From Deviant to Widely Recognized: The Unprecedented Changes in Americans' Attitudes

Toward Homosexuality From 1974 to 2016

(Extended Abstract, Paper for PAA 2019)

Langou LIAN (*langou1@uci.edu*)

Department of Sociology, University of California, Irvine

Background and Introduction

From the mid 1970s to the mid 2010s, a fundamental shift took place in American public attitude towards homosexuality, and this shift is the hallmark of a broader social change in the United States. Less than half a century ago, only a small minority, about one in every seven people, expressed favorable attitudes towards homosexuality. This was an attitude that could be well considered as deviant back then, but less than 50 years later, this attitude is now widely adopted by a majority of Americans. In recent years, with greater data availability, numerous studies have examined this drastic shift in public opinion. Demographic shifts in the population are posited to be one factor that drives the change. Specifically, growth in the public's education level and replacement of the older generations can account for some changes in attitudes (Loftus 2001; Keleher and Smith 2012).

While the changing demographics of the population is important for explaining many changes in society, by itself it cannot sufficiently explain the specific issue of attitudinal shifts toward same-sex relations. Neither can it explain why there are generational differences in attitudes, nor can it clarify how and why public opinion of homosexuality has shifted in a different pattern compared to attitudes toward other civil rights issues.

I argue that making sense of the broader social and historical transformation of homosexuality in the United States might be more essential for explaining this drastic attitude

shift. From the Stonewall Rebellion to the nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage, countless changes have happened. These broader changes have redefined the meaning of homosexuality in society, and may have initiated a shift in people's views on the issue.

In this paper, rather than examining only generational replacement, as in prior research, I incorporate both demographic and historical factors to further examine the mechanisms that drive generational differences. Improving on cross-sectional studies that only examine variations in attitudes across sociodemographic groups at one point in time (e.g.: Herek and Capitanio 1995; Hill, Moulton and Burdette 2004; Herek and Capitanio 1999), I explore how these differences in public attitudes have changed over time. Overall, I examine whether and to what extent these demographic and historical factors can explain the attitudinal shifts toward same-sex relations.

Data and Methods

This research uses data from the 1974-2016 General Social Survey (GSS), which is designed by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (NORC) to understand contemporary American society by collecting data on individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and other attributes. I use a survey question on "attitudes towards homosexuality" as the study's main dependent variable. It is a standardized question in the GSS, with the exception of the 1972, 1975, 1978 and 1986 surveys, when no data was collected.

My key independent variables measure the effects of historical time and generations. Base on previous historical and sociological research, I choose to analyze years in intervals that are marked by historical and sociological significance. The survey years are coded into the following four historical periods: Gay Liberation period (1974-1980); Height of the AIDS Epidemic period (1981-1994); Gay Activism period (1995-2003); and Same-Sex Marriage

Activism period (2004-2016). Since GSS is not longitudinal panel data (data surveying a specific cohort group over time), I generate the cohort (or generation) variable by subtracting respondents' age from survey year. After removing missing data on the main dependent variable, my analytic sample size is 30,904.

When analyzing historical, demographic and generational effects, one estimation problem needs to be addressed. Specifically, because of the relationship between age, period and cohort, including all three variables in the model would lead to the problem of "over-identification" (Yang and Land 2013). To minimize the estimation problem, I first construct models to look at each effect separately, and then use the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) to assess the model fit (Clayton and Shifflers 1987). Second, Firebaugh (1997) and Glenn (1989) suggest using side information to analyze the model, and "judge the relative plausibility of alternative interpretations of observed results" (Glenn 1989). Thus, as I try to disentangle the effect of age, period and cohort, I use different demographic theories and historical information to find the most plausible explanations. This is because some interpretations of the model might be more likely than others (Firebaugh 1997; Glenn 1989).

After showing some descriptive results and trends by period and generation, in my analytical model I control for sociodemographic factors and examine how attitudes vary across generations and historical periods. Lastly, I demonstrate how people with different sociodemographic backgrounds have shifted their views of homosexuality over time.

Preliminary Results

As can be seen in Figure 1, from 1974 to 2016, people's attitudes towards same-sex relations did not increase in a linear pattern. During the Gay Liberation period and the AIDS Epidemic period, the rate of approval did not change by much, and only a small share of the

population expressed a favorable view of homosexuality. The drastic change in public opinion actually happened during the following 20 years; the rate of approval has increased more than twofold during the 21st century.

