HOW COHORTS, EDUCATION, AND IDEOLOGY SHAPED A NEW SEXUAL REVOLUTION ON AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD NONMARITAL SEX, 1972–1998

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ABSTRACT: Data from the 1972–98 General Social Surveys document changes in attitudes toward premarital, extramarital, homosexual, and teenage sex. This analysis demonstrates the liberalizing effect of cohort succession but also finds intracohort change in attitudes as the birth cohorts age. Intracohort change dominated recent dramatic declines in disapproval of homosexuality. As theories of individualism and postmaterialism suggest, higher education, secularism, and relative income are associated with greater tolerance of homosexuality. Although the young and those who do not attend religious services frequently led the 1988–98 declines in disapproval of same-sex relations, the diffusion of permissive values from higher to lower education groups is also evident.

The United States has grown more permissive about sexual matters. This liberalization is seen in pervasive contraceptive usage, unmarried cohabitation, and the demise of adultery as grounds for divorce. Greater tolerance is also evident in the decriminalization of homosexual acts and the widespread availability of sexually explicit material. Shifts in some sexual attitudes are consistent with these changes. The mid-1960s, for example, marked the beginning of a sexual revolution: the acceptance of premarital sex increased markedly, especially among younger people (DeLamater and MacCorquodale 1979; Smith 1994; Thornton 1989). Although this trend points to greater tolerance, Americans did not become more permissive on all sexual issues (Smith 1990a). American views toward sex outside marriage remain relatively judgmental. When twenty-four countries were surveyed in 1994, Americans’ sharp disapproval of nonmarital sex ranked with that of conservative Catholic populations such as Ireland and Poland (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1999).

This study examines trends in American attitudes toward four types of nonmarital sex: premarital, homosexual, extramarital, and teenage sexual relations.

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Long-term ideological developments are one possible cause of changing values toward sexuality, family, and gender. For example, secularism and postmaterialism promote pluralistic tolerance by freeing individuals from institutional constraints (Inglehart 1990; Lesthaeghe 1983). New cohorts, exposed to these ideas, liberalize public opinion by slowly replacing older cohorts that hold more traditional values (Ryder 1965). Although my analysis shows that cohort succession has a liberalizing influence on attitudes toward all types of nonmarital sex, not all items show an overall trend toward greater permissiveness. The most revolutionary change in sexual attitudes in recent years—a sharp decrease in disapproval of homosexuality—belyes any assumption that value change is necessarily driven by cohort succession. The rapid, intracohort change in attitudes toward same-sex relations offers a unique opportunity to investigate the determinants of sexual values. Theoretical arguments about ideological influences and their mechanisms of diffusion yield testable hypotheses about the origins of a new sexual revolution in attitudes toward homosexuality.

IDEATIONAL ORIGINS OF TRENDS IN SEXUAL ATTITUDES

Researchers have linked changes in sexual norms to the introduction and diffusion of new ideas. To explain an increase in premarital sex in the 1920s, Kinsey et al. (1953:299) pointed to “a more deliberate approach to sexual problems by the postwar generation.” Besides more widespread knowledge of contraception, they noted the influence of the unconventional ideas introduced by Sigmund Freud, Havelock Ellis, and the European cultures encountered by U.S. servicemen during World War I. Today social scientists ascribe permissive trends to even broader cultural forces, particularly the triumph of individual expression over the collective controls exercised by family, church, and community. To explain the growing state legitimization of homosexual relations, for example, Frank and McEneaney (1999) point to “cultural individualism,” which they argue favors sex for individual pleasure as opposed to family-based, procreative sexuality.

Lesthaeghe (1983) attributes progressive views on sexuality, like other new ideas about family life, to an ideology of individual choice that can be traced back to the Enlightenment. Americans adopted conscious limitation of marital fertility early on, argues Lesthaeghe (1983:412), because of individualistic influences such as the “general secularization tendency inspired by early humanist philosophies and contemporaneous materialist ones.” By weakening institutional controls over the individual, secularism promotes sexual permissiveness, because it privileges personal choice and promotes tolerance for nonconformity. Organized religion, on the other hand, constrains individual expression by articulating collective norms and fostering internalized sanctions such as guilt (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988). With secularization, individuals forsake traditional religious beliefs, and religious denominations themselves adopt more lenient, pluralistic doctrines. Of course, the United States offers an important test of this thesis, because its long-run trends point to increased church membership and the success of strict denominations in the spirited competition for believers (Finke and Stark 1992).

