

## BLACK-WHITE DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMOSEXUALITY AND GAY RIGHTS

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**Abstract** Black homophobia has been cited as a contributing factor in slowing mobilization against AIDS in the African-American community, as an obstacle to black lesbians and gay men in coming to terms with their sexuality, and as a challenge to the legitimacy of the gay rights movement. Yet evidence that blacks are more homophobic than whites is quite limited. This article uses responses from almost seven thousand blacks and forty-three thousand whites in 31 surveys conducted since 1973 to give more definitive answers on black-white attitudinal differences and their demographic roots. Despite their greater disapproval of homosexuality, blacks' opinions on sodomy laws, gay civil liberties, and employment discrimination are quite similar to whites' opinions, and African Americans are more likely to support laws prohibiting antigay discrimination. Once religious and educational differences are controlled, blacks remain more disapproving of homosexuality but are moderately more supportive of gay civil liberties and markedly more opposed to antigay employment discrimination than are whites. Yet religion, education, gender, and age all have weaker impacts on black than on white attitudes, suggesting that black and white attitudes have different roots.

Homophobia is still a great problem throughout America, but in the African-American community it is even more threatening. This is an enormous obstacle for everyone in-

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volved in AIDS prevention, treatment and research. . . . We have to launch a national campaign against homophobia in the black community. (Coretta Scott King, speaking at the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS, quoted in Wockner 2001)

Opposition to gay rights unfortunately seems to run higher in the black community than in the nation as a whole, with many reserving special scorn for the claim that the struggle of homosexuals mirrors the struggle of African-Americans. This cultural conservatism has deeply religious roots. (Stephen L. Carter 1994, p. 67)

The “commonly held belief that homophobia is more prevalent in the black community than in society at large” (Brandt 1999, pp. 8–9) has been cited as a contributing factor in slowing African-American mobilization against AIDS; as an obstacle to black lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs) in coming to terms with their sexuality; and as a challenge to the legitimacy of the gay rights movement. Evidence that blacks are more homophobic than whites is quite limited, however. Although research on gender differences in attitudes has already warranted two meta-analyses (Kite 1984; Kite and Whitley 1996) and continues to grow (e.g., Herek 2002; Herek and Capitano 1999), researchers have typically addressed racial differences only in passing, in studies focused on other issues, based on samples with small numbers of blacks.

This study amasses data from 31 national surveys conducted since 1973 (nearly seven thousand blacks and forty-three thousand whites) to determine whether blacks and whites differ in their attitudes toward homosexual relations, civil liberties for lesbians and gay men, and gay employment rights. The first section discusses potential implications of black-white attitudinal differences. The second section establishes that such differences exist by reviewing previous research, describing the data used in this study, and performing simple analyses on those data. The third section explores whether black-white differences persist among demographically comparable individuals, especially those of similar religious and educational backgrounds, using logit analysis. The fourth section considers whether religion, education, and other demographic characteristics affect attitudes differently for blacks and whites.

### Why Would Racial Differences Matter?

Black condemnation of homosexuality may increase the impact of AIDS on the African-American community both individually and politically.<sup>1</sup> First,

1. Blacks comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population but 45 percent of all U.S. AIDS cases (U.S. CDC 2001a) and 33 percent of AIDS cases among men who have sex with men (MSM; U.S. CDC 2000). HIV incidence may be six times as high for blacks as for whites among MSM in their twenties (U.S. CDC 2001b).

black lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs) may rely on same-race heterosexuals for acceptance even more than white LGBs do (Cohen 1999; Icard 1986). Half of a large survey of black LGBs reported problems with racism among white LGBs (Battle et al. 2002, p. 44); perhaps as a result, blacks report less involvement in the LGB community (Lewis and Rogers 2002; Stokes, Vanable, and McKirnan 1996). African Americans attracted to their own sex experience more pressure than whites to hide their homosexual behavior, to marry, and to have children (Cohen 1999; Icard 1986). Among men who have sex with men (MSM), blacks are more likely than whites to think their friends and neighbors disapprove of homosexuality, to have sex with women, and to identify as heterosexual (Stokes et al. 1996; Stokes and Peterson 1998; U.S. Centers for Disease Control [CDC] 2000).<sup>2</sup> This may fuel the spread of AIDS, as black MSM who perceive greater homophobia in the black community and feel greater discomfort in disclosing their homosexual behavior tend to have lower self-esteem and to engage in riskier sexual behaviors (Peterson et al. 1992; Stokes and Peterson 1998).

Second, black political and cultural organizations did not respond as quickly or forcefully to AIDS as LGB organizations did, even though similar numbers in the black and LGB communities had contracted AIDS (Cohen 1999). The black community has fewer resources and confronts more crises (Cohen 1999, pp. 33–34; Harper 2000), which partly explains the weaker response, but Cohen argues that middle-class blacks and black political leaders feared that embracing AIDS as a black cause might indicate acceptance of homosexuality and injection drug use, feeding into racist images about uncontrolled black sexuality. The key role of ministers in African-American politics and most black churches' denunciation of homosexuality also weighed against early emergence of AIDS as a black political issue, especially since many black people thought of homosexuality as "a cultural phenomenon of white people" and AIDS as a disease of gay white men (Icard 1986, p. 86).

