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**The Friends and Family Plan:
Contact with Gays and Support for Gay Rights**

Abstract

According to both the contact hypothesis and gay rights advocates, coming out to straight friends and family members should increase acceptance of homosexuality and support for gay rights. If lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs) come out primarily to people they expect to be accepting, however, the repeated finding that people who know LGBs are more likely to support gay rights could be overstating the impact of coming out. Using individual-level data from 27 national surveys, I find that similar variables predict both knowing LGBs and supporting gay rights, but in different ways. Even after controlling for those demographic, religious, and political variables – and sometimes also for beliefs about whether some people are born gay and whether homosexuality is immoral – people who know LGBs are much more likely to support gay rights. The effect holds for every issue, in every year, for every type of relationship, and for every demographic, religious, and political sub-group.

The Friends and Family Plan:

Contact with Gays and Support for Gay Rights

The legal rights of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs¹) have changed dramatically over the past two decades. In 1990, only two states and the District of Columbia (DC) banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and the United States banned same-sex marriage by assumption rather than explicit prohibition. In 2010, 21 states (and DC) prohibit anti-LGB discrimination, 5 states (and DC) allow same-sex couples to marry, and a dozen provide more limited recognition of same-sex relationships; but 29 states have amended their constitutions to prohibit same-sex marriages, and 10 more have statutory bans (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 2009, 2010). Changes in public opinion have had a major impact on those state actions (Lax and Phillips 2009; Lewis 2003; Lewis and Oh 2008), as would be expected with an “easy” morality policy issue (Carmines and Stimson 1990; Gormley 1986; Haider-Markel and Meier 1996; Layman and Carmines 1997; Mooney 1999; Norrander and Wilcox 1999).

Changing public opinion is therefore an important goal of LGB rights advocates and opponents. Advocates have long urged LGBs to “come out” – to reveal their sexual orientation – to friends, family, and acquaintances, not only to improve their own mental health, but to increase social and political acceptance of LGBs. Polling data has long shown that Americans who know LGBs are more likely to accept homosexuality and support gay rights than those who do not. A strong research tradition in psychology supports coming out as a political strategy: the contact hypothesis posits that knowing

out-group members diminishes prejudice. However, if LGBs come out primarily to people they expect to be accepting, heterosexuals' support for gay rights might be the cause as much as the effect of having LGB friends and acquaintances, and the causal impact of coming out could be much more limited.

To assess the impact of knowing LGBs, I re-estimate the link using individual-level data from 27 surveys of nationally representative samples conducted since 1983. Stage One examines whether the same characteristics that predict support for LGB rights also predict knowing LGBs, especially as friends. If they do, it is more important to control for them in assessing the impact of knowing LGBs on support for gay rights, and it is more likely that other, unobserved factors also influence both; failing to control for those factors will tend to overstate the impact of contact. Stage Two looks at whether knowing LGBs increases support for LGB rights, even after controlling for all the observable factors, and whether the policy issue, the type of contact with LGBs, and the characteristics of respondents affect the size of the impact. I find that younger, more educated, female, less religious, and more liberal respondents are all more likely both to know LGBs and to support LGB rights, but that age, education, gender, religion, and liberalism have different effects on contact than on support. Even controlling for this two-way causation, however, knowing LGBs appears to have a substantial impact on support for LGB rights – an impact that is reasonably similar for all relationship types, all policy issues, all types of respondents, and all years.

Linking Acquaintance with LGBs to Support for Gay Rights

Coming out as a political strategy fits well with strong theoretical and empirical support for the hypothesis that intergroup contact reduces prejudice (Allport 1954). Personal interactions tend to increase “liking” and diminish “intergroup anxiety” (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 767). Contact, especially prolonged contact that develops into friendship, allows “learning about the outgroup, changing behavior, generating affective ties, and ingroup reappraisal,” which are all key processes in overcoming prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 80). Allport (1958) argues that contact has its greatest impact when encounters are marked by “equal status ..., common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authorities, law, or custom” (Pettigrew 1998, 66). Meta-analysis of 515 empirical studies confirms that contact with out-groups lowers prejudice, but it also shows that Allport’s conditions are not necessary for a positive impact, though they “enhance the tendency for positive contact outcomes to emerge” (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 766). The positive effect appears to occur whether contact is voluntary or involuntary, and the most rigorous studies, where contact is experimentally created, show the strongest effects.

Anti-LGB prejudice may be especially susceptible to intergroup contact, because most LGBs “pass” as heterosexual in many situations, and heterosexuals often learn they have been interacting with LGBs only after establishing a relationship. Many of those relationships have ideal attributes for attitude change: equal status, cooperation toward common goals, or friendship. Especially in relationships with close friends or relatives, affective ties should push heterosexuals toward intergroup learning (e.g., asking what it

means to be gay) and behavioral change (e.g., making fewer anti-gay jokes), important steps in eliminating prejudice (Pettigrew 1998). The Pettigrew and Tropp meta-analysis (2006, 763) finds that contact with LGBs typically has stronger effects than contact with racial, ethnic, or other minorities.

The existing empirical analyses have limits in establishing what impact knowing LGBs has on support for gay rights, however. Many studies are based on samples of college students, who are not representative of the population in their characteristics, contact with LGBs, or support for gay rights. Most studies look at attitudes toward homosexuality or LGBs rather than at policy issues. Some analyses of nationally representative samples provide only simple comparisons of those who do and do not know LGBs, or control for only a few of the many variables that could influence both support for gay rights and acquaintance with LGBs (e.g., Schneider and Lewis 1984), though more recent work (Bramlett 2010; Herek and Capitanio 1995, 1996; Herek and Glunt 1993; Skipworth, Garner, and Dettrey 2010; Wilcox and Wolpert 2000) have shown a strong impact of knowing LGBs, especially as friends, using multivariate analysis of representative national samples.

Most studies rely on self-reported, voluntary contact with out-group members, meaning that the apparent impact of contact may be over-estimated because the strongly prejudiced can avoid contact.² LGB-heterosexual contact creates special complexities, because most LGBs can pass as straight in many situations. This gives the strongly prejudiced less ability to avoid intergroup contact (because they may not be able to identify LGBs), but the effect of contact may be weaker (if they remain ignorant

that they know LGBs). Because LGBs have more control than most out-groups over whether to reveal their out-group status, they can balance the potential benefits of a more satisfying, honest relationship with the dangers of rejection (Woods 1993). LGBs are more likely to come out if they perceive more rewards from an honest relationship (perhaps because they see real possibilities for friendship) or fewer dangers from coming out (because they perceive little chance of, or cost to, rejection).

