



Connecticut Daily Campus

By Kenneth Sherrill and Alan Yang

Americans' changing attitudes toward homosexuals and homosexuality indicate not only systematic victories for the movement for lesbian and gay rights but also the American political system's success at integrating new minorities. Surely one test of a democratic political system is its ability to incorporate its least liked and least powerful members into full citizenship.

Viewed from this perspective, the history of the American system's increasing incorporation of gay people into full citizenship might, at century's end, be viewed as yet another triumph of pluralist democracy in the United States. Of course, this process is far from complete. Nevertheless, the changes over the past half-century are dramatic and not likely to be reversed.

This success would not have been possible without a grass roots political and social movement that appealed to the conscience of the nation by demonstrating the disjuncture between the dominant norms of a democratic political system—fairness, equality, and respect for all citizens—and the treatment accorded to members of a stigmatized minority group—homosexuals—by dominant groups in society. In 1950, lesbian and gay Americans were in no sense of the

word democratic citizens of the US. In most of the country, homosexuality was grounds for forcible separation from society into prisons or hospitals. It was a disqualification for employment in the public service and for entry into professions such as law and medicine. In public discourse, when homosexuality was discussed at all, it was discussed as a perversion, an affliction, a weakness of character, and a threat to the American way of life and our nation's security.

By the early to mid-1970s, gays and lesbians had emerged as an identity-based interest group. There were also clear signs that the lesbian and gay movement had arrived as a broad social change movement, perhaps as a consequence of other 1960s mass movements which successively challenged broad structures of the state and economy as well as previously unquestioned social norms. The decade of the 1970s saw the beginnings of gays' inclusion in at least one of the nation's major political parties, the introduction of non-discrimination legislation in Congress, and a number of anti-discrimination laws passed at the local and municipal level. Also important were the establishment of community advocacy organizations, such as the National Gay Task Force (which later became the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force) and the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the emergence of geographically concentrated enclaves, primarily in major urban areas. Affecting public perceptions at the mass level during this period was a marked increase in representations of homosexuality and gay life in the mainstream media and popular culture.

Kenneth Sherrill is chair of the department of political science, Hunter College, CUNY, and Alan Yang is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of political science, Columbia University.

Since the late 1970s, the movement for gay and lesbian rights has faced a conservative backlash—exemplified by Anita Bryant’s “Save Our Children” campaign and the Briggs initiative in California—as well as the devastation wrought by the AIDS epidemic. Even so, at the end of the 1990s, the movement is irrevocably on the American political agenda. Changing public opinion data over this time period indicate that Americans may now have a critical mass of increasingly unbiased information on which to draw when reasoning about and evaluating questions of homosexuality and lesbian and gay rights.

In 1951, Harold Lasswell examined the values and attitudes that are needed in the mass public for democracy to thrive in the face of various challenges from totalitarian states and authoritarian urges. Lasswell, who is widely regarded as one of the pioneering figures of modern political science, emphasized in his work the role of psychological factors in political life. His theoretical framework helps us understand how those who were once viewed as pariahs or as strangers to the law can come to be regarded as equals by their fellow citizens. Americans’ shifting attitudes toward gay people can be understood by examining three dimensions that, according to Lasswell, typically characterize attitudes of citizens in democracies toward one another: affection, respect, and rectitude.

Affection goes to the core of shared membership in a democratic political system. The democratic ideal, in Lasswellian terms, “emphasizes the desirability of congenial human relationships, and emphasizes the capacity of human beings for entering into such relationships.... There needs to be equality of opportunity for the exercise of affection as a means of achieving affection... [and the] scope of affection... needs to be as wide as humanity.”¹

Fortunately, we have longitudinal data to apply to several aspects of this notion. First, of course, is the National Election Studies (NES) feeling thermometer. This survey device asks respondents to imagine a thermometer that measures their feelings toward others, on which 100 degrees represents the warmest of feelings and zero represents the coldest.

In those studies in which the groups assessed include homosexuals, gay people remain the most systematically and intensely disliked of all of the groups measured.² However, attitudes toward gays have warmed over the past decade. The average feeling “warmed” from 30 degrees in 1984 (and 29 degrees in 1988) to 46 degrees in 1998, but we see a remarkable concentration of Americans who report having the coldest possible feelings toward gay people—zero degrees. Roughly one-third of the public reported this frigid response in both the 1984 and 1988 NES; and while this figure has declined

substantially (to 16% in 1998), the magnitude of the complete lack of affection toward gays and lesbians is far from negligible, particularly when compared to the proportion of Americans who reported having the warmest possible feelings that same year—a mere 6% at 100 degrees.