Black attitudes also have symbolic importance for the gay rights struggle. LGB activists draw heavily on rhetorical and strategic analogies to the black civil rights movement—seeking parallel nondiscrimination legislation, comparing Clinton's proposed lifting of the ban on gays in the military to Truman's decision to end racial segregation in the armed forces, and castigating the outlawing of same-sex marriages as a throwback to antimiscegenation laws. The Christian Right, however, has increasingly challenged the LGB movement's claim to "the moral legacy of the black civil rights movement" (Solomon 1999, p. 60), arguing that gays seek "special rights"

2. AIDS researchers frequently refer to "men who have sex with men," because many men who engage in same-sex sex do not identify as "gay" or "bisexual," and it is the behavior rather than the identity that matters in AIDS research.

that should be restricted to legitimate minorities and targeting blacks for many of their arguments (Wadsworth 1997).<sup>3</sup>

Openly gay Congressman Barney Frank (D-Mass.) argues that the Congressional Black Caucus's strong support for gay rights shows that black voters are not broadly homophobic (Boykin 1999), but "cavalier" comparisons of the gay and black civil rights movement grate even on African Americans who strongly support gay rights (Smith 1999, p. 15). "This sentiment—that gays are pretenders to a throne of disadvantage that properly belongs to black Americans, that their relation to the rhetoric of civil rights is one of unearned opportunism—is surprisingly widespread" (Gates 1999, p. 25). Rejection of the civil rights analogy in the black community would help legitimize its rejection in the white community as well. For instance, Colin Powell's denial of comparability between skin color and sexual orientation was widely cited by opponents of allowing gays to serve openly in the military (e.g., Zumwalt 1992).<sup>4</sup>

### Do Black and White Attitudes Differ?

*Previous research.* The evidence is mixed. Levitt and Klassen (1974) find that whites have significantly more negative attitudes toward homosexuality than do blacks, Hudson and Ricketts (1980) and Schneider and Lewis (1984) find the opposite result, and Tiemeyer (1993, p. 195) finds blacks to be 10 percentage points more likely than whites both to label homosexual relations as "always wrong" and to say that homosexuality is an "acceptable alternative lifestyle." On gay rights, however, polls from the early 1990s indicate that blacks are more likely than whites to oppose antigay discrimination, to support extending civil rights laws to cover gays, and to reject the claim that gays want "special rights" (Boykin 1996, pp. 186–89).

*Data.* To obtain more definitive answers, this study compares the attitudes of nearly seven thousand African Americans and forty-three thousand whites in 31 national surveys conducted between 1973 and 2000. The data come from four major series of surveys: 18 years of the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey (GSS:  $N = 3,815$  blacks, 22,017 whites; years 1973–2000); six surveys conducted by the *Times Mirror* (later Pew Research) Center for the People and the Press (Pew:  $N = 2,039$  blacks, 12,108 whites; years 1987–97); five Gallup surveys (Gallup:  $N = 820$

3. In the words of Colorado Republican Senator Bill Armstrong, "to equate the self-created miseries of pleasure-addicted gays—who sport average incomes of nearly \$55,000 a year—with the innocent sufferings and crippling poverty of legitimate minority groups is an insult to those who've struggled to achieve true civil rights in America" (Wadsworth 1997). The inflammatory video *Gay Rights/Special Rights*, e.g., focuses on African Americans expressing resentment of gay activists' use of civil rights rhetoric. It was sent to hundreds of black churches (Solomon 1999, p. 64).

4. "Skin color is a benign, nonbehavioral characteristic. Sexual orientation is perhaps the most profound of human behavioral characteristics" (Zumwalt 1992).

blacks, 7,156 whites; years 1977–96); and the American National Election Study (NES:  $N = 645$  blacks, 5,403 whites; years 1992, 1996).

Table 1 presents variable names, question wordings, and survey sizes by year, with questions ordered into three broad categories: homosexual relations, civil liberties, and employment rights. Questions on whether homosexual relations are wrong (Sexual Relations) or immoral (AIDS as Punishment) fall into the first category, those about progay books in public libraries (Library Book) and progay public speeches (Public Speech) fall into the second category, and legalizing same-sex relations (Sodomy Law) falls somewhere in between. A variety of questions ask about employment issues (Teach College, Fire Teachers, Hiring, and Army), with the question on a nondiscrimination law (Rights Law) in a class by itself.

Variables are reverse coded as necessary to give the response that is most accepting of homosexuality or supportive of gay rights the value one and the least supportive response the value zero.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Teach College is coded one for those who agreed to allow a gay man to teach college, but Fire Teachers is coded one for those who disagreed that school boards ought to have the right to fire gay teachers.<sup>6</sup> Hiring is coded one for those who said “yes” to all five questions about whether homosexuals should be hired as salespeople, elementary school teachers, doctors, clergy, and members of the armed forces. The first column of table 1 shows the differences between the percentages of whites and blacks giving the more supportive response, with positive numbers indicating that whites are more supportive. Because sample sizes are so large, the focus is on the size of differences, and statistical significance is mentioned primarily when black-white differences are insignificant despite huge samples.

*Findings.* Blacks are 11 percentage points more likely than whites to condemn homosexual relations as “always wrong” and 14 percentage points more likely to see them warranting “God’s punishment” in the form of AIDS, but no more likely to favor criminalizing gay sex.<sup>7</sup> More blacks than whites would remove a progay book from their public library (by 6 percentage points) and would not allow an admitted homosexual to give a speech in their community (by 4 percentage points).<sup>8</sup> When the issue turns to employment, however,

5. Although respondents could classify the wrongness of homosexual relations at four levels, about three-quarters called them “always wrong” and were much less likely to support civil liberties than even those who said “almost always wrong”; any response other than “always wrong” was coded one.