At a minimum, analysis of the impact of knowing LGBs requires controlling for characteristics that affect both one's probability of knowing LGBs and one's support for gay rights. In deciding whom to come out to, LGBs may use heterosexuals' likely attitudes toward homosexuality and LGB rights as indicators of the rewards of knowing them better and of the danger of rejection. Research on attitudes toward homosexuality and support for LGB rights finds several consistent patterns (see Herek (2000) for a review of the research). Female, younger, more educated, less religious, and more liberal people generally have more positive attitudes. Jewish and non-religious people tend to be the more supportive than Catholics and mainline Protestants, who are more supportive than evangelical Protestants. Support declines with religiosity. Other patterns are less clear. Blacks are more likely than whites to condemn homosexual behavior as morally wrong, but they may be more likely to support gay rights laws (Lewis 2003). Although the Democratic and Republican parties take very different positions on gay rights, partisan differences at the grass roots level are weaker, but growing (Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2002). Living in areas with high concentrations

of LGBs should make acquaintance more likely, and living in more accepting environments should make LGBs more likely to come out to straight acquaintances.

If LGBs choose to come out primarily to people who accept homosexuality, then gender, age, education, religion, and ideology, and perhaps race and party identification should all affect one's probability of knowing LGBs. These variables should have more effect on whether one has LGB friends than family members or acquaintances, because friendship requires choice. If these characteristics strongly influence one's probability of knowing LGBs, especially as friends, other characteristics not included in the survey data may also have important effects on both their relationships with LGBs and their positions on LGB issues, leading to over-estimates of the impact of knowing LGBs.

If knowing LGBs increases support for LGB rights, its effects may still vary across relationship types, demographic groups, policy issues, and time. Friends and family are more likely than acquaintances to have the kinds of conversations that produce attitude change (Herek and Capitanio 1996; Pettigrew 1998), and friendships with out-group members have more impact on prejudice than do less intense forms of contact (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Barth and Parry (2009) find that knowing LGB couples increases support for legal recognition of same-sex relationships more than knowing LGB individuals. Though models of attitudes toward homosexuality and LGB rights typically assume that the same factors affect all groups similarly, Lewis (2003) finds very different patterns for blacks and whites. Two recent studies find that contact with LGBs has weaker effects on conservatives, evangelicals, and Southerners (Bramlett 2010; Skipworth, Garner, and Dettrey 2010). (Barth and Overby (2003) find a similar

weaker effect in the South without direct measures of contact.) Those strongly opposed to LGB rights on religious or political grounds might not only avoid contact with LGBs but be impervious to interactions with LGBs when they do occur – loving the sinner but hating the sin, or viewing their LGB friends as exceptions who reveal little about the group. Political conservatives might oppose “special rights” for minorities so strongly that friendship cannot overcome that objection. Impact could be stronger on issues on which Americans are split fairly evenly than on those with very high or very low support. As more heterosexuals know LGBs, as LGBs become more visible in the media, and as support for LGB rights increases, the impact of contact could grow or shrink as some LGB issues (e.g., employment discrimination) become less controversial and others (e.g., marriage) become more controversial.

Data and Methods

Using the iPOLL search engine of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, I identified 39 polls that asked respondents whether they knew LGBs. I was able to obtain individual-level data for 27 of them from either the Roper Center or the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. I have data on 38,910 respondents from 1983 through 2005, gathered by professional polling firms using random national samples.

Stage One models who knows LGBs, using several strategies to cope with the complications created by 27 surveys using 18 different questions to establish LGB acquaintance and by several not asking crucial demographic, political, or religious questions. First, I combine all 27 surveys, ignore question wording, and calculate the

percentage of each group who answered “Yes” to whichever **Knows LGB** question they were asked. Second, I perform logit analysis on a combined sample of 15 surveys that have fairly consistent measures of gender, race, education, age, religion, and political ideology. Third, I run separate logit analyses on each of the 27 data sets, using the most detailed measures of religion, political ideology, party identification, gender, race, education, and age available in that data set. Fourth, I follow up with separate models predicting LGB friends, family members, and co-workers or acquaintances on surveys that ask multiple questions about contact with LGBs; stronger results for friends would strengthen evidence that one’s attitudes affect one’s probability of knowing LGBs.

In the combined analysis, dummy variables distinguish men from women (the reference group) and blacks and other minorities from whites (the reference group). Education is measured in years. I represent age with a set of dummy variables for the decade in which respondents were born (with the 1950s as the reference group. Dummy variables distinguish Catholic, Jews, members of another religion, or the nonreligious from Protestants (the reference group). Dummy variables also distinguish the very liberal, liberal, conservative, and very conservative from moderates (the reference group).

In the logits on individual surveys, I add (when possible) dummy variables for Latinos, Asians, born-again or evangelical Protestants, and those who attend religious services at least almost every week or who say religion is very important in their lives. I treat ideology and party identification as “linear” variables. Ideology is measured on a 3- or 5-point scale from (very) liberal to (very) conservative, and party identification is

measured on a 3-, 5-, or 7-point scale from (strong) Democrat to (strong) Republican. (The 7-point scale also indicates whether independents lean Democratic or Republican.) Based on findings from the combined analysis, I use two separate linear variables for year of birth for those born before and after 1940.

Respondents who live in areas with high concentrations of LGBs should be more likely to interact with them, and LGBs should be more likely to come out to straight acquaintances in more accepting environments. In combined analyses, I use dummy variables to identify the state of residence, survey question, and year; these allow arbitrary trends and differences across questions and states. In analyses of single surveys, I substitute the Gates and Ost (2004) Gay and Lesbian Index (the ratio of the percentage of a state's residents who are in same-sex couples to that percentage for the country as a whole) to control for the concentration of LGBs, and the Lewis and Oh (2008) estimates of the percentage of each state's residents who support same-sex marriage as an indicator of social acceptance.

Because probabilities are nonlinear functions of the independent variables in logit analysis, logit coefficients translate into varying probability changes at different values of all the independent variables. For the combined analysis, I translate logit coefficients into probability differences for a "base" person (a moderate, white, female Protestant with 14 years of education born in the 1950s who lived in Pennsylvania and answered the question, "Do you have a work colleague, close friend, or relative who is gay or lesbian?" in 2004). In analyses of individual surveys, I translate logit coefficients into probability differences holding the other variables at their means.

Stage Two models how knowing LGBs affects people's attitudes toward homosexuality and LGB rights. First, I run logit analyses for each question about acceptance of homosexuality or support for gay rights, using all the independent variables from Stage One available in that survey, plus **Knows LGB**, a dummy variable coded 1 for those who know someone gay.³ This gives me 210 logit estimates of the impact of knowing LGBs, controlling for a wide variety of individual characteristics.

To translate the logit coefficients into probability differences, I estimate the expected impact of knowing someone gay for each individual in each data set. That is, I calculate each individual's expected probability of giving the LGB-positive response twice, once assuming the person knows LGBs and once assuming he/she does not. (I use the Stata **predict** command twice, once setting **Knows LGB** to 1 and once setting it to 0.) I calculate the probability difference for each individual and the mean of those probability differences for the data set. (For the advantage of this method, see the discussion of the *average partial effect* in Wooldridge (2009, 583).) I then calculate the mean of the average partial effects, weighting each survey equally.

