is gay has no effect on their support for gay rights issues. Meanwhile born again Christians have their opinions on equality framed gay rights issues positively affected by knowing someone who is gay.

I shed further light on this finding by running the predicted probabilities for this regression model with respect to the variables measuring religion and contact. The predicted score for support for gay rights was created by setting the interaction variable as well as the contact and religion variable to the proper value for the group I was trying to isolate, and setting all of the other variables in the model at their means. Among born again Christians, the gay rights score, which is scaled from 1 (strongly oppose) to 2 (strongly support), is 1.7 if you do not know someone who is gay or a lesbian. For born again Christians who do know someone who is gay, the score increases to 1.75. However, among other Christians the model predicts only a .01 increase in the gay rights score as you move from not knowing someone who is gay to knowing someone who is gay. There are similar results for the morality issues. For this dependent variable, the gay rights score for born again Christians increases by .04 when they know someone who is gay, but for other Christians the score only increases by .02. Knowing someone who is gay leads to an increase in support for both born again Christians and other Christians, but this increase is larger among those who are born again. This is the opposite of how I theorized this relationship to be in Hypothesis 4.

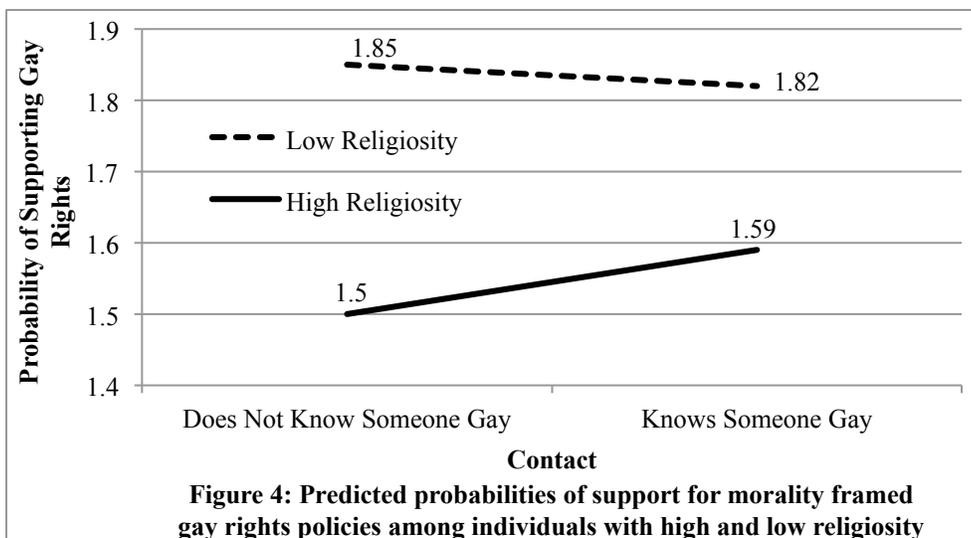
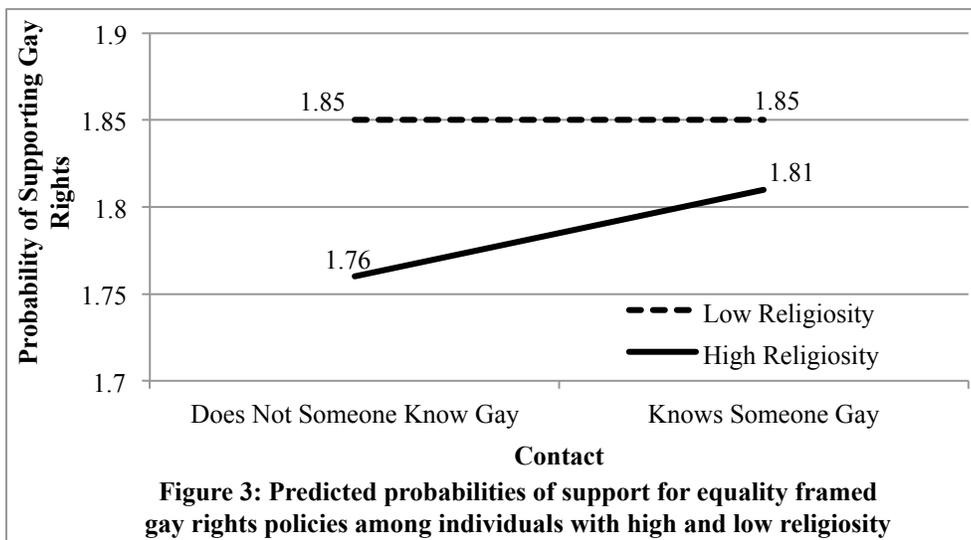




Model 2 produced somewhat similar results. In this model, the variable representing born again Christians is substituted for a measure of religiosity. Having higher levels of religiosity and knowing someone who is gay has a positive and significant effect on support for gay rights. The coefficient for the morality frame dependent variable is .060, and for the equality frame dependent variable it is .025. It is interesting to note that the positive effect of knowing someone who is gay is stronger for morality issues. As is expected, the coefficient for individuals who have high levels of religiosity and do not know someone that is gay is negative for both dependent variables but larger for morality issues.