6. Respondents were allowed to “completely” or “mostly” agree or disagree with the statement, but simplifying to a dichotomous coding did not alter the results meaningfully.

7. Table 1 reports differences for all years combined. For the 18 GSS survey years combined, 20 percent of blacks and 31 percent of whites said that homosexual relations were something other than “always wrong,” a difference of 11 percentage points. Blacks were more likely than whites to label homosexual relations as “always wrong” in all 18 years (the differences were statistically significant in 13 years) and were significantly more likely to see AIDS as a punishment from God in each year.

8. By year, the differences were consistently positive (there were only three negative differences in 36 comparisons) but only intermittently statistically significant.

**Table 1.** Acceptance of Homosexuality and Support for Gay Rights among Blacks and Whites

	White-Black Difference	Odds Ratio	Transformed Odds Ratio
What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex—do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all? (Sexual Relations) “not ‘always wrong’” <sup>a</sup>	11.3***	1.23*** (.07)	3.6***
AIDS might be God’s punishment for immoral sexual behavior (AIDS as Punishment) “disagree” <sup>b</sup>	13.6***	1.37*** (.10)	7.8***
Do you think homosexual relations between consenting adults should or should not be legal? (Sodomy Law) “legal” <sup>c</sup>	1.2	.77* (.09)	−6.6*
[There are always some people whose ideas are considered bad or dangerous by other people. ... And what about a man who admits that he is a homosexual?] If some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote in favor of homosexuality should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not? (Library Book) “not removing” <sup>a</sup>	6.4***	.86** (.04)	−3.2**
Suppose this admitted homosexual wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak, or not? (Public Speech) “allowed” <sup>a</sup>	4.3***	.79*** (.04)	−4.0***
Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not? (Teach College) “allowed” <sup>a</sup>	1.6	.68*** (.03)	−8.1***
School boards ought to have the right to fire teachers who are known homosexuals (Fire Teachers) “disagree” <sup>b</sup>	2.2	.84* (.06)	−4.5*
Do you think homosexuals should or should not be hired for each of the following occupations? ... doctors, clergy, salespersons, elementary school teachers, armed forces (Hiring) “yes to all” <sup>c</sup>	−2.6	.61 (.07)	−10.0***

**Table 1.** (Continued)

	White-Black Difference	Odds Ratio	Transformed Odds Ratio
Do you think homosexuals should be allowed to serve in the United States Armed Forces, or don't you think so? (Army) "yes" <sup>d</sup>	-3.0	.66** (.09)	-9.0**
Do you favor or oppose laws to protect homosexuals against job discrimination? (Rights Law) "favor" <sup>d</sup>	-9.7***	.42*** (.06)	-18.0***

NOTE.—Numbers are differences between percentages of whites and blacks giving the more LGB-positive answer to each question for all survey years combined; differences are white minus black. Odds ratios are for the variable White in a logit model that includes years of education, age, sex, religion, church attendance, and survey year. The odds ratio is transformed into a percentage difference, holding all other variables constant at their means, using the Stata *prchange* command (Long and Freese 2001).

<sup>a</sup> Question taken from General Social Surveys for 1973 ( $N = 1,484$ ), 1974 ( $N = 1,470$ ), 1976 ( $N = 1,481$ , response rate [RR] = .751), 1977 ( $N = 1,505$ , RR = .765), 1980 ( $N = 1,453$ , RR = .759), 1982 ( $N = 1,816$ , RR = .775), 1984 ( $N = 1,412$ , RR = .786), 1985 ( $N = 1,481$ , RR = .787), 1987 ( $N = 1,759$ , RR = .754), 1988 ( $N = 929$ , RR = .773), 1989 ( $N = 987$ , RR = .776), 1990 ( $N = 868$ , RR = .739), 1991 ( $N = 950$ , RR = .778), 1993 ( $N = 1,018$ , RR = .824), 1994 ( $N = 1,904$ , RR = .778), 1996 ( $N = 1,813$ , RR = .761), 1998 ( $N = 1,752$ , RR = .756), and 2000 ( $N = 1,750$ , RR = .700). Total includes 3,815 blacks and 22,017 whites; 1982 and 1987 include black oversamples (RR = .717 and .799).

<sup>b</sup> The polls were conducted largely under the auspices of the *Times Mirror* Center for the People and the Press, which has been superseded by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. The first three surveys were conducted by the Gallup Organization, the remainder by the Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA). The first four were personal interviews, the remainder telephone interviews. Sample sizes varied widely from year to year, with the last two surveys less than one-third the size of the first. Gallup, April 25–May 10, 1987 ( $N = 4,244$ ); Gallup, May 13–22, 1988 ( $N = 3,021$ ); Gallup, January 1–February 5, 1989 ( $N = 2,048$ ); PSRA, May 1–31, 1990 ( $N = 3,004$ ); PSRA, October 21–November 10, 1991 ( $N = 2,020$ ); PSRA, May 28–June 10, 1992 ( $N = 3,517$ ); PSRA, May 18–24, 1993 ( $N = 1,507$ ); PSRA, July 12–27, 1994 ( $N = 1,009$ ); and PSRA, November 5–17, 1997 ( $N = 1,165$ ). Response rates were not available. Keeter et al. (2000) report a .360 response rate (AAPOR RR3) to a "standard," 5-day Pew telephone survey but also report that a much more rigorous 8-week version of the same survey with more aggressive efforts to contact individuals and to convert refusals resulted in a 60.6 percent response rate, though both yielded very similar survey results. The surveys used here probably have response rates within that range, as they typically spent 6 weeks in the field but did not involve such aggressive callback and conversion efforts.