Inglehart (1990) emphasizes the material underpinnings of individualism. Indus-
trialization and higher living standards were ushered in by a “modern” worldview characterized by innovation, individualism, secularism, and the decline of absolute norms (Inglehart, Basanez, and Moreno 1998). Greater affluence permitted concerns to shift from basic subsistence and physical security to higher-order needs such as self-actualization (Maslow 1954). New “postmaterial” values emphasize personal fulfillment over the dictates of restrictive social institutions, like church and family, that were once necessary to economic survival (Inglehart 1977). Affluent parental households inculcate lasting postmaterial values (Inglehart 1985), but postmaterial views also reflect current living standards. Annual inflation indicators, which tap anxieties about economic security, are inversely related to the postmaterialism in society (Inglehart 1985). People with postmaterial values have been shown to reject traditional views of family, gender, and sexuality (Abrahamson and Inglehart 1995).

The mechanism for value change, according to both Inglehart and Lesthaeghe, is the demographic dynamic of cohort succession: when an older generation dies out, it is replaced by a new cohort that holds different values reflecting its unique historical experience. Many Americans say that they see sexual matters differently than the older generation. In 1970 nearly half of respondents in a large, national survey reported themselves as more approving of both premarital and extramarital sex than their parents were when the respondents were growing up; a quarter saw themselves as more approving of homosexuality (Klassen, Williams, and Levitt 1989). Ryder’s (1965) classic essay on cohorts and social change explains why the young are more open-minded than their seniors. They are “old enough to participate directly in the movements impelled by change, but not old enough to have become committed to an occupation, a residence, a family of procreation or a way of life” (1965:848). Once dedicated to a set of values, Ryder contends, the individual’s capacity to change becomes circumscribed by structural and cognitive constraints. Cohort succession compensates for the factors that work against individual—and intracohort—attitude change over the life course.

Although older people are certainly capable of changing their minds, young people have been shown to be particularly malleable with respect to a wide range of attitudes (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Glenn 1980). In youth, when people typically experience their first sexual relationships (Laumann et al. 1994), sexual morality may be an especially salient issue. Although secularism, individualism, and higher education may all leave a liberal mark on young people, early life course transitions (leaving home, getting a job) also increase the influence of the peer group, which generally advocates more permissive sexual standards than does the family (Reiss 1967). This may explain why the young were at the forefront of the decline in disapproval of premarital sex that dated from the mid-1960s (Scott 1998; Thornton 1989).

Youthful receptivity to new ideas does not guarantee the embrace of permissive ideas, however. After the mid-1970s young people grew more disapproving, not less, about premarital, extramarital, and homosexual sex (Smith 1994). Their growing intolerance narrowed the value differences between young and old. The General Social Surveys show a declining generation gap in two-thirds of the 153 items considered (Smith 2000). Between the 1970s and 1990s the attitudes of the
age groups converged the most on sex, civil liberties, and gender roles. Usually, both the young and the old moved in the same direction on each item, but consistent with the malleability of youthful attitudes, the young moved more rapidly to close the age gap.

Education is an important mechanism of stability and change in attitudes. To account for the fixity of attitudes after early adulthood, Lesthaeghe and Surkyn (1988) point to the lasting effects of schooling for the manipulation and coding of class-based cultural symbols. Following Tarde (1890) and Sorokin (1947), they also identify the educated elite as the source of cultural innovations that eventually diffuse to lower classes. Besides being more tolerant of sexual nonconformity (Loftus 201; Scott 1998; Smith 1994), people with more schooling are known to voice greater support for the civil rights of nonconformists (Nunn, Crockett, and Williams 1978). The greater political tolerance of the educated can be traced in part to their greater cognitive sophistication (Bobo and Licari 1989), but higher education is also known to instill enduring tastes for learning (Hyman, Wright, and Reed 1975). While acknowledging that education teaches cognitive skills that facilitate political participation, Inglehart (1990), however, is not convinced that the association of higher education and liberal values reflects anything more than their common origins in parental affluence (Abrahamson and Inglehart 1995).