As an initial test of whether having LGB friends has a bigger impact than knowing LGBs in other ways, I summarize the findings separately for surveys where the question clearly asks whether the respondent has an LGB friend and those where the LGB contact either might not be or clearly is not a friend. To see whether the impact of knowing LGBs varies by policy issue, I summarize the findings separately for beliefs about homosexuality, opposition to employment discrimination, support for relationship

recognition, opposition to sodomy laws, and support for gay rights laws. To see whether the impact of knowing LGBs has changed over time, I summarize by survey year.

Second, I try to control for the fact that demographic factors do not capture all the information LGBs have in deciding whether to come out to others. Heterosexuals whose characteristics suggest one level of acceptance may signal that they are actually much more or less accepting. I repeat the logit models for the LGB rights questions, controlling for beliefs about homosexuality. These beliefs, especially about the morality of homosexual relations, provide important information to LGBs about the value or danger of coming out to them, but they may have less impact on policy positions, as Americans increasingly “bracket” their moral concerns about homosexuality in thinking about LGB rights (Ball 2003; Brewer 2003; Lewis 2005). These logit models estimate the impact of knowing LGBs on support for LGB rights among similar people with similar attitudes toward homosexuality. As knowing LGBs probably affects beliefs about homosexuality and *vice versa*, the first set of models probably overstates the impact of knowing LGBs, while the second set under-estimates it.

These questions are not available in all surveys (dropping the number of analyses to 89), and they vary in their focus. Several surveys ask whether homosexual relations are morally wrong or sinful; that belief is the strongest predictor of opposition to same-sex marriage, though it has less impact on other LGB rights issues (Lewis 2005). A milder version of the question, whether homosexuality is “an acceptable alternative lifestyle,” should have a weaker effect. Several surveys ask whether homosexuality is something one is born with; those who believe some people are born gay are much more

likely to support LGB rights (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Herek and Capitanio 1995; Lewis 2009; Wood and Bartkowski 2004).

Third, as a further test of whether the type of relationship the respondent has with LGBs matters, I analyze surveys that asked at least two questions about how one knew LGBs and use separate dummy variables for each type of relationship. (A 1994 Yankelovich poll, for instance, asks questions about both an LGB “close friend” and an LGB family member.) I enter separate dummy variables for each way of knowing LGBs and test whether their effects differ. If having LGB friends or knowing same-sex couples has a bigger impact, their coefficients should be larger and more significant.

Fourth, to test whether knowing LGBs has more impact on some groups than others, I combine data for 11 surveys that ask at least two questions on homosexuality and/or LGB rights that can be combined into indexes with Cronbach’s alphas of at least .70 (they vary between .72 and .95). I create my dependent variable by standardizing each index to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. I regress this measure on whether one knows LGBs separately by level of education, decade of birth, ideology, party identification, gender, race/ethnicity, religious intensity, and religious affiliation, controlling for all the other variables. These models also include dummy variables for each survey to control for time, question wording, and house effects.

Fifth, I regress that combined measure on all these variables simultaneously (without religious affiliation, the sample size is 11,621; with it, the sample size drops to 7,861⁴). I run each model three times, once for those who do not know any LGBs, once for those who do, and once on the combined sample with interaction terms between

Knows LGBs and all the other independent variables. Coefficients on these interaction terms replicate the differences between the coefficients on the same variable in the first two models. If knowing LGBs has the same impact on all sub-groups, the coefficients on the variables will be about the same for those who do and do not LGBs and very few coefficients on the interaction terms will be statistically significant.

Who Knows LGBs?

Women are more likely than men to know LGBs. In the 27 surveys combined, ignoring question wording, 47% of the women and only 40% of the men said they knew LGBs. In the combined analysis of 15 surveys (Table 1), the highly significant logit coefficient (-.467) indicates that a woman is 11 percentage points more likely than a comparable man to know LGBs (63% *versus* 52%) if both have the characteristics of the base person. In 31 individual logit analyses on the 27 data sets, controlling for whatever demographics were available, women were significantly more likely than similar men to know LGBs in 24 and gender was the most important predictor⁵ in 7.

[Table 1 about here]

More educated people are more likely to know LGBs. Overall, 63% of those with graduate degrees and only 30% of those who did not complete high school know LGBs. In the combined analysis, an additional year of education raises our base person's probability of knowing LGBs by 3.4 percentage points. The education coefficient is positive and significant in 24 of 30 models on individual surveys, and it has the largest standardized odds-ratio in 9 of them.

Cohort effects are substantial for those born before 1940 but not since. In the full sample, only 14% of those born before 1910 know LGBs, compared to 45% of those born in the 1940s and 56% of those born in the 1980s. In the combined logit, each decade from 1910 to 1940 raises the probability of knowing LGBs by about 12 percentage points, but those born in the 1980s are only a statistically insignificant 6 percentage points more likely than similar individuals born in the 1940s to know LGBs. In the logits on individual surveys, year of birth matters for those born before 1940; its coefficient is positive in 30 of 31 models and statistically significant in 19. For those born since 1940, however, the coefficient on year of birth is only positive half the time and statistically significant only twice.⁶

Religion has less impact than expected. Overall, 58% of Jewish and 57% of non-religious respondents know LGBs, compared to 47% of Catholics and 43% of Protestants. Controlling other characteristics shrinks these differences from 10-15 percentage points to 4-8 percentage points. Probabilities of knowing LGBs do not differ significantly among similar Protestants, Catholics, and members of other religions. Including measures of religiosity or evangelism shrinks sample sizes by one-third to one-half, making it less likely to find significant differences, but point estimates suggest only minor impacts: those who attend religious services weekly or say religion is very important in their lives are only about 4 percentage points less likely to know LGBs than comparable others, and evangelical Protestants do not differ significantly from other Protestants.

Liberals are more likely than conservatives to know LGBs. Overall, 57% of liberals, 44% of moderates, and 41% of conservatives know LGBs. Party identification matters less: 46% of Democrats, 47% of independents, and 43% of Republicans know LGBs. I drop party identification from the combined logit analysis, because it shrinks the sample but does not have a statistically significant effect. Without party identification in the models, liberals are 13 percentage points more likely than similar conservatives to know LGBs, and strong liberals are 23 percentage points more likely than strong conservatives to do so. Conservatism has a significant negative coefficient in 8 of 18 surveys that include ideology.

Race differences are small. Overall the percentages of whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asians who know LGBs vary only between 44% and 46%. With the full set of controls, African Americans and other minorities are 4 percentage points less likely than similar whites to know LGBs. In separate logits, the black coefficient is negative in 21 models (significantly 7 times), but it is positive 10 times (significantly twice).