<sup>c</sup> The Gallup surveys were conducted June 17–20, 1977 ( $N = 1,513$ ); June 25–28, 1982 ( $N = 1,531$ ); November 11–18, 1985 ( $N = 1,008$ ); March 14–18, 1987 ( $N = 1,015$ ); October 12–15, 1989 ( $N = 1,227$ ); June 4–8, 1992 ( $N = 1,002$ ); and November 21, 1996 ( $N = 1,003$ ). Response rates were not available.

<sup>d</sup> American National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies, Survey Research Center, University of Michigan: 1992 ( $N = 1,715$ , RR = .740) and 1996 ( $N = 1,655$ , RR = .71).

\* Black-white differences significant at the .05 level.

\*\* Black-white differences significant at the .01 level.

\*\*\* Black-white differences significant at the .0001 level.



black-white differences nearly disappear. With all years combined, differences are trivial and statistically insignificant on allowing gay college professors, firing gay teachers, hiring homosexuals into five occupations, and letting gays serve in the military. Strikingly, African Americans are 10 percentage points more likely than whites to support a law prohibiting antigay job discrimination. In sum, previous studies give inconsistent evidence partly because blacks appear to be more likely than whites both to see homosexuality as wrong and to favor gay rights laws.

### Explaining Black-White Differences

Black-white religious and educational differences may contribute to attitudinal differences. Beliefs about homosexuality and support for gay rights vary substantially by religion (with Jews the most accepting and born-again Protestants the most disapproving) and by intensity of religious feeling (disapproval is highest among those who attend religious services frequently, who pray frequently, and who say that religion is very important in their lives—see, e.g., Ellison and Musick 1993; Herek 1988; Herek and Capitanio 1995, 1996; Seltzer 1993). Blacks are substantially more religious than whites, more likely to be fundamentalist Protestants, and more likely to believe in a God who sends misfortunes as punishments (Taylor 1988; Taylor and Chatters 1996).<sup>9</sup> Schulte and Battle (in press) find that weak racial differences in attitudes toward lesbians among college students disappear once religion is controlled.

Education appears to lead to greater acceptance of difference in others, more liberal sexual attitudes, greater interaction with gay men and lesbians, and heightened commitment to democratic values and civil liberties (e.g., Ellison and Musick 1993; Gibson and Tedin 1988; Herek and Capitanio 1996). Blacks are only two-thirds as likely as whites to be college graduates (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001, p. 140). These religious and educational differences contribute to greater black social conservatism on such issues as abortion (Combs and Welch 1982; Wilcox 1990), suicide (Early and Akers 1993), and euthanasia (MacDonald 1998).

Age differences, however, may be suppressing black-white attitudinal differences. Older Americans tend to be less politically and socially tolerant than younger Americans, probably due more to the eras in which they were socialized than to the aging process (e.g., Davis 1992; Herek and Glunt 1993), and blacks tend to be younger than whites, which would predict greater black

9. Blacks had significantly higher levels on 16 measures of religious participation (including attendance, church membership, frequency of prayer, and importance of religion in their lives), whether or not a variety of demographic characteristics were controlled (Taylor and Chatters 1996). A contrary viewpoint is that, as more central institutions to the community, black churches accommodate all members of the black community in ways that white churches do not. Some suggest that the black church accords an established role for homosexuals, e.g., as the backbone of the choir (Boykin 1996; Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Harper 2000; Stokes and Peterson 1998).



acceptance of homosexuality. Most studies also find that men disapprove of homosexuality more than women do, though it is less clear whether they also oppose gay rights more (Kite 1984; Kite and Whitley 1996). As a higher percentage of black respondents than white respondents are women, this would tend to understate black condemnation of homosexuality. Other factors (e.g., black nationalism and personal experiences of discrimination) suggest that African Americans could be more likely than equally religious and educated whites to condemn homosexuality but to support gay rights laws.<sup>10</sup>

*Controlling for demographic differences.* Once demographic factors are controlled, black-white differences in attitudes are typically statistically insignificant (e.g., Alcalay et al. 1989 [reported in Herek and Capitanio 1995]; Bobo and Licari 1989; Davis 1995; Gibson and Tedin 1988; Glenn and Weaver 1979; Herek 1994; Irwin and Thompson 1977; Marsiglio 1993; Millham, San Miguel, and Kellogg 1976; Nyberg and Alston 1976–77; Schulte and Battle forthcoming; Strand 1998). Most of these samples include few blacks, however, which could explain the absence of statistically significant differences. In two studies combining several years of the GSS, Dejowski (1992) finds blacks to be more willing than comparable whites to restrict gay people's civil liberties, but Loftus (2001) finds blacks to be more negative on homosexuality, though more positive on gay civil liberties, than comparable whites.