Of course, change is not always unidirectional, as incremental cohort succession models would imply. Attitudes on family, gender, and sexuality are subject to “ups and downs, that is, periods of institutional affirmation and of deinstitutionalization, or periods of collective assertion followed by periods characterized by a quest for greater individual freedom and tolerance” (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988:13). Individualism, postmaterialism, and secularism are not apt to influence all sexual attitudes in a uniform manner, if only because different issues are salient at different times (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). In the realm of family attitudes, the moral concerns evoked by the transition to low marital fertility were succeeded by issues of divorce and more recently unmarried cohabitation (Lesthaeghe 1983). If intracohort changes in attitudes toward various types of nonmarital sex cannot be counted on to move together, a single measure of sexual permissiveness is no substitute for careful consideration of the individual indicators (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1999).

RATIONAL AND HYPOTHESES: CHANGING SEXUAL ATTITUDES

Does cohort succession or intracohort change dominate trends in sexual attitudes? Although Scott (1998) has documented intracohort shifts in sexual attitudes, the relative effects of cohort turnover and intracohort change have not been investigated systematically. Because the two mechanisms speak to the pace of change, the empirical question poses more than a technical accounting problem. Since differences between adjacent, single-year birth cohorts are seldom dramatic, cohort succession unfolds gradually over the long term. Intracohort attitude change can, in principle, happen virtually overnight. Although intracohort change may result from compositional changes within cohorts or even sampling error, large intraco-
hort changes strongly suggest individual opinion changes that challenge assumptions about the stability of attitudes in adulthood.

Intracohort change might be expected to dominate attitude change for two reasons. First, because the age differences in sexual attitudes have declined (Smith 1994, 2000), the potential impact of cohort turnover has diminished. Second, the extension of higher education increased the prospects for intracohort change in attitudes, because a larger segment of the population has acquired the cognitive skills to evaluate new arguments encountered over the life course (Hyman, Wright, and Reed 1975). Thus we hypothesize that intracohort change will have a greater impact on attitude change than will cohort turnover.

Another empirical question concerns the direction of change. As new cohorts are socialized into an increasingly secular and postmaterial culture, sexual values can be expected to become more permissive (Inglehart 1990; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988). Given the well-documented association between education and the tolerance for nonconformity (Bobo and Licari 1989; Nunn, Crockett, and Williams 1978), rising educational attainments of successive generations of Americans also lead us to expect greater acceptance of nonmarital sex (Loftus 2001). Therefore, we hypothesize that cohort turnover will have a permissive effect on sexual attitudes.

If cohort turnover is a liberalizing force, it cannot explain conservative trends, such as the increased disapproval of extramarital sex in the 1980s (Smith 1994). Intracohort value shifts must be substantial and negative to result in greater conservatism. There is of course no a priori reason to expect intracohort change to move in one direction or another. Because trends in sexual attitudes are subject to fits and starts, trends and reversals, intracohort change in sexual values is more likely to result from episodic period effects (i.e., historical shifts in the climate of opinion) than from more predictable aging or developmental effects. Given research that shows the young to be somewhat more malleable than older people (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Glenn 1980), period influences should affect the values of youth more than those of their seniors. Thus we hypothesize that the young will change their sexual attitudes more than older people will.

As discussed, ideological factors may influence attitudes about sex. Inglehart (1977) argues that economic security breeds postmaterialism, a broad value constellation that includes permissive attitudes toward sex outside marriage. Thus we hypothesize that persons with higher economic standing will embrace more pluralistic sexual attitudes.