As in Model 1, I calculated the predicted gay rights support score based on the religiosity and contact variables for this model. The results are shown in Figures 3 and 4. For the equality frame dependent variable, the scores for people with low levels of religiosity indicate a very slight increase if a respondent knows someone who is gay. Among the same group, support for gay rights policies actually decreases when an individual knows someone who is gay. Although all of the values from predicted probabilities in both Figures 3 and 4 are statistically significant

($p < .01$), it is important to note that for both of these curves measuring low religiosity respondents the two points on the line are within the standard error of each other. Thus, I cannot conclude for sure what the direction of this relationship is for people of low levels of religiosity. For people of high levels of religiosity, however, it is clear that knowing someone who is gay positively effects support for gay rights policy as measured by both dependent variables. In fact, this increase in support is even larger for the morality framed dependent variable. Thus, the data refutes not only Hypothesis 4, but also Hypothesis 5. Born again Christians and people with high levels of religiosity actually have their opinions on gay rights more positively affected by knowing someone who is gay than other Christians and people with low levels of religiosity.



This leads to the question of why the results from my analyses testing these hypotheses are consistently the opposite of what I expected. As was mentioned earlier in this paper, methodological concerns have been raised about how to test contact theory. That is, there is the possibility of a self-selection bias for coming into contact with an out group. This concept is well developed in the literature for racial contact theory, and research has found that self-selection does not actually affect traditional measurements of contact in regression (Powers and Ellison 1995). However, this concept of self-selection for contact theory among gays is not quite as well developed and takes on different forms than that of race. When thinking about race there is one dimension of self-selection bias. Blacks and whites can choose not to make contact with someone of the opposite race if they do not feel warmly towards that other race. However, I argue that with contact for gays and lesbians there exists another dimension of self-selection. That is, rather than just those who are gay and straight choosing not to come into contact with one another, gays can actually come into contact with someone who is straight and choose not to reveal their sexual orientation. Thus, a straight person could be in contact with someone who is gay and not even know it. Psychologist Thomas Pettigrew suggests, “constructive contact relates more closely to long-term close relationships than to initial acquaintanceship” (1998, 76). Revealing one’s sexual orientation may often imply a relatively close relationship to the other person, which according to Pettigrew should result in more “constructive” forms of contact. However, the coming out process could be less likely to happen if the individual who is gay or a lesbian knows that the person they are coming into contact with is a born again Christian or has a high level of religiosity and is probably opposed to gay rights. In fact, the 2012 ANES data shows that born again Christians and people with high levels of religiosity are less likely to have acquaintances that are gays and lesbians. 35% of born again Christians report knowing someone

who is gay, which is 5% fewer than other Christians. This gap in contact is even larger when looking at levels of religiosity. Among those with the lowest levels of religiosity, 57% of people know someone who is gay. Meanwhile, only 28% of people at the highest levels of religiosity know someone who is gay. Thus, the contact that born again Christians and high religiosity individuals are reporting could be that with gays and lesbians who were already relatively close to them before coming out. I theorize that they do not report contact with mere acquaintances, because they are less likely to know someone who is gay in the first place, and gay people who only minimally know them may be less likely to come out to them. Meanwhile, other Christians and people with lower levels of religiosity are probably more likely to have less close acquaintances that are gays and lesbians and report it in a survey. This type of contact is less likely to positively affect opinions on gay rights. This could help to explain why born again Christians and people with high levels of religiosity showed significantly more positive effects for knowing someone who is gay than other Christians and people with low levels of religiosity.

Conclusion

This theory that I use to explain my findings has a variety of interesting implications. First, it calls for further development in the research on contact theory and gay rights. Studies have been done that find that closer relationships to gays often do lead to more positive views towards this group (Herek and Capitano 1996). However, there is little research that directly looks at how this relationship specifically works for religious people. It would be helpful to investigate if people who hold stronger and more conservative religious beliefs and know someone who is gay have a proportionally higher number of close relationships with gay people versus acquaintances when compared to those who are less religious.

If this theory does hold true it has a number of important consequences. Most interestingly, gays and lesbians who are close to those that are very religious can positively affect opinion on gay rights by being open about their sexuality. This is especially pertinent as the gay rights movement shifts its focus to the highly religious southern portion of the United States. This push for gay rights in the south will, no doubt be met by serious opposition from religious people. Tony Perkins, president of the conservative Family Research Council said, “Mississippi has the highest church attendance per capita in the nation. People have strong convictions based on faith. It’s not an opinion. It is their understanding of religious truth. And they are not going to walk away from it just because it’s unpopular” (Confessore and Peters 2014). It is true that religious people will not just change their beliefs on gay rights because their view is becoming less popular. My research clearly shows that across a variety of gay rights issues religious people are significantly less supportive of these policies than those who are not religious. That being said, perhaps religious people will begin to change their views as they begin to know more people that they are close with who are gay. Thus, I echo the sentiments of Barth et al. when they say, “We hope future research might fruitfully delve further into the dynamics of interpersonal contact with more finely grained questions about the nature, extent, and intimacy of interaction and their impact on other policy matters” (2009, 363). However, I take their request one step forward by calling for a renewed emphasis to be put on differences in contact and how it is reported among people of different religious traditions and levels of religiosity.