Friends versus Family. Table 2 reports separate logit analyses for whether one has close LGB friends, family members, and coworkers in seven surveys that ask about them separately, and for whether one knows same-sex couples and LGB individuals in two surveys that ask about both. Comparing the models for having LGB friends and family members confirms that we choose our friends more than our families: the McFadden's R^2 is approximately twice as strong in the friend as in the family models. The clearest differences are for education and age. Better-educated respondents are much more likely to have LGB friends but not relatives. Younger respondents are more

likely to have both LGB friends and family members, but the age effect is twice as strong for friends. In contrast, blacks are significantly less likely than whites to have LGB friends in one survey but significantly more likely to have LGB family members in another; Latinos and Republicans may also be less likely than non-Hispanic whites and independents, respectively, to have LGB friends but not relatives. The model also does a better job of explaining whether people know LGB individuals rather than same-sex couples, mostly due to the stronger effects of conservatism and age. Blacks are less likely than comparable whites to know same-sex couples but not LGB individuals.

[Table 2 about here]

Discussion. Many patterns suggest that people who know LGBs probably already had more accepting attitudes toward homosexuality. Younger, more educated, female, less religious, and more liberal respondents are more likely both to support LGB rights and to know LGBs. Those effects are larger for having LGB friends than acquaintances or family members, suggesting that the more choice is involved in the contact with LGBs, the more important is an openness to LGBs that makes one more likely to support LGB rights. Models that do not control for predictors of support for LGB rights may dramatically overstate the impact of contact with LGBs, and even models with many control variables will probably overstate the impact having LGB friends, as they fail to control for an unobserved propensity both to befriend LGBs and to support LGB rights. Having LGB co-workers, acquaintances, or family members may give more unbiased estimates, as these relationships are more accidental than friendships.

On the other hand, many of these variables have smaller effects on knowing LGBs than on support for same-sex marriage, for instance. Age has little impact on knowing LGBs: today's 25-year-olds are barely more likely to know LGBs than similar 65-year-olds, but they are 24 percentage points more likely to support same-sex marriage (Lewis 2010). Religion effects are small: Jewish and non-religious people are only 4 to 8 percentage points more likely than comparable Protestants to know LGBs, but 13 to 18 points more likely to support same-sex marriage (Lewis and Oh 2006). Mainline and evangelical Protestants do not differ significantly in their acquaintance with LGBs, but they differ by 18 points on marriage equality. Strong Democrats are not significantly more likely to know LGBs than similar strong Republicans, but they are 25 percentage points more likely to favor same-sex marriage. Liberals are 13 percentage points more likely than conservatives to know LGBs but 47 percentage points more likely to favor marriage rights. Black-white and male-female differences are reasonably similar on knowing LGBs and favoring marriage equality, but education has a 50 percent *larger* impact on knowing LGBs than on supporting same-sex marriage. In sum, though similar variables influence both knowing LGBs and supporting their rights, the differences are substantial enough to indicate that they are far from the same thing.

The Impact of Knowing LGBs

Knowing LGBs substantially increases acceptance of homosexuality and support for LGB rights. Table 3 summarizes results from 299 logit analyses that control for all the demographic variables available in each data set. The 210 models that do not control for beliefs about homosexuality indicate that those who know LGBs are, on

average, 12.7 percentage points more likely to give the LGB-positive response than demographically, politically, and religiously similar people who do not.

[Table 3 about here]

Knowing LGBs in any capacity has an impact. In the 84 models where the respondent clearly has an LGB friend, the difference is 13.5 percentage points; in the 126 models where the LGB known could be a friend, family member, coworker, or acquaintance, the difference drops slightly to 12.2 percentage points. The difference is somewhat larger in models that compare individuals who also have similar beliefs about whether homosexuality is innate, acceptable, and/or morally wrong. Those with LGB friends are still 13.4 points more likely to support LGB rights than those who do not, but when the relationship could be something other than a friendship, the gap drops to 10.1 points. LGB friends may get past other beliefs about homosexuality that co-workers or family members cannot, but even weaker relationships overcome some preconceptions.

Table 4 restricts the analysis to surveys that ask questions about how one knows LGBs and reports models that include separate dummy variables for each type of relationship. In the 1994 Yankelovich poll, for instance, having an LGB “close friend” has a strong impact on support for each right listed, but having an LGB family member has a clearly significant additional impact only on support for marriage (though the effects on morality, legality, and civil rights laws are also significant at the .05 level in one-tailed tests). In Harris, having a “close personal friend” increases the probability that one favors marriage, supports adoption rights, and believes LGBs cannot change their sexual orientation (but not on whether one favors a gay rights law), with or without

controlling for beliefs about the changeability of sexual orientation. Having an LGB family member, however, has no additional impact on any dependent variable. Five *Newsweek*/PSRA polls between 1994 and 2000 ask whether respondents “work with someone you know is gay,” then whether they “have a gay person in your family,” and then whether they “have a friend or acquaintance who is gay.” The friendship does not have to be as close as in the previous two surveys, but it should be more than a co-worker. All three types of relationships have significant positive impacts on support for LGB rights (partly due to the larger sample size), but a friend or acquaintance matters more than a family member or coworker in every case. In contrast, the two CBS News/New York Times polls suggest little difference from knowing LGB individuals or couples: each has an independent impact of approximately the same size.

[Table 4 about here]

Knowing LGBs matters for all policy issues. Although the estimated size of the effect varies somewhat, the basic patterns are the same for all dependent variables (Table 3). In the 12 surveys that ask about innateness, genetics, or choice, the logit coefficient on **Knows LGB** is always statistically significant. Although only one-third believes homosexuality is something people are born with, those who know LGBs are 8 percentage points more likely than comparable others to believe that (Table 3). Those who know LGBs are 14 points more likely to call homosexuality an acceptable alternative lifestyle and 11 points more likely to *reject* the claim that homosexual relations are morally wrong or sinful.

Those who know LGBs are substantially more likely to support gay rights across the board. In the 143 models that do not include beliefs about homosexuality as control variables, the effect of knowing LGBs is statistically significant in all but five. Those who know LGBs are significantly more likely than comparable others to favor non-discrimination in principle and in law, to support LGBs teaching school and serving openly in the military, to oppose sodomy laws, to favor civil unions and same-sex marriage, and to support adoption and inheritance rights for same-sex couples. There is some variation across issues: in seven surveys that ask about both civil unions and same-sex marriage, the **Knows LGB** coefficient is consistently larger in the civil union model. Still, for each issue included in at least four surveys, the mean logit coefficient varies only between .59 and 1.15 (for supporting gay rights laws and for hiring homosexuals as doctors or high school teachers, respectively) and the mean percentage difference varies between 10 and 24 points. (The difference is so small on equal rights in terms of job opportunity largely because support for the principle is high even among those who do not know LGBs).

Knowing LGBs affects attitudes for all groups throughout this period. The impact of contact with LGBs does not appear to have changed much since 1983. The questions vary from year to year, but Figure 1 shows the mean difference in percentages accepting homosexuality and supporting LGB rights between those who do and do not know LGBs has not changed much over the years. The confidence intervals make the stability even clearer.