Secularism also promotes pluralistic family values (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988). Indeed, more religious segments of the population do hold more conservative sexual views (Smith 1994). Participation in organized religion, especially in conservative denominations, we hypothesize, will be associated with greater disapproval of nonmarital sex. We also hypothesize that the most religious Americans will be less likely to follow permissive trends. In fact, if there is a backlash against the liberalization of public opinion, the most religious Americans may even grow more disapproving as denominations emphasize their positions on these moral issues.

Education is known to be associated with tolerance for nonconformity, including acceptance of nonmarital sex (Smith 1994). Although the young have more
education than older people, we anticipate a positive association of education and permissiveness, even when age is controlled. Assuming that novel attitudes diffuse from well-educated to less-educated groups (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988), we hypothesize that educational differentials in sexual attitudes will narrow over time as the less educated adopt the permissive views of those with more schooling.

Although gender is not critical to these arguments, previous research indicates that women are less permissive than men regarding premarital and extramarital sex but more tolerant of homosexuality. As Scott (1998) suggests, these differences may reflect women’s greater interest in interpersonal relationships.

DATA AND METHODS

Data come from the General Social Survey (GSS), the large, representative household sample survey of English-speaking adults, eighteen and older, in the United States (Davis and Smith 1992). Between 1972 and 1998 items on the morality of premarital, teenage, extramarital, and homosexual sex were replicated at irregular but generally frequent intervals of every year or so. With the exception of a short series on teen sex dating from 1986, seventeen surveys spanning nearly a quarter century are available for analysis. The wording of the sex items is as follows:

- There’s been a lot of discussion about the way morals and attitudes about sex are changing in this country. If a man and a woman have sexual relations before marriage, do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?
- What if they are in their early teens, say 14 to 16 years old?
- What is your opinion about a married person having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner?
- What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex?

Evaluating the relative size of cohort succession and intracohort change calls for decomposing overall change into the component resulting from cohort turnover and the component due to change within cohorts. Studies have documented intracohort change in sexual attitudes by comparing cohort attitudes at two points in time (Scott 1998; Smith 1994; Thornton 1989). This approach is sensitive to the choice of time points and does not make full use of the time series. Firebaugh (1989), however, details other methods for analyzing survey items that are repeated with different samples over time.

Although decomposition methods based on linear regression are appealingly straightforward, trends in attitudes toward nonmarital sex are not always linear, or even monotonic. Algebraic decomposition is appropriate, because it does not assume linearity (Firebaugh 1992). Where $\Delta \mu$ is the total change in the mean value of the attitude between times 1 and 2, the algebraic decomposition (2) parcels change into three components. Change within cohorts between times 1 and 2 is represented by the first summed term,

$$\Delta \mu = \mu_2 - \mu_1$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

$$= \sum_j p_{j1} \Delta \mu_j + \sum_j \mu_{j1} \Delta p_j + \sum_j \Delta \mu_j \Delta p_j$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)
where mean attitude change within cohort \( j \), \( \Delta \mu_{j} \), is weighted by its population share at time 1, \( p_{j1} \). Cohort turnover is captured by the second summated term, where the change in the cohort’s population share, \( \Delta p_{j} \), is weighted by its mean value at time 1, \( m_{j1} \). The last term is a residual, a joint effect that cannot be attributed uniquely to either turnover or within-cohort change. By convention (Das Gupta 1978), the joint component is allocated equally between the two cohort components. The mean value in this analysis is the proportion of respondents who choose “always wrong,” the most frequent response to most sex questions.

Logistic regression tests hypotheses about the individual-level determinants of sexual attitudes. Survey year captures the trend in attitudes. The dependent variable for a sexual attitude is a dummy variable (“always wrong” = 1, else = 0). Independent variables include gender, coded “1” for female and “0” for male, which is a control variable known to be associated with sexual attitudes (Oliver and Hyde 1993). To examine the hypothesis that young adults are more permissive, age is recoded into a dummy variable (18–28 = “1” and 29+ = “0”). Education is an ordinal measure of the highest degree attained (less than high school, high school, associate or junior college, bachelor’s, and graduate).