Further, the issue in the gay rights movement that receives the most attention is that for gay marriage. However, my research indicates that shifting that focus of the movement and the public as a whole towards laws against job discrimination first could prove more fruitful for the gay rights movement. First, there is more popular support for these types of issues in general,

and my findings show that Christians are much more likely to support these types of laws over laws allowing gay marriage and civil unions. As a result, it is more likely that these laws could be passed. Further, as more policies are enacted that prevent gays and lesbians from losing their job for their sexual orientation, more closeted homosexuals will likely feel safer coming out of the closet. In turn, this could lead to those who oppose gay rights in this highly religious part of the country actually knowing someone who is gay, causing them to be more likely to change their opinion gay rights and support more controversial issues like gay marriage. Thus, leaders of the gay rights movement should take a long-term approach to ensuring legal rights for gays and lesbians in which they focus first on protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination in the workplace.

Appendix

The questions used to create the variables to measure opinions towards gay rights issues are below.

Do you FAVOR or OPPOSE laws to protect homosexuals against job discrimination?

Do you FAVOR or OPPOSE laws to protect gays and lesbians against job discrimination?

Do you think gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve in the United States Armed Forces or don't you think so?

Do you think homosexuals should be allowed States Armed Forces or don't you think so?

Do you think gay or lesbian couples should be legally permitted to adopt children?

Which comes closest to your view? You can just tell me the number of your choice.

- 1. Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to legally marry.*
- 2. Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to form civil unions but not legally marry.*
- 3. There should be no legal recognition of a gay or lesbian couple's relationship.*

The questions used to create the variables to measure religion are below.

Is R born-again or evangelical Christian

Is R Catholic, other Christian, other, or not religious

The questions used to create the variables to measure religiosity are below.

Now on another topic.... Do you consider religion to be an IMPORTANT part of your life, or NOT?

Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible? You can just give me the number of your choice.

- 1. The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word.*
- 2. The Bible is the word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word*
- 3. The Bible is a book written by men and is not the word of God.*

Lots of things come up that keep people from attending religious services even if they want to. Thinking about your life these days, do you ever attend religious services, apart from occasional wed- dings, baptisms or funerals?

Do you go to religious services [EVERY WEEK, ALMOST EVERY WEEK, ONCE OR TWICE A MONTH, A FEW TIMES A YEAR, or NEVER/ NEVER, A FEW TIMES A YEAR, ONCE OR TWICE A MONTH, ALMOST EVERY WEEK, or EVERY WEEK]?

Would you say your religion provides [SOME guidance in your day-to-day living, QUITE A BIT of guidance, or a GREAT DEAL of guidance / a GREAT DEAL of guidance in your day-to-day living, QUITE A BIT of guidance, or SOME guidance] in your day-to-day life?

People practice their religion in different ways. Outside of attending religious services, do you pray [SEVERAL TIMES A DAY, ONCE A DAY, A FEW TIMES A WEEK, ONCE A WEEK OR LESS, or NEVER/ NEVER, ONCE A WEEK OR LESS, A FEW TIMES A WEEK, ONCE A DAY, or SEVERAL TIMES A DAY]?

The question used to create the variables to measure contact with gays and lesbians is below.

Among your immediate family members, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, or close friends, are any of them gay, lesbian, or bisexual as far as you know?

The questions used to create my attitudinal control variables are below.

(How would you rate:) GAY MEN AND LESBIANS [from 0 to 100]

'This country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are.' (Do you [AGREE STRONGLY, AGREE SOMEWHAT, NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE, DISAGREE SOMEWHAT, or DISAGREE STRONGLY / DISAGREE STRONGLY, DISAGREE SOMEWHAT, NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE, AGREE SOMEWHAT, or AGREE STRONGLY] with this statement?)

'This country would have many fewer problems if there were more emphasis on traditional family ties.' (Do you [AGREE STRONGLY, AGREE SOMEWHAT, NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE, DISAGREE SOMEWHAT, or DISAGREE STRONGLY / DISAGREE STRONGLY, DISAGREE SOMEWHAT, NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE, AGREE SOMEWHAT, or AGREE STRONGLY] with this statement?)

'We should be more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own moral standards, even if they are very different from our own.' (Do you [AGREE STRONGLY, AGREE SOMEWHAT, NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE, DISAGREE SOMEWHAT, or DISAGREE STRONGLY / DISAGREE STRONGLY, DISAGREE SOMEWHAT, NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE, AGREE SOMEWHAT, or AGREE STRONGLY] with this statement?)

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