[Figure 1 about here]

Does knowing LGBs have more impact on some groups than others? Figure 2 shows the impact of knowing LGBs on a standardized index of support for LGB rights; it is the coefficient on **Knows LGBs** from regressions run separately for each group. For the entire group (N=11,621), the mean effect is a .55 standard deviation increase in support for LGB rights. The point estimates vary, but the effect is statistically significant for every group, including one as small as Asian Americans (N=145). Four differences stand out. Knowing LGBs has significantly larger effects for liberals and moderates than for conservatives, for Democrats than for Republicans, for mainline Protestants than for evangelicals, and for women than for men.

[Figure 2 about here]

Controlling for all these variables simultaneously alters these findings somewhat (Table 5). In general, the independent variables have similar effects on support for LGB rights for those who do and do not know LGBs. As in most previous research on public opinion on LGB rights, support rises strongly with education and with each new birth cohort. Support is much higher for liberals than conservatives and somewhat higher for Democrats than Republicans (holding ideology constant). Jewish, non-religious, and Catholic respondents are more supportive than mainline Protestants, who are more supportive than evangelical Protestants. Women support LGB rights more than men, and whites support them more than blacks, until we control for blacks' higher propensity to be evangelical Protestants.

[Table 5 about here]

The highly significant difference between the constants represents the expected impact of knowing LGBs for a white, female, moderate, independent high school graduate born in the 1950s (who is also a mainline Protestant in the second set of equations). Knowing LGBs has significantly less impact for better-educated individuals (as suggested but not demonstrated by Figure 2). Knowing LGBs has more impact on liberals. That impact weakens somewhat when religion (in particular, whether one is an evangelical Protestant) is added to the model, but the difference between liberals and conservatives is still .24 wider for those who do than for those who do not know LGBs (the liberal-conservative difference is .496 for those who do not know LGBs and .737 for those who do, significantly different at the .01 level). Knowing LGBs has about the same impact on Republicans and Democrats, however, once the other variables are held constant, suggesting that conservatism and evangelism rather than party identification explains the partisan difference in Figure 2. Knowing LGBs has similar effects for most religious groups, but less impact on evangelical than mainline Protestants even with the full set of controls. The impact is nearly identical for black and white evangelicals, however. Knowing LGBs has similar effects for men and women and for whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asians. It also has about the same impact for those born any time before 1980, but a significantly larger effect for those born in the 1980s.

Discussion. In general, knowing LGBs seems to have less impact for those predisposed to strongly oppose LGB rights: contact has the least impact on religious and political conservatives, as Skipworth, Garner, and Dettrey (2010) and Bramlett (2010) have also found. Contact also has the most impact on those born in the 1980s, who are

also the cohort most likely to support LGB rights. The one counter-example is that knowing LGBs has more impact for less-educated people, who tend to be less supportive of LGB rights. Perhaps this means that the less-educated tend to have less firmly held beliefs and are therefore more open to being swayed by personal contact.

Even for groups most strongly opposed to LGB rights, however, knowing LGBs seems to have a substantial impact on acceptance of homosexuality and support for gay rights. The **Knows LGBs** coefficient is statistically significant in virtually every model – for all dependent variables, in all years, for all sub-groups, with or without controlling for attitudes toward homosexuality. The effect is stronger if the respondent has an LGB friend than if the relationship is less intimate or less voluntary, but the difference is only about 10 to 20 percent stronger when we know the respondent has an LGB friend than when we don't know the nature of the relationship. In analysis of surveys that asked about multiple types of relationships, LGB friends matter more than LGB coworkers or family members, but the latter usually have effects as well.

Knowing LGBs might affect opposition to hiring and employment discrimination more than support for couple recognition, but it still increases support for civil unions and marriage rights by 10-12 percentage points. In every sub-group, those who know LGBs support LGB rights more than those who do not. The effect is strongest for the youngest respondents, for liberals, and for less-educated respondents, but it is substantial even for college-educated conservatives⁷. The effect of knowing LGBs is weakened when we control for beliefs about the innateness, acceptability, and morality

of homosexuality, but even when we compare individuals with the same beliefs, those who know LGBs are more likely to support LGB rights.

Conclusion

As LGB activists have long argued, coming out to straight friends, family, and colleagues is likely to have a positive political impact. Heterosexuals who know that they know LGBs are more likely than others to support employment and relationship rights for LGBs. Part of the reason is that people who know LGBs tend to have other characteristics that make them more likely to accept homosexuality and support LGB rights, suggesting that LGBs are more likely to come out to those less likely to reject them. However, even controlling for many factors that might influence both support for LGB rights and probability of having LGB friends, knowing a lesbian or gay man has a noticeable impact on support for gay rights. The impact is meaningful even among similar people with the same beliefs about the morality and origins of homosexuality.

As others have found (Bramlett 2010; Skipworth, Garner, and Dettrey 2010), the impact is smaller for political conservatives and evangelical Protestants, but even for them contact appears to increase support by .25 standard deviation. Though strong political or religious objections to LGB rights weaken the impact of personal contact, they do not eliminate them. An impact of 10 to 20 percentage points holds across issues, time, and demographic groups. [Personalizing same-sex marriage increases support, both for people whose political leanings and moral judgments would suggest no problems with the concept and for those whose politics and religion suggests strong opposition.](#)

The percentage of Americans reporting that they know LGBs has grown rapidly. In 1983, one-quarter had “any friends or acquaintances who are homosexual” (Gallup/Newsweek Poll 1983). Today, two-thirds to three-quarters of Americans know someone gay or lesbian (CBS News 2010; Greenburg Quinlan Rosner Research 2009), and half have an LGB family member or close friend (CNN/Opinion Research Corporation 2010). If knowing LGBs raises the probability of supporting LGB rights by 10 to 20 percentage points, that suggests that increasing personal contact with LGBs accounts for 5 to 10 percentage points of the rise in support for LGB rights – an important but not overwhelming share of the rise. The growth in the percentage knowing LGBs seems to have tapered off in the past decade (Morales 2009), though the percentage with LGB friends continues to grow. The conversion from LGB acquaintances to friends who are LGB should continue progress toward passing non-discrimination laws and couple recognition.

Does contact matter for other policy issues? The contact hypothesis indicates that acquaintance with racial/ethnic minorities will increase support for minority interests. Effects should generalize to contacts with the poor and with undocumented immigrants. Serwer (2010) suggests that one reason public opinion has shifted so much on gay rights and remained so stable on abortion, the other pre-eminent morality politics issue of our time, is that the “abortion closet” has protected “noxious stereotypes” about the kind of women who get abortions; knowing encounters with women or couples who have chosen abortions could force people to test those stereotypes against real people. Personalizing same-sex marriage changes opinions,

both for people whose political leanings and moral judgments would suggest no problems with the concept and for those whose politics and religion suggests strong opposition. Making a personal connection on abortion or illegal immigration might have similar effects.