Other independent variables relate to ideological sources of value change. To measure the economic determinants of postmaterial values, we consider the respondent’s rating of his or her own family income compared to the income of American families in general. Response categories, coded from “1” to “5,” respectively, are far below average, below average, average, above average, and far above average. Measures of religious denomination preference and religious practice address the effect of secularism. Because preliminary analyses revealed that Protestant Fundamentalists were markedly more disapproving of nonmarital sex, a dummy variable distinguishes individuals in denominations identified as Fundamentalist Protestant (“1”) from all others (“0”). Frequency of attendance at religious services ranges from “1” (never) to “8” (several times a week).

**TRENDS AND TURNOVER**

Figure 1 describes trends in sexual attitudes. Although there was no uniform trend toward greater sexual permissiveness between 1972 and 1998, attitudes toward premarital sex did become more liberal. While 36.6 percent condemned premarital sex as “always wrong” in 1972, the figure fell to 26.4 percent by 1998. Tolerance of premarital sex was limited to sex between adults, however. In the short time series on teen sex, disapproval remained strong, with 71.7 percent of GSS respondents in 1998 stating that teen sex was always wrong. In contrast to the growing acceptance of adult sex before marriage, the disapproval of extramarital sex, while always high, actually increased over time. Extramarital sex was condemned as “always wrong” by 69.6 percent of Americans in 1973. Following a sharp increase in disapproval at the end of the 1980s, 79.3 percent in 1998 stated that adultery was always wrong. As for same-sex relations, disapproval drifted gradually upward between 1973 and 1988: the share saying that homosexual relations were “always wrong” increased from 74.3 to 76.8 percent. Then disapproval plummeted to 58.0 percent in 1998. Since harsh judgments of extramarital sex, like
disapproval of teen sex, persisted into the 1990s, the recent outbreak of sexual permissiveness is limited to a single issue—homosexuality.

Given secularism, postmaterialism, and rising educational attainments, cohort turnover should have a liberalizing influence on sexual mores. To test this hypothesis, we decompose total change in each item into its three components—cohort turnover, within-cohort attitude change, and the joint effect, allocated equally to the cohort turnover and within-cohort components. The results, shown in Table 1, offer strong support for the hypothesis. Whether one considers premarital, extramarital, homosexual, or teen sex, cohort turnover shows a liberalizing influence—reducing strong disapproval of nonmarital sex.

If moral judgments were relatively fixed after early adulthood, cohort turnover would dominate attitude change. Most of the data show change within cohorts as they grew older. In the case of premarital sex, this intracohort change was modest
at best. The proportion of the population regarding premarital sex as always wrong declined (−.102) between 1972 and 1998, because the permissive effect of cohort turnover (−.186) outweighed the small conservative intracohort (.036) and joint (.047) components of premarital attitude change. Any big intracohort changes in attitudes toward premarital sex transpired before the start of the GSS series.

In the case of extramarital sex, however, conservative within-cohort shifts led to a general increase in disapproval (.100). This intracohort change (.136) swamped the liberalizing effect of cohort turnover (−.079). The 1986–98 increase in disapproval of teen sex (.050) was the product of counterbalancing forces. As expected, cohort turnover promoted greater permissiveness toward teen sex (−.090), but cohort succession was more than offset by conservative within-cohort shifts (.145). As they aged, birth cohorts became more disapproving of teenagers having sexual relations.

Trends in attitudes toward same-sex relations were more complex. Strong disapproval of homosexuality declined between 1973 and 1998 (−.161). This was due largely to the liberalizing effect of cohort turnover: over the entire 1973–98 period, the absolute value of the turnover-plus-joint number (−.105) was almost twice as large as the intracohort-plus-joint effect (−.056). This conclusion is deceptive, because change was not linear. If anything, public opinion grew more disapproving of homosexuality until the late 1980s, when the trend reversed. The dramatic liberalization of attitudes toward homosexuality is noteworthy in light of the relative stability of other attitudes toward nonmarital sex. Between 1988 and 1998 disapproval of homosexuality dropped almost two percentage points each year, as

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TABLE 1
indicated by the mean annual change (−.019). By comparison, the average change was only 1.3 percentage points annually across a large number of GSS items with linear trends (Smith 1990a).