In the data examined here, blacks are 2–5 percentage points more likely than whites to attend religious services weekly, about 50 percent more likely to classify themselves as born-again (Pew) or as fundamentalist or charismatic (NES), and about two-and-one-half times as likely to belong to denominations the GSS classifies as fundamentalist (not shown). Blacks are far less likely than whites to be Catholic, somewhat less likely to have no religious affiliation, and extremely unlikely to be Jewish. Blacks have about one less year of education than whites, on average, in all four data sets. Blacks are also 2–4 years younger than whites, on average, and the black GSS and NES samples are much more female than the white samples. According to the literature,

10. Black nationalism emphasizes black masculinity and the need “to propagate the race” (Icard and Schilling 1992, p. 442). “In the influential *Afrocentricity*, Molefi Asante blames the disintegration of the Black nuclear family on ‘an outburst of homosexuality among black men, fed by the prison breeding system.’ . . . In the equally influential *Isis Papers*, Dr. Frances Cress Welsing attributes the entire disintegration of the Black community to ‘Black male passivity, effeminization, Bisexuality and Homosexuality’” (Ongiri 1997, p. 285). (The belief that prisons cause homosexuality appears more common among blacks than whites.) These beliefs would predict greater condemnation of homosexuality among blacks, though Davis and Brown (2000) find no link between black nationalism and feelings toward gay people. On the other hand, African Americans’ experiences of discrimination should make them more sympathetic to the case for gay rights laws. Boykin (1996, p. 209) suggests that gay people perceive more black homophobia because “we . . . expect blacks to support gay rights, because they, of all people, should know the importance of equality and the pain of discrimination”; when blacks and whites are equally homophobic, the black attitude is more surprising and troubling. Blacks also support government action to counteract inequality more than whites do: they are much more likely to favor affirmative action (Bobo 1998; Steeh and Krysan 1996) and a strong government role in providing for the needy (Colasanto 1988).

black-white religious and educational differences predict greater black condemnation of homosexuality, while the smaller black-white age and gender differences predict greater acceptance.

*Method.* To control for demographic differences in this study, logit analyses are run for each of the dependent variables, with religion, education, age, sex, and survey year added as control variables. The dummy variable White is coded one for whites and zero for African Americans. (Nonblack minorities are excluded from the analyses.) Religion is coded as similarly as possible across data sets. The dummy variable Attends Weekly is coded one for those who attend religious services weekly and zero otherwise. The dummy variables Catholic, Jewish, Other Religion, and No Religion are coded one for those who fit those categories and zero otherwise. The dummy variable Fundamentalist is coded one for those who were fundamentalist, charismatic, or born-again, depending on the data set.<sup>11</sup> Mainstream Protestants are the reference group. Education and Age are measured in years.<sup>12</sup> Male is coded one for men and zero for women. Because LGB-supportive responses rose 10–28 percentage points on all but two questions (Sodomy Law and Rights Law) over the period studied, dummy variables representing each survey year allow for arbitrary time trends and correct for possible bias arising from unequal racial distributions across survey years.

*Findings.* The second column of table 1 presents the odds ratios on White in logit models that control for religion, education, age, gender, and survey year, and the third column transforms them into predicted percentage differences between whites and blacks, holding the other variables constant at their

11. A variety of authors have found that disapproval of homosexuality is strongly related to religious conservatism, frequently measured as a dummy variable (e.g., Ellison and Musick 1993; Herek and Capitanio 1995; Seltzer 1993), and to frequency of church attendance (e.g., Herek and Capitanio 1996). There is no standard coding of either variable, and, indeed, the religion variables vary substantially across surveys and even across years within the same survey, forcing us to discard several years of data. The GSS categorizes Protestant denominations as fundamentalist, moderate, or liberal, and asks attendance patterns in all years. The NES asked if respondents had been born-again and how often they attended religious services in both years. The Pew surveys asked the Fire Teachers question in 9 years and the AIDS as Punishment question in 7 years but did not ask respondents whether they were fundamentalist or charismatic in 1988, 1991, and 1993, and never asked how frequently they attended religious services. Those survey years were dropped, leaving 6 years of data on teachers and 5 years of data on AIDS. Gallup asked the Sodomy Laws and Hiring questions in 7 years, whether respondents had been born-again in 3 years, and how frequently they attended religious services in 5 years, but the religion questions overlapped in only 1 year. We dropped the 2 years that did not ask about attendance at religious services (1987 and 1992).

12. The original Pew and Gallup education measures were ordinal but were recoded into years. For Pew, “none or grades 1–4” was coded 4, “grades 5–7” was coded 6, “grade 8” was coded 8, “high school/incomplete” was coded 10, “high school graduate-grade 12” was coded 12, “technical trade or business” was coded 13, “college/university-incomplete” was coded 14, and “college/university graduate” was coded 16. Gallup codes varied somewhat from year to year, but those with no high school were coded 6, those with some high school were coded 10, high school graduates were coded 12, those with some college were coded 14, and college graduates were coded 16.

means.<sup>13</sup> African Americans remain significantly more likely than comparable whites to condemn homosexuality, but controlling for these variables shrinks differences by 6–7 percentage points (from 11 to 4 points for Sexual Relations and from 14 to 8 points for AIDS as Punishment). On the other hand, blacks are more likely than comparable whites to favor gay civil liberties (by 3–7 percentage points), to support gay employment rights (by 4–9 percentage points), and to favor a law prohibiting antigay discrimination (by 18 percentage points). Though religious and educational differences were expected to have more impact on condemnation of homosexuality than on support for gay rights, the controls increase black support (relative to whites) by 6–10 percentage points on all questions.