Figure 1. Percentage Effect of Knowing LGBs, by Year

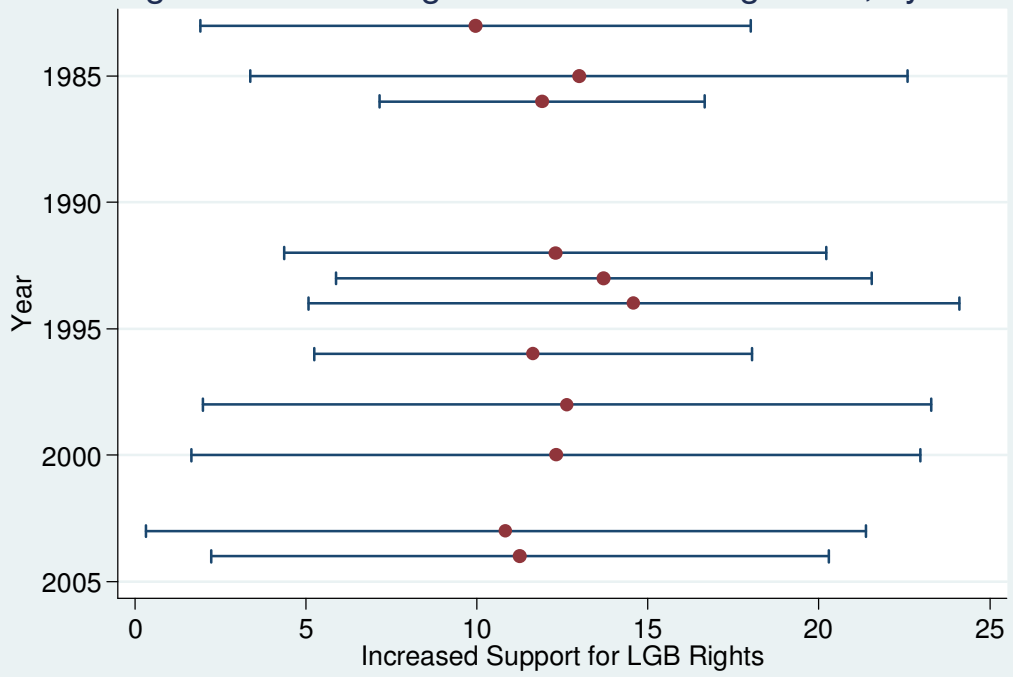
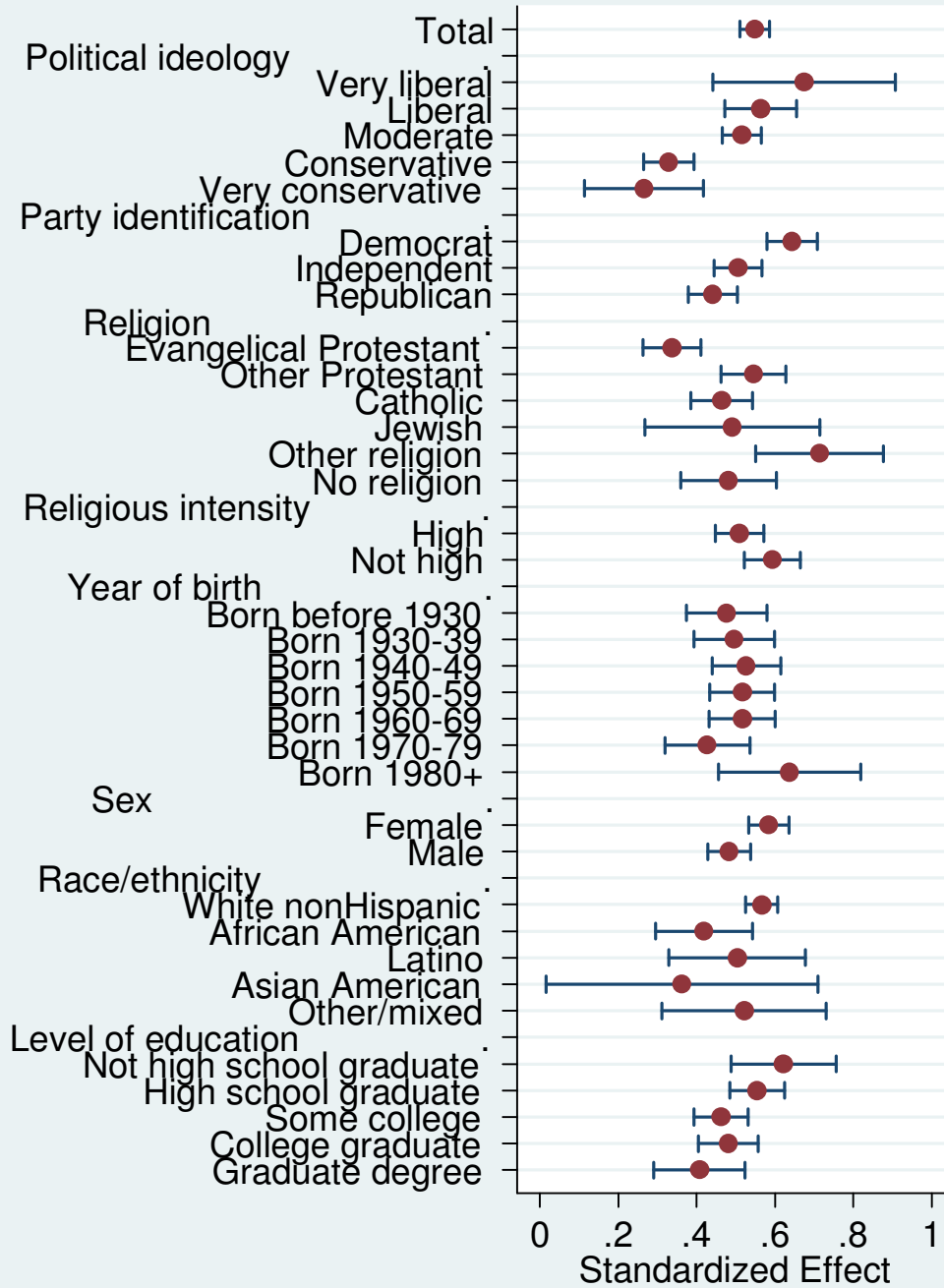


Figure 2. Confidence Intervals for Effect of Knowing LGBs on Support for LGB Rights



Point estimates and confidence intervals from regressions by group

Table 1. Logit Model for Knowing LGBs

	<u>Logit Coefficient</u>	<u>Robust z-statistic</u>	<u>Percentage Difference</u>
Constant	0.532**	4.55	63
Male	-0.467**	12.54	-11
Education (years)	0.146**	18.04	3.4
Born before 1920	-1.524**	11.99	-36
Born in the 1920s	-0.984**	12.78	-24
Born in the 1930s	-0.569**	8.64	-14
Born in the 1940s	-0.169**	3.00	-4
Born in the 1950s	.	.	.
Born in the 1960s	-0.075	1.39	-2
Born in the 1970s	-0.011	0.17	0
Born in the 1980s	0.069	0.78	2
White	.	.	.
Black	-0.183**	2.78	-4
Other minority	-0.149*	2.34	-4
Protestant	.	.	.
Catholic	0.046	0.99	1
Jewish	0.367**	2.60	8
Other religion	-0.041	0.54	-1
No religion	0.240**	3.47	5
Very liberal	0.544**	5.16	12
Liberal	0.332**	6.42	7
Moderate	.	.	.
Conservative	-0.232**	5.35	-6
Very conservative	-0.436**	4.97	-11
McFadden's pseudo-R ²	.159		
Observations	22,393		

* significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%

Source: Sample combines 15 surveys. The model also includes dummy variables for state, survey question, and year. The third column translates the constant into the probability of knowing LGBs for the “base” person (a moderate, white, female Protestant born in the 1950s who had an average level of education, lived in Pennsylvania, and answered the question, “Do you have a work colleague, close friend, or relative who is gay or lesbian?” in 2004) and translates logit coefficients into probability changes.