Separate decompositions for the 1973–88 and 1988–98 time segments clarify how attitudes toward same-sex relations changed. In the earlier period the liberalizing effect of turnover-plus-joint components (−.066) was offset by the conservative intracohort-plus-joint effect (.092). In the later period the liberalizing effect of cohort replacement was reinforced by the within-cohort decline in disapproval of homosexuality. This suggests that Americans rethought their views about the morality of same-sex relations in response to influences of the historical period. In fact, for the 1988–98 period, the absolute size of the intracohort-plus-joint effect (−.148) was more than three times greater than the turnover-plus-joint effect (−.040). Although cohort turnover was a liberalizing force, within-cohort change was the major component in changing attitudes toward homosexuality in both 1973–88 and 1988–98.

As hypothesized, the decompositions show that cohort turnover was a consistent force for greater permissiveness, but intracohort attitude change had a greater influence than cohort turnover on most moral judgments. Recent increases in the acceptance of homosexuality seem to owe more to a change of minds than to a change of cohorts. Similarly, the growing disapproval of extramarital sex was the result of cohorts becoming more conservative as they aged—a development that swamped the liberalizing force of cohort turnover. In the case of both extramarital and homosexual sex, major opinion change was confined to a relatively short period, as Figure 1 showed. Too few cohorts entered or exited the surveys during these short periods for their distinctive moral views to have much effect on public opinion. Short-run changes reflect unique historical circumstances, but further analysis clarifies the sources of change in attitudes toward same-sex relations.

THE NEW SEXUAL REVOLUTION: ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMOSEXUALITY

The 1988–98 change in public opinion regarding same-sex relations is remarkable in both its size and its speed. The shift is similar to the sexual revolution that occurred in attitudes toward premarital sex in the 1960s. Unfortunately, this earlier episode of liberalization is poorly documented, because the GSS time series on sexual attitudes did not begin until 1972. According to scattered data from earlier surveys, the dramatic revolution in American attitudes toward premarital sex was largely complete by the early 1970s (Scott 1998; Smith 1990b; Thornton 1989). The growing acceptance of homosexuality, on the other hand, is well documented by the GSS. Thus the new sexual revolution in attitudes toward homosexual sex presents a unique opportunity to test theories about the determinants of attitudes toward sexual nonconformity.

Our analysis focuses on 1988–98, the period when the share of Americans regarding homosexuality as “always wrong” dropped from 76.8 to 58.0 percent. Table 2 presents the results from the logistic regressions of “always wrong” responses to the same-sex item. The first model incorporates the main effects
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(Expressed as exponentiated betas) for demographic variables known to be associated with sexual attitudes. All these effects are statistically significant at the .001 level. Consistent with the general decline in strong disapproval of homosexuality, the net effect of time (measured by survey year) is negative, as indicated by a value less than 1.0. As anticipated on the basis of previous studies, women are less likely than men to disapprove of same-sex relations. All things considered, older people are 95 percent (1.95–1.0) more likely than their juniors, ages eighteen to twenty-eight, to voice strong disapproval. This effect holds even when education, one important distinction between cohorts, is controlled. As hypothesized, education is negatively associated with disapproval of homosexuality.

Model 2 adds variables associated with postmaterialism, individualism, and secularism. Consistent with theories of secularism, more frequent attendance at religious services increases the likelihood of condemning homosexual relations. Identifying with a Fundamentalist Protestant denomination increases the likelihood of always disapproving of homosexuality by 172 percent. As implied by the postmaterial arguments, the higher the relative income, the less likely is the respondent to disapprove of same-sex relations.