### Do Demographic Factors Influence Black and White Attitudes Differently?

These models, however, assume that the demographic variables have the same impact on black and white attitudes, a largely untested assumption that Herek and Capitanio (1995) question. Blacks' position as an out-group in American society could make discrimination such a central issue for them that all other variables decrease in importance. Religion is strongly related to white attitudes toward gay rights, but most black churches have histories of opposing employment discrimination that white fundamentalist churches do not (Wadsworth 1997), and sermons favoring government action to prevent antiblack discrimination should have spillover benefits for LGBs.<sup>14</sup> Younger whites tend to support the rights of minority groups more than their elders do because the eras in which they grew up socialized them to do so (Davis 1992; Herek and Glunt 1993), but the civil rights movement may have socialized blacks more powerfully in the 1950s and 1960s than in subsequent years. Likewise, the women's movement and higher education may teach white women and whites generally lessons in nondiscrimination and tolerance of difference that blacks have learned from the civil rights movement. Thus, religion, education, age, and gender may all influence blacks' attitudes less than whites' attitudes, at least with regard to discrimination.

*Previous research.* Three multivariate studies of black attitudes toward gay people suggest that white models may not transfer directly to blacks (Davis and Brown 2000; Herek and Capitanio 1995; Sawyer 2000). Acceptance of

13. Coefficients for all key control variables (not shown) have the expected signs in all 10 models and are statistically significant in at least 9 of those 10 models, with patterns quite similar to those in the "Whites Only" models in table 2.

14. On the other hand, out-groups may feel the need to compete for restricted societal resources, including respect, and a strong sense of group identity can lead to antipathy to other groups (Davis and Brown 2000; Gibson and Gouws 2000). A perception that gay rights laws diminish the protections governments provide to blacks and detract from their status as legitimate minorities would lessen support among African Americans.

gay people rises with education and declines with religiosity in all three studies, as in general population studies. Contrary to most prior findings, however, neither Davis and Brown (2000) nor Herek and Capitanio (1995) find a significant age effect, and Sawyer (2000) finds acceptance rising with age. Herek and Capitanio (1995) also find male and female attitudes to be quite similar, and in a simpler analysis of a large sample of state employees, Ernst et al. (1991, 581) report higher percentages of black than white women saying that “AIDS will help society by reducing the number of homosexuals (gay people)” but no significant difference between black and white men. In contrast, Davis and Brown (2000) and Sawyer (2000) find greater acceptance among black women than men.<sup>15</sup> As these studies include only moderate numbers of blacks (391 for Herek and Capitanio [1995] and about eight hundred for Davis and Brown [2000] and Sawyer [2000]) and no whites, neither black patterns nor black-white differences are completely clear.

*Method.* We repeat the logit analyses separately for whites and blacks and run analyses on the combined sample with a full set of interaction terms between race and all demographic variables (not shown). Table 2 shows odds ratios first for whites, then for blacks. Table 3 translates these odds ratios into expected percentage differences, holding the other variables at their means. The impact of education and age is calculated as the expected differences between college and high school graduates and between 45-year-olds and 25-year-olds, respectively.<sup>16</sup>

*Findings.* Patterns for whites match expectations well. Weekly attendance at religious services decreases the odds of accepting homosexuality or supporting gay rights. Fundamentalist Protestants have lower odds of doing so—and Jews, the nonreligious, and Catholics have higher odds of doing so—than do nonfundamentalist Protestants, the reference group. Acceptance and support rise with education and decline with age. Women are more supportive than comparable men. Support has been trending upward, at least since the late 1980s (not shown).

The models work somewhat less well for blacks. Acceptance of homo-

15. Sawyer also finds that feelings about whites were the strongest predictor of attitudes toward gays and lesbians. Sawyer (2000) attributes this largely to a widespread black perception that “gay” means white men with money; Herek and Capitanio (1995) also find that blacks thought primarily of white men when they heard the word “gay.” This finding does not show up in other studies and was difficult to test here. However, the 1996, 1998, and 2000 GSS asked respondents how “close” they felt to blacks and whites. With these variables added to the models below, whites’ closeness to blacks tended to predict more gay-positive responses, but blacks’ closeness to whites was never statistically significant.

16. In the Stata *prchange* command (Long and Freese 2001), all control variables are held at their means for calculating the attendance, education, age, and gender effects. For the education effect, the initial value of Education is set to 14 and delta to four; for the age effect, the initial value of Age is set to 35 and delta to 20; the Stata *prchange* command calculates the change in expected probability between one-half delta above the initial value and one-half delta below the initial value. All religious preference variables are set to zero (and the other variables to their means) to calculate differences between other preferences and nonfundamentalist Protestants.