More interestingly, my study also shows that some people have been more susceptible to these recent social and historical changes than others (Table 2). I found a distinctive pattern across generations in which the older generations tend to express less support towards same-sex relations. However, people who came of age after the Gay Liberation period have a much higher approval of homosexuality. The share approving is more than three times that of the older generations. In addition, the results show that although people have all become more tolerant of homosexuality over time, female, White, less religious, and more conservative individuals have shifted their views at a faster rate.

These descriptive and analytical results serve as the starting point for my in-depth discussion of the roles of social and historical transformation in affecting people's view of homosexuality over time. In detail, I aim to explain why the broader social changes after the Gay Liberation period have impacted individuals from certain demographic groups. By understanding this striking interaction between the society and individuals, we can gain some insights into the forces that have carried the torch of change in public opinion during the past few decades.

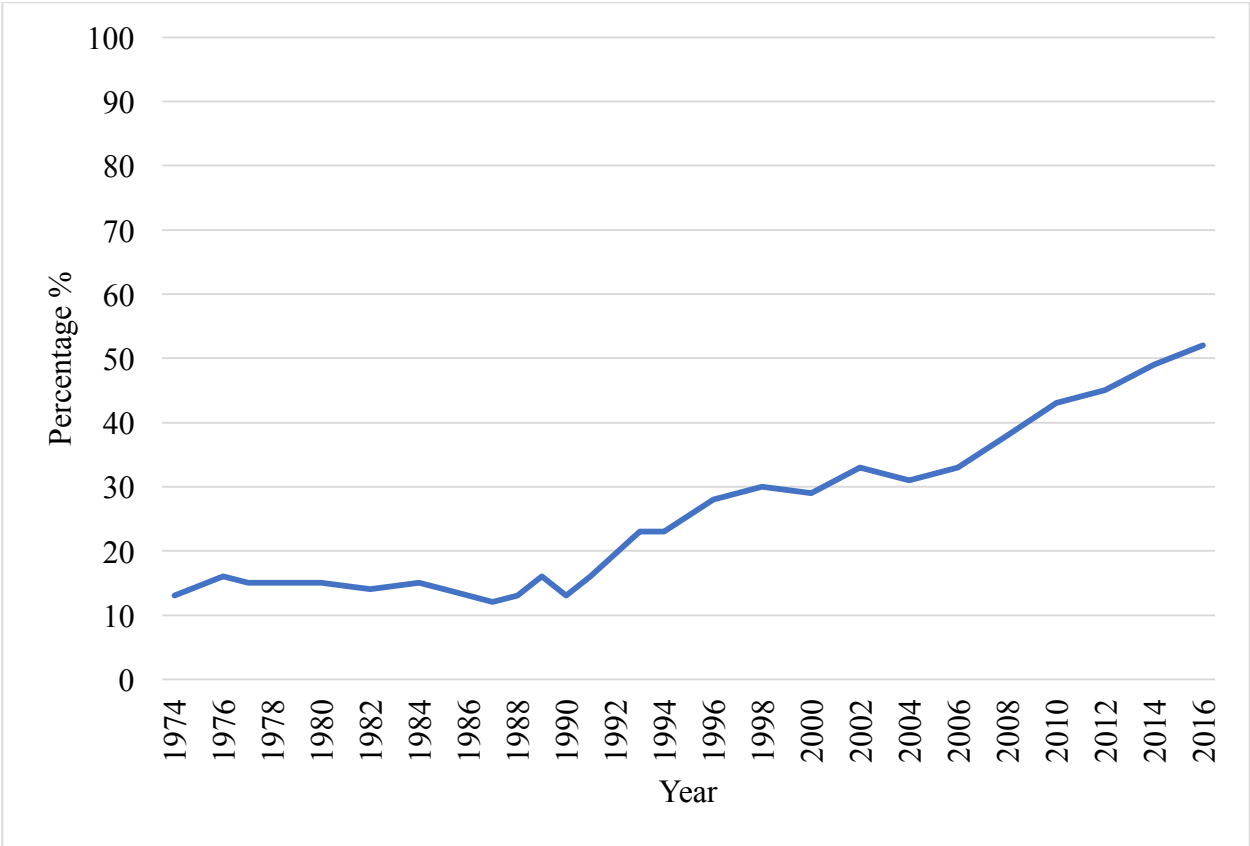**Figure 1:   Percentage of Approval From 1974 to 2016**

Table 2: Binomial Logistic Regression on Individual Approval Towards Same-Sex Sexual Relationships