The third model in Table 2 incorporates interaction terms between survey year and each of the independent variables. The interactions elaborate on the process of attitude shifts by identifying changes in the effects of variables over time. This

### TABLE 2

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<td>2.411***</td>
<td>2.714***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative income</td>
<td>0.887***</td>
<td>0.900***</td>
<td>0.886***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactions with Year</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.011</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.046**</td>
<td>1.045**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.017*</td>
<td>1.015*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.006*</td>
<td>1.007*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant Fundamentalist</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.021</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative income</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.997</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td>4.594***</td>
<td>2.838***</td>
<td>4.502***</td>
<td>4.407***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sample Size</strong></td>
<td>10,101</td>
<td>9428</td>
<td>9428</td>
<td>9428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>−2 Log Likelihood</strong></td>
<td>11,792.980</td>
<td>9848.757</td>
<td>9825.058</td>
<td>9827.057</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Significance levels: *0.05, **0.01, ***0.001.
analysis finds statistically significant interactions between survey year and three variables—age ($p < .01$), educational attainment ($p < .05$), and frequency of attendance at religious services ($p < .05$). The fourth model includes the main effects along with the three statistically significant interactions.

First, age has a greater effect on disapproval of homosexuality later in the period than earlier on. Closer inspection of the data reveals that disapproval of same-sex relations declined for both age groups but particularly for the young. In 1988 the eighteen- to twenty-eight-year-olds were less likely than their older counterparts to judge homosexuality as “always wrong” (70.0 percent and 78.6 percent, respectively), but the gap widened over time. By 1998 only 41.8 percent of the young voiced such strong disapproval, compared to 61.4 percent of their seniors. This hypothesized finding of greater change for young adults is consistent with arguments of youthful receptivity to new ideas.

Second, since both time and education are negatively associated with strict disapproval of homosexuality, the positive interaction term indicates a modest decline over time in the effect of educational attainment. Specifically, the attitudes of persons with less schooling moved closer to the liberal views of those with more education. Always more permissive than those with lower educational attainments, Americans who had been to college became even less disapproving: between 1988 and 1998 the college educated choosing the “always wrong” response dropped from 53.1 percent to 45.9 percent. However, the large group with only a high school degree registered a much larger decline in disapproval—from 81.0 percent to 59.7 percent—while those with less than a high school degree fell from 89.5 to 78.2 percent. Thus, as hypothesized, educational differentials in attitudes toward homosexuality narrowed, suggesting the diffusion of cultural innovations from the educated “elite” to the less educated segments of the U.S. population.

Third, the effect on disapproval of attending religious services increased over the 1988–98 period. As Figure 2 shows, frequency of worship came increasingly to distinguish the permissive from the disapproving. As hypothesized, those exposed most often to religious teachings, that is, those attending services more than once a week, remained firmly opposed to homosexuality (although they did not increase their opposition in reaction to the societal trend toward less judgmental views of same-sex relations). By contrast, even those attending religious services weekly softened their positions. Consistent with secularization arguments, Americans who attended religious services less often or never registered sharpest declines in disapproval.

Thus people who were younger, less educated, and less religious showed the largest declines in disapproval of same-sex relations from 1988 to 1998. These findings were anticipated based on theories of human development, the cultural diffusion of innovation, and secularism. The significant main effects of time suggest liberalizing period effects at work too.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Whether one considers homosexual, extramarital, premarital, or teen sex, cohort succession had the hypothesized liberalizing effect on sexual attitudes. The decom-
position analysis shows that cohort turnover provided a permissive backdrop for intracohort change. Despite the expectation that intracohort change would dominate cohort turnover as a determinant of attitude change, the results depend on the type of nonmarital sex considered. In the case of premarital sex, there was so little intracohort change that cohort turnover was responsible for the gradual liberalization of views on sex before marriage. On the other hand, consistent with the hypothesis, intracohort change overwhelmed cohort turnover on the attitudes toward extramarital and teen sex. As for homosexuality, when the eras of increasing and decreasing disapproval were analyzed separately, intracohort change proved the most important source of change in attitudes toward same-sex relations.

The sexual revolution in attitudes toward homosexuality is the product of both the incremental permissiveness of cohort succession and the rapid revision of public opinion evidenced within cohorts as they grew older. In the 1988–98 period women, young people, and the better educated were less likely to regard homosexuality as always wrong. Following Inglehart’s (1990) postmaterial thesis, those
predisposed to postmaterial orientations, namely, Americans with higher relative incomes, were also less likely to disapprove. On the other hand, individuals with less secular values (i.e., those who were Protestant Fundamentalists or who attended religious services frequently) were more likely to voice strong disapproval of same-sex relations.