**Table 2.** Odds Ratios for Blacks and Whites<sup>a</sup>

	Sexual Relations	AIDS as Punishment	Sodomy Laws	Library Book	Public Speech	Teach College	Fire Teachers	Hiring	Army	Rights Law
Whites only:										
Attends Weekly	.33***	N.A.	.42***	.53***	.54***	.53***	N.A.	.55***	.55***	.63***
Fundamentalist	.44***	.59***	N.A.	.50***	.53***	.53***	.40***	N.A.	.50***	.56***
Catholic	1.33***	1.01	1.58***	1.24***	1.37***	1.50***	1.27***	1.76***	1.55***	1.74***
Jewish	3.46***	1.41	3.00***	2.15***	2.60***	4.00***	3.64***	3.03***	4.40***	3.43**
No Religion	2.61***	1.52***	1.83***	1.85***	1.68***	1.82***	1.81***	2.76***	1.31	1.43*
Years of Education	1.26***	1.15***	1.20***	1.26***	1.27***	1.25***	1.20***	1.18***	1.11***	1.10***
Age	.981***	.995***	.980***	.981***	.982***	.976***	.981***	.988***	.991***	.999
Female	1.56***	1.21***	1.07	1.18***	1.20***	1.29***	1.79***	1.58***	2.95***	2.04***
Adjusted count $R^2$	.229	.197	.275	.242	.141	.278	.343	.061	.138	.104
Sample size	20,647	10,257	5,342	21,067	21,085	20,893	12,007	5,342	2,960	2,920
Blacks only:										
Attends Weekly	.41***	N.A.	.71	.58***	.66***	.64***	N.A.	.71	.74	1.29
Fundamentalist	.79*	.75*	N.A.	.90	.80*	.90	.71**	N.A.	.60*	.90
Catholic	1.46*	2.28**	1.29	1.38*	1.15	1.45*	1.80**	1.18	3.02	.83
No Religion	2.10***	1.35	1.05	1.20	1.22	1.43	1.05	1.48	.87	.64
Years of Education	1.10***	1.11***	1.13**	1.15***	1.18***	1.19***	1.18***	1.10*	1.04	1.16**
Age	.992*	1.01**	.994	.991***	.995*	.990***	.996	1.005	1.01	1.01
Female	1.23*	.95	1.13	1.00	.95	1.10	1.04	1.10	1.46	.55*
Adjusted count $R^2$	.021	.193	.124	.161	.092	.164	.188	.005	.069	.049
Sample size	3,540	1,812	636	3,537	3,571	3,553	2,015	636	409	410

NOTE.—N.A. = not available.

<sup>a</sup> Models also control for survey year and include variables Other Religion and Jewish.

\* Odds ratios are significantly different from one at the .05 level.

\*\* Odds ratios are significantly different from one at the .01 level.

\*\*\* Odds ratios are significantly different from one at the .0001 level.

**Table 3.** Percentage Impact of Variables for Blacks and Whites

	Sexual Relations	AIDS as Punishment	Sodomy Laws	Library Book	Public Speech	Teach College	Fire Teachers	Hiring	Army	Rights Law
Whites only:										
Attends Weekly	-20	N.A.	-21	-14	-11	-15	N.A.	-11	-14	-11
Fundamentalist	-13	-13	N.A.	-16	-13	-15	-22	N.A.	-17	-14
Catholic	6	0	11	4	5	8	6	10	9	12
Jewish	29	8	27	14	12	22	28	23	24	24
No Religion	22	10	15	12	7	12	14	21	6	8
Education	20	14	18	18	13	17	18	13	9	9
Age	-8	-3	-10	-8	-5	-10	-9	-5	-4	0
Female	8	5	2	4	3	6	15	8	24	17
Blacks only:										
Attends Weekly	-12	N.A.	-9	-13	-9	-10	N.A.	-7	-7	5
Fundamentalist	-3	-7	N.A.	-2	-4	-2	-8	N.A.	-12	-2
Catholic	6	20	6	7	3	8	14	3	18	-4
No Religion	14	7	1	4	4	8	1	8	-3	-10
Education	7	10	12	12	11	14	16	9	4	10
Age	-2	5	-3	-4	-2	-4	-2	2	3	5
Female	3	-1	3	0	-1	2	1	2	9	-12

NOTE.—Percentage differences are calculated using the Stata prchange command. For each calculation, the other variables are set to their means, except that each religious denomination is compared to nonfundamentalist Protestants, the reference group in the logit models. Education effects are calculated as expected differences between college and high school graduates. Age effects are expected differences between 45- and 25-year-olds. N.A. = not available.

sexuality and support for gay rights are clearly related to religion. Attending church weekly has a significant negative effect in four out of eight questions. Born-again or fundamentalist Protestants are significantly less likely than other Protestants, the reference group, to give a positive response in five out of eight questions, and Catholics are significantly more likely than “other” Protestants to give the positive response in five out of 10 questions.<sup>17</sup> Still, odds ratios on weekly attendance and fundamentalism are uniformly closer to unity (no relationship) for blacks than for whites. Weekly attendance lowers probabilities of positive responses by 11–21 percentage points for whites but by 7–13 points for blacks (and has an insignificant positive impact on support for gay rights laws). Fundamentalists are 13–22 percentage points less likely than nonfundamentalist Protestants to give the positive response among whites, but only 2–12 points less likely to do so among blacks. The interaction terms (not shown) indicate that weekly attendance and fundamentalism each has significantly more negative effects for whites than blacks in five of eight questions.

Education effects are positive for blacks but somewhat weaker than for whites. Being a college rather than a high school graduate increases the probability of a positive response by 4–16 points for blacks, but by 9–20 points for whites. The interaction terms show education effects are significantly stronger for whites than blacks on all four GSS questions.

Older blacks are significantly less likely than younger blacks to respond positively to the four GSS questions, but four of the 10 odds ratios on age are greater than one, and older blacks are significantly less likely than younger blacks to say that AIDS might be God’s punishment for immoral sexual behavior. In contrast, age effects are consistently negative for whites. White 45-year-olds are 4–10 percentage points less likely than comparable 25-year-olds to give the positive response on eight out of 10 questions, but black 45-year-olds were between four points less supportive and five points more supportive than comparable 25-year-olds. Interaction terms show black-white differences in age effects to be highly significant for eight out of 10 questions, and approval declines with age twice as quickly for whites even when the age effect is significant for blacks.