Table 2. Who Has LGB Friends, Family Members, and Work Acquaintances?

	Yankelovich 1994		Harris 2000		Newsweek/PSRA 1994-2000			Los Angeles Times 2003-2004	
	Friend	Family	Friend	Family	Friend	Family	Coworker	Couple	Person
Male	-0.623** (2.93)	-0.412 (1.62)	-0.533** (3.13)	-0.204 (1.06)	-0.294** (3.82)	-0.326** (3.36)	-0.101 (1.23)	-0.473** (4.18)	-0.543** (4.68)
African American	0.348 (0.98)	0.131 (0.28)	-0.906** (3.09)	0.407 (1.25)	-0.242 (1.81)	0.374* (2.47)	0.191 (1.38)	-0.498* (2.44)	-0.124 (0.59)
Latino	-1.213* (1.96)	0.678 (1.18)	-0.679 (1.82)	0.617 (1.69)	-0.384 (1.24)	-0.368 (1.03)	-0.082 (0.26)	-0.226 (0.88)	-0.238 (0.89)
Asian	-0.395 (0.66)	-0.566 (0.54)	-	-0.713 (0.62)	-0.745* (2.56)	-0.185 (0.50)	-0.403 (1.18)	-0.883* (2.40)	-0.630 (1.42)
Other minority	-0.247 (0.45)	0.324 (0.68)	0.371 (0.95)	0.235 (0.52)	-0.044 (0.29)	0.391* (2.28)	-0.087 (0.55)	-0.244 (0.89)	0.039 (0.14)
Years of education	0.104 0.116** (1.77)	-0.057 (0.97)	0.072* (1.99)	o(Allport 1954).027 (0.67)	0.175** (10.01)	-0.011 (0.52)	0.149** (7.81)	0.109** (4.20)	0.109** (4.38)
Age	-0.020** (2.88)	-0.017* (1.97)	-0.032** (6.34)	-0.010 (1.78)	-0.015** (6.56)	-0.008** (3.04)	-0.012** (4.67)	-0.004 (1.17)	-0.018** (5.44)
Democrat	-0.015 (0.05)	-0.099 (0.31)	0.233 (1.16)	0.416 (1.79)	-0.022 (0.24)	0.141 (1.23)	0.050 (0.51)	-0.071 (0.36)	-0.311 (1.51)
Republican	-0.311 (1.04)	-0.365 (1.02)	-0.591** (2.81)	0.357 (1.49)	-0.155 (1.67)	0.286* (2.42)	-0.054 (0.53)	-0.306 (1.50)	-0.344 (1.64)
Conservatism			-0.209 (1.68)	-0.199 (1.40)				-0.089 (1.02)	-0.261** (2.91)

Household income	-0.184*	0.121	0.183**	-0.038				0.176**	0.259**
	(1.98)	(1.07)	(2.70)	(0.49)				(3.66)	(5.07)
Refused to state income	-1.185*	0.558	-0.008	-2.352**				-0.135	0.396
	(2.49)	(1.15)	(0.02)	(3.52)				(0.42)	(1.24)
Lives in city	0.579*	0.517	0.740**	0.359					
	(2.46)	(1.69)	(2.98)	(1.28)					
Lives in suburb	0.283	0.366	0.666**	0.137					
	(1.18)	(1.17)	(3.06)	(0.55)					
Evangelical Protestant	-0.354	-0.074						-0.091	0.109
	(1.28)	(0.24)						(0.63)	(0.76)
Catholic	0.327	-0.248						-0.128	0.008
	(1.27)	(0.75)						(0.88)	(0.06)
Jewish	0.569	0.543						-0.495	-0.089
	(0.94)	(0.76)						(1.49)	(0.21)
Other religion	0.153	-0.101						-0.051	-0.176
	(0.53)	(0.28)						(0.19)	(0.73)
No religion	0.208	-0.430						0.236	0.287
	(0.63)	(0.93)						(1.25)	(1.49)
Importance of religion	-0.254*	-0.111						-0.064	-0.101
	(2.52)	(0.90)						(0.90)	(1.43)
Survey year					0.082**	0.132**	0.094**	0.046	0.467**
					(4.32)	(5.65)	(4.76)	(0.42)	(4.22)
Constant	-0.695	-0.442	-0.043	-1.014	-1.554**	-1.449**	-2.720**	-1.106*	-0.520
	(0.85)	(0.52)	(0.07)	(1.39)	(5.69)	(4.50)	(9.05)	(2.34)	(1.10)

McFadden's pseudo-R ²	.096	.047	.116	.051	.058	.022	.038	.048	.085
Observations	792	792	966	979	3629	3629	3629	2252	2252

Robust z statistics in parentheses * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%

Table 3. Does the Impact of Knowing LGBs Vary by Issue?

Issue	Not Controlling for Beliefs About Homosexuality			Controlling for Beliefs About Homosexuality		
	Mean Logit Coefficient	Mean Percent Difference	Number of Logits	Mean Logit Coefficient	Mean Percent Difference	Number of Logits
All	.71	12.7	210	.68	11.3	89
LGB friend	.74	13.5	84	.78	13.4	32
LGB other/unknown	.68	12.2	126	.63	10.1	57
Beliefs about Homosexuality						
Acceptable alternative lifestyle	.80	14.2	5			
Something one is born with	.40	8.0	25			
Not morally wrong	.60	10.8	16			
Employment Discrimination						
Equal rights in job opportunities	.71	9.7	7	.51	5.9	3
Elementary school	1.06	19.5	13	.82	15.2	7
High school	1.14	23.9	4	1.01	18.5	4
Doctors	1.15	19.1	4	1.02	15.5	4
Military	.87	16.7	13	.67	13.0	7
Combined	.96	17.3	41	.80	14.1	25
Recognition for Same-sex Relationships						
Same-sex marriage	.73	11.2	30	.69	8.9	15
Civil unions	.73	13.3	27	.59	9.7	10
Const. amendment	.64	11.6	10	.46	7.1	3
Combined	.73	12.1	64	.63	9.0	28
Other						
Sodomy laws	.84	16.3	11	.76	12.6	9
Gay rights laws	.59	10.7	27	.53	10.0	13

Table 4. Does How One Knows LGBs Affect Support for Gay Rights?