While less judgmental about homosexuality, neither women nor the affluent “postmaterialists” were statistically significant sources of the shift toward more permissive views of same-sex relations. Nor were liberal (i.e., non-Fundamentalist) religious groups. Young people, however, were a significant source of the 1988–98 decrease in condemnation of homosexuality. Consistent with the youthful malleability hypothesis, persons ages eighteen to twenty-eight, showed a sharper drop in disapproval than did their seniors.

As hypothesized, declines in disapproval were sharper for the less educated. This liberalizing effect is distinctly different from the permissive compositional effect on attitudes toward homosexuality resulting from the educational upgrading of the U.S. population as a whole (Loftus 2001). Following a classic pattern of cultural diffusion, permissiveness trickled down from higher status to lower status groups in society, as Lesthaeghe and Surkyn (1988) predict. There is no reason to expect such a 1988–98 change in the effect of education if, as Abrahamson and Inglehart (1995) argue, the association between higher education and liberal values is a spurious one resulting from their distant correlation with an affluent adolescence. The declining educational differentials in attitudes do speak to the “sexual embourgeoisement” thesis of Weinberg and Williams (1980), who hypothesized that the working class would adopt the sexual behavior and values of the middle class. They found relatively little support for the thesis when it was tested with less comparable and representative data than the GSS offers. The GSS, showing top-down diffusion of moral judgments about homosexual behavior, provides intriguing evidence of embourgeoisement, at least in terms of one realm of sexual values.

In keeping with the secularization hypothesis, more secular Americans, as gauged by frequency of attendance at religious services, showed significantly larger declines in disapproval than did more religious Americans. Thus religiosity differentials in attitudes toward homosexuality widened between 1988 and 1998, as religious practice became an even more important determinant of these attitudes. Culture wars over social issues are often attributed to organized religion. Thus it is important to point out that virtually all Americans moved toward less disapproval (although declines were greater for those with little or no participation in religious services). While the small minority who attend services several times a week did not soften their stern judgments of homosexuality, neither did they stiffen their moral opposition in the face of growing permissiveness of public opinion.

Although the analysis highlights the groups and mechanisms of attitude change, the historical period influences that triggered shifts in public opinion invite speculation. Because disapproval of both extramarital and homosexual sex increased in the late 1980s, Scott (1998) suggests that the AIDS crisis was responsible for a growing condemnation of permissive sexual behavior. Certainly, as understanding of AIDS increased and fears abated in the 1990s, discourse on homosexuality
shifted from the public health threat of unsafe sexual practices to civil rights issues such as employment discrimination and hate crimes (Jenness and Broad 1997). Although news magazine coverage of homosexuals emphasized promiscuous lifestyles in the 1980s, the top story in the 1990s was gays in military service (Bennett 2000).

Paradoxically, the increasing disapproval of homosexual behavior in the 1970s and 1980s ran counter to long-run trends in other attitudes toward gays and lesbians. Support for the civil liberties of homosexuals—namely, their rights to make a speech, teach at a college, or be the author of a book kept at the public library—increased since the early 1970s (Loftus 2000; Smith 1994). Americans two-to-one would have allowed homosexuals to speak in the 1970s. By 1998 support ran five to one. Americans’ support for the civil liberties of homosexuals suggests that there was fertile ground for greater acceptance of homosexuality once it was framed as a matter of civil rights and fair treatment.

Being large, rapid, and unanticipated, the 1988–98 decline in disapproval of homosexuality amounts to a new revolution in sexual attitudes comparable to the 1960s when widespread opposition to premarital sex suddenly buckled, heralding the sexual revolution (Smith 1990b; Thornton 1989). Of course, opposition to nonmarital sex is not likely to disappear any time soon. The fact that many Americans maintain strong religious commitments is a brake slowing the liberalizing influence of higher education and cohort succession (Scott 1998). If homosexuality follows the course of premarital sexual attitudes, we might look for a long, slow decline in disapproval to follow the recent and revolutionary decrease in the disapproval of same-sex relations.

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REFERENCES