Gender differences are insignificant for blacks on most questions, though black men are significantly more likely than comparable black women both to call same-sex relations “always wrong” and to favor gay rights laws. In contrast, white women give significantly more positive responses than comparable white men on every question except abolishing sodomy laws, with half the male-female gaps being eight points or larger. The sex differences are significantly larger for whites than blacks in six out of 10 models.

In sum, religion, education, age, and gender all appear to have less impact on black attitudes than on white attitudes. Adjusted count  $R^2$  values are

17. Weekly attendance is also significant in a one-tailed test in the Sodomy Law model.



**Table 4.** Probability of Positive Response for Hypothetical Blacks and Whites

	60-Year-Old, Male, High School Graduate, Fundamental Protestant Who Attends Church Weekly		30-Year-Old, Female, College Graduate, Nonfundamental Protestant Who Does Not Attend Church Weekly	
	Black	White	Black	White
Sexual Relations	12	6	45	74
AIDS as Punishment	75	72	80	92
Sodomy Laws	31	18	58	69
Library Book	59	38	82	92
Public Speech	75	55	90	96
Teach College	61	43	89	95
Fire Teachers	60	45	83	93
Hiring	29	15	44	58
Army	61	28	83	89
Rights Law	85	29	77	78

NOTE.—Expected percentages are for the most recent survey year and are calculated using the logit models in table 2.

consistently higher for white models than for black models, frequently twice as high. Five-sixths of the coefficients in the black models are smaller than those in the white models, and over half of the black-white differences are statistically significant. Weaker gender and age effects for blacks are consistent with previous findings. Education and religion effects were expected to be weaker for blacks on discrimination questions, but they are also weaker on disapproval of homosexuality.

The implications can be seen in table 4, where the probabilities of positive responses are calculated for two hypothetical sets of white and black respondents. The 60-year-old, male, high school graduates who attend a fundamental Protestant church weekly are much less accepting of homosexuality and gay rights than are the 30-year-old, female college graduates who attend a nonfundamental Protestant church less than weekly.<sup>18</sup> Still, among the former, less supportive individuals, blacks are always predicted to be more likely to give the positive response (with differences ranging between three and 56 points). Among the latter, more supportive individuals, however, whites are always predicted to be more likely to give the positive response (with differences ranging between 29 points and one point). More important, the dif-

18. The first individual is coded one on Fundamental and Attends Weekly, 12 on Education, and zero on Female and the other religion variables. The second individual is coded one on Female, zero on all the religion variables (including Fundamental and Attends Weekly), and 16 on Education. Both individuals are given the value of the most recent survey year in the series.

ferences between the more and less supportive respondents are always substantially wider for whites than blacks.

## Conclusion

Blacks disapprove of homosexuality more strongly than whites. Even in the most recent survey years, nearly three-quarters of blacks say that homosexual relations are always wrong, and over one-third say that AIDS might be God's punishment for immoral sexual behavior. Overall, blacks are 11–14 percentage points more likely to hold both positions than are whites. On average, blacks are also 4–8 percentage points more likely to do so than whites of the same religion and educational level, though black-white differences tend to be widest among the most educated and least fundamentalist respondents, and blacks may actually be less disapproving than whites among older, less educated, fundamentalist Protestants.

African Americans attracted to their same sex tend to face more disapproval from their families and straight friends than do similar whites. Given the link between perceptions of homophobia in the black community and both lower self-esteem and riskier sexual behaviors among black men who have sex with men (Peterson et al. 1992; Stokes and Peterson 1998), this disapproval places even greater obstacles to self-acceptance and safe sexual behaviors in the paths of black youths than white youths with same-sex attractions. This is especially true because black youths are no less likely to condemn homosexuality than their elders, contrary to the white pattern. Blacks also face greater difficulty in finding alternative sources of acceptance and support: they are less likely than whites to be socially involved in a lesbian or gay community (Lewis and Rogers 2002; Stokes et al. 1996), and many experience racism in interactions with white LGBs (Battle et al. 2002).

Understanding how to conduct a “national campaign against homophobia in the black community” (as Coretta Scott King calls for in the battle against AIDS) requires an understanding of the roots of black attitudes toward homosexuality. Most studies of attitude formation or change focus on whites, however, and the processes may differ, as suggested by the very different effects of standard demographic variables on black and white attitudes. Stephen L. Carter (1994) refers to the “deeply religious roots” of African-American disapproval of homosexuality, but religion actually appears to affect white more than black homophobia. More education is a commonly recommended response to prejudice, but education appears to have less impact on black attitudes than white attitudes toward homosexuality. All the demographic variables examined were related less strongly to black than white attitudes, suggesting that additional research focused on black attitude formation and change may be necessary to develop an effective, culture-specific campaign against homophobia.

Despite blacks' greater disapproval of homosexuality, however, black and

white opinions on sodomy laws, gay civil liberties, and employment discrimination are quite similar, and African Americans are more likely to support laws prohibiting antigay discrimination. Once religious and educational differences are controlled, blacks are moderately more supportive of gay civil liberties and markedly more opposed to antigay employment discrimination. Though antigay rights activists have contrasted lesbians and gay men to “legitimate” minorities, blacks appear more likely than comparable whites to object to both antiblack and antigay discrimination.

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