	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Sex					
Female	0.188*				
	(0.08)				
Race					
White		-0.143			
		(0.10)			
Religious Affiliation					
Fundamentalist			-0.397***		
			(0.08)		
Involved in Religious Service				-0.673***	
				(0.07)	
Political Affiliation					
Conservative Political View					-0.283***
					(0.07)
Period: Gay Liberation (before 1981)					
AIDS Epidemic (1981-1994)	-0.258**	-0.454***	-0.285***	-0.220**	-0.222*
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Gay Rights Activism (1995-2003)	0.287**	0.117	0.273**	0.344***	0.329***
	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Same-Sex Marriage (2004-2016)	0.548***	0.374***	0.601***	0.668***	0.648***
	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Cohort: 1901-1920 (0)					
1900 and before	-0.491†	-0.485†	-0.488†	-0.499†	-0.505
	(0.29)	(0.29)	(0.29)	(0.29)	(0.29)
1921-1940	0.546***	0.531***	0.539***	0.552***	0.545***
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
1941-1960	1.147***	1.129***	1.138***	1.152***	1.151***
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)
1961-1980	1.475***	1.462***	1.467***	1.478***	1.476***
	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.15)
1981 and after	1.981***	1.986***	1.969***	1.975***	1.971***
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.19)
Period x Female					
AIDS Epidemic x Female	0.143				
	(0.10)				

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Gay Rights Activism x Female	0.213† (0.11)				
Same-Sex Marriage x Female	0.348*** (0.10)				
Period x White					
AIDS Epidemic x White		0.454*** (0.11)			
Gay Rights Activism x White		0.480*** (0.12)			
Same-Sex Marriage x White		0.664*** (0.11)			
Period x Fundamentalist					
AIDS Epidemic x Fundamentalist			-0.224* (0.09)		
Gay Rights Activism x Fundamentalist			-0.291** (0.09)		
Same-Sex Marriage x Fundamentalist			-0.312*** (0.09)		
Period x Involved					
AIDS Epidemic x Involved				-0.085 (0.09)	
Gay Rights Activism x Involved				-0.136 (0.10)	
Same-Sex Marriage x Involved				-0.172* (0.09)	
Period x Conservative View					
AIDS Epidemic x Conservative View					-0.090 (0.08)
Gay Rights Activism x Conservative View					-0.189** (0.08)
Same-Sex Marriage x Conservative View					-0.257** (0.08)
Control Variables (Individual Level)	***	***	***	***	***
Constant	-3.130*** (0.18)	-2.924*** (0.19)	-3.126*** (0.18)	-3.196*** (0.18)	-3.177*** (0.18)
AIC	27366	27343	27368	27363	27367

P<:0.001 '***' , 0.01 '**',0.05 '*', 0.1 '†'   Source: The General Social Survey 1974-2016

References Cited

Clayton, D. and E. Schifflers. 1987. "Models for temporal variation in cancer rates. II: Age–period–cohort models." *Statistics in Medicine*6(4):469–81.

Clayton, D. and E. Schifflers. 1987. "Models for temporal variation in cancer rates. I: Age–period–cohort models." *Statistics in Medicine*6(4):449–67.

Firebaugh, Glenn. 1997. *Analyzing repeated surveys*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Glenn, Norval D. 1989. "A Caution About Mechanical Solutions to the Identification Problem in Cohort Analysis: Comment on Sasaki and Suzuki." *American Journal of Sociology*95(3):754–61.

Herek, Gregory M. 1988. "Heterosexuals' Attitudes towards Lesbians and Gay Men: Correlates and Gender Differences." *Journal of Sex Research* 25(4):451–77.

Herek, Gregory M., and John P. Capitanio. 1999. "Sex differences in how heterosexuals think about lesbians and gay men: Evidence from survey context effects." *Journal of Sex Research* 36.4: 348-360.

Hill, Terrence D., Benjamin E. Moulton, and Amy M. Burdette. 2004. "Conservative Protestantism and attitudes towards homosexuality: Does political orientation mediate this relationship?." *Sociological Focus* 37.1: 59-70.

Keleher, Alison and Eric R. A. N. Smith. 2012. "Growing Support for Gay and Lesbian Equality Since 1990." *Journal of Homosexuality* 59(9):1307–26.

Loftus, Jeni. 2001. "America's Liberalization in Attitudes towards Homosexuality, 1973 to 1998." *American Sociological Review 66*(5), 762-782.

Yang, Yang and Kenneth C. Land. 2013. *Age-Period-Cohort Analysis New Models, Methods, and Empirical Applications*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.