Yankelovich, 1994

	Morally Wrong	Gay Sex Legal	Marry	Adopt	Elem. Teacher	Military	Emp't Law	Use Civil Rights Law
Close friend	-0.589** (2.74)	1.142** (4.35)	0.713** (3.26)	1.084** (4.56)	0.994** (4.41)	1.016** (4.47)	1.103** (4.44)	0.840** (3.69)
Family member	-0.444 (1.67)	0.521 (1.77)	0.797** (2.71)	0.378 (1.39)	0.050 (0.19)	0.116 (0.43)	0.138 (0.47)	0.507 (1.91)

Harris, 2000

	Genetic	Change	Rights Law	Marry	Adopt	Rights Law	Marry	Adopt
Close friend	0.311 (1.75)	-0.347* (1.97)	0.203 (1.16)	0.930** (3.69)	0.599** (2.67)	0.132 (0.74)	0.892** (3.46)	0.606** (2.68)
Family member	0.138 (0.67)	0.055 (0.26)	-0.215 (1.02)	-0.095 (0.33)	0.015 (0.06)	-0.231 (1.08)	-0.098 (0.33)	0.070 (0.26)

Newsweek/PSRA 1994-2000

	Marry	Adopt	Inherit	Social Security	Emp't Law	Housing Law	Job Opps.	Sales	Hire Military	Teacher
Friend/ acquaintance	0.679** (7.49)	0.651** (7.43)	0.519** (6.14)	0.452** (5.44)	0.340** (4.10)	0.775** (7.55)	0.785** (7.13)	1.167** (6.32)	0.914** (7.85)	0.969** (8.80)
Family member	0.255* (2.45)	0.281** (2.81)	0.275* (2.53)	0.315** (3.14)	0.182 (1.83)	0.242 (1.75)	0.282 (1.91)	0.631* (2.33)	0.458** (2.96)	0.539** (3.72)
Coworker	0.250** (2.66)	0.455** (5.03)	0.267** (2.81)	0.191* (2.15)	0.337** (3.77)	0.380** (3.08)	0.260* (2.01)	0.600* (2.51)	0.214 (1.60)	0.328** (2.61)

CBS News/New York Times, 2003-04

	Choice	Morally Wrong	Gay Sex Legal	Civil Unions	Marry	No Const. Amend.	Civil Unions	Marry
Knows LGB person	-0.294* (2.12)	-0.482* (2.32)	0.637** (3.19)	0.567** (3.92)	0.510** (2.97)	0.629** (3.04)	0.528** (3.56)	0.463** (2.61)
Knows LGB couple	-0.425** (3.18)	-0.667** (3.47)	0.712** (3.68)	0.650** (4.65)	0.779** (4.86)	0.507* (2.51)	0.587** (4.09)	0.719** (4.33)
Homosexuality a choice							-1.100** (7.65)	-1.209** (6.72)

Table 5. Does Knowing LGBs Affect Gay Rights Support More for Some?

	<u>Model 1</u>			<u>Model 2</u>		
	<u>Does Not Know LGB</u>	<u>Knows LGB</u>	<u>Difference</u>	<u>Does Not Know LGB</u>	<u>Knows LGB</u>	<u>Diff.</u>
Constant	-.263** (3.03)	.144* (2.48)	.407** (3.89)	-.229* (2.36)	.213** (3.29)	.442** (3.80)
Years of education	.057** (9.27)	.039** (6.17)	-.018* (2.04)	.051** (6.80)	.021** (3.07)	-.030** (2.91)
Liberal	.268** (5.36)	.399** (9.27)	.131* (1.99)	.232** (3.72)	.365** (8.02)	
Conservative	-.282** (7.45)	-.428** (1.82)	-.146** (2.66)	-.266** (5.37)	-.372** (8.58)	
Democrat	.006 (.16)	.101** (2.69)		.046 (.96)	.068 (1.63)	
Republican	-.297** (8.00)	-.258** (6.64)		-.232** (4.95)	-.191** (4.45)	
Evangelical Protestant				-.352** (8.35)	-.487** (11.04)	-.134* (2.20)
Catholic				.186** (3.84)	.186** (4.31)	
Jewish				.602** (3.89)	.479** (8.66)	
Other religion				-.026 (.29)	-.020 (.29)	
No religion				.245** (2.96)	.341** (6.24)	
Born before 1930	-.269** (5.84)	-.271** (4.80)		-.194** (3.17)	-.274** (4.03)	
Born in the 1930s	-.222** (4.81)	-.173** (3.39)		-.224** (3.85)	-.096 (1.74)	

Born in the 1940s	-.096* (2.01)	-.084 (1.90)		-.058 (.97)	.005 (.09)	
Born in the 1950s		
Born in the 1960s	.020 (.44)	.087 (1.94)		.030 (.50)	.104* (2.01)	
Born in the 1970s	.269** (4.67)	.244** (5.11)		.293** (3.84)	.251** (4.90)	
Born in the 1980s	.255** (3.08)	.513** (6.92)	.258* (2.33)	.185* (2.14)	.449** (6.08)	.263* (2.32)
Male	-.181** (6.09)	-.154** (5.01)		-.192** (4.98)	-.154** (4.48)	
African American	-.173** (3.23)	-.260** (4.49)		-.029 (.39)	-.066 (.96)	
Latino	-.031 (.38)	-.008 (.11)		.026 (.25)	-.019 (.26)	
Asian	-.005 (.03)	-.032 (.19)		.060 (.30)	.016 (.11)	
Other minority	.003 (.04)	-.107 (1.17)		.019 (.18)	-.166 (1.73)	
Observations	5443	6178		3199	4662	
Adjusted R ²	.16	.22		.25	.32	

Robust t statistics in parentheses * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%

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Notes

¹ In addition, 13 states and the District of Columbia also ban discrimination on the basis of gender identity/expression, but I restrict my focus to LGBs rather than adding the T because polling data on transgender rights is rare.

² This criticism applies to most empirical tests of the contact hypothesis, however, and the effects actually seem to be stronger in experimental studies that create involuntary contact (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 759), so this concern may be overstated.

³ I also did simple difference-of-proportions tests between those who did and did not know LGBs, with no control variables. As expected, these differences are even stronger than those shown in Table 3.

⁴ Adding religious intensity to the model loses another 1,889 cases without meaningfully changing the findings.

⁵ As a measure of the relative importance of the independent variables, I use the standardized odds-ratio (Long and Freese 2006, 178-9). Like the beta-weight in multiple regression analysis, the standardized odds-ratio shows the impact of a one-standard-deviation increase in an independent variable, holding the other variables constant.

⁶ Based on the findings from Table 1, I used two linear variables for year of birth, one for those before 1940 and one for those born since. Typically, only the first was significant.

⁷ The effect is .25 standard deviation for this sub-group. If the sample is further restricted to evangelical Protestants (N=386), however, the coefficient drops to .09 and falls well short of statistical significance.