The feeling thermometer data also give us a handle on the disjuncture between changing public opinion and a continuing failure of the government to move to end discrimination against gay people. In 1998, the median warm feeling (values above 50 degrees) was 70 degrees, while the median cold feeling (values below 50 degrees) was 10 degrees. We can expect that the more intense the belief, the more likely the holder is to act on the belief. Thus, even though public support for protecting the rights of gay people is growing, we are faced, on issue after issue, with an apathetic majority deferring to an intense minority—a classic example of how one intense minority can prevent the formation of public policies designed to protect the rights of another despised minority.

One explanation for the declining intensity of negative affect can be found by examining attitudes toward homosexuality *per se*. Here, too, we see dramatic changes over the past decade. When asked by Gallup whether “homosexuality should be considered an acceptable alternative lifestyle or not,” the proportion of Americans who chose “acceptable” rose from one-third (34% in 1982) to one-half (50% in 1999).³ Similarly, Yankelovich Partners found that the percentage of Americans who feel “lifestyles... such as homosexual relationships” are “not acceptable at all” dropped from a clear majority in 1978 (59%) to a clear minority in 1998 (33%).

The percentage saying that sexual relations between consenting adults of the same sex is always wrong has dropped substantially as well, after over a decade at a high level (between 70 and 75% chose “always wrong” in nine separate surveys spanning from 1980 to 1991; by 1996, that figure had dropped to 56%). The drop, however, is not uniform among all population groups. Notably, there has been no significant drop among Republicans or conservatives; attitudes have shifted most among Democrats, independents and liberals.⁴

In a democratic political system, the mutual affection of citizens should be reflected in mutual respect, although one can be present without the other. To Lasswell, “individuals deserve respect because they are human.... [No] deprivations are imposed which are incompatible with the merit of the individual as a human being.... [No] discriminations are practiced.”⁵ In other words, we may not like some folks, but they’ve got the same rights as everyone else. Increasingly, this is the view Americans have toward gay people.

While Americans are not prepared to show moral approval to

homosexuality, they are—by increasingly sizable majorities—prepared to extend equal rights. On the question of support for the idea of non-discrimination in employment, the evidence is clear: overwhelming majorities are supportive, particularly over the past decade. When asked whether “homosexuals should or should not have equal rights in terms of job opportunities,” Gallup reports 83% of Americans favored equal rights in 1999 (three separate surveys done between 1993 and 1996 showed support between 81 and 84%), a substantial increase from a baseline of 56%, reported by Gallup in 1977. Gallup’s numbers are confirmed in a Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) trend that asks whether there “should or should not be... equal rights for gays in terms of job opportunities” (83 to 84% supported equal rights in three separate surveys between 1996 and 1998).

In another PSRA series, however, a gap between support for the principle of non-discrimination and a means of implementation is apparent. The public is evenly divided on the question of “...special legislation to guarantee equal rights for gays” (47% in favor, 46% opposed in a July 1998 PSRA survey). It is worth noting that the use of the phrase “special legislation...” in the question wording is particularly important in the case of lesbian and gay rights, as the trope of “equal rights, not special rights” has been frequently (and successfully) employed by opponents of lesbian and gay civil rights.

When the battle over lesbian and gay rights becomes particularly salient in the course of the nation’s affairs—as seen in the ongoing debate over the right of lesbians and gays to legal marriage—the effect on mass opinion seems to be an awakening of a sense of equity. For instance, in the aftermath of the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act (1996), it seems that although Americans remain opposed to same-sex marriage, they support the rights of lesbians and gays to receive certain tangible benefits that accrue to legally married couples. For example, a clear majority—58 to 59%—agreed in two recent PSRA surveys that there should be “health insurance and other employee benefits for gay spouses.” Similarly, a majority of the public supports “equal rights for gays in terms of Social Security benefits for gay spouses” in three PSRA surveys done between 1994 and 1998 (52 to 57%). Majority support also exists for “equal rights for gays in terms of inheritance rights for gay spouses,” with between 59 and 62% in favor in four PSRA surveys done between 1994 and 1998. As these data show, Americans support equality of tangible benefits even while opposing symbolic equality.

Lasswell’s notion of rectitude adds more of a moral dimension to these attitudes but makes clear that there must be equality of opportunity for inclusion among the righteous in a democratic society. He writes, “The sense of responsibility and the standards of right conduct are applied in private judgments and in the private life of members of the

community. There is access on the basis of merit to the values which influence the conceptions and application of rectitude standards.”⁶

This brings us once again, of course, to the issue of same-sex marriage. Clearly, in a democratic society, citizens would support the right of people to act responsibly and to use the standards of right conduct in their private lives on the basis of merit. How could this not include the right of households to enter into legal relationships that codify mutual rights and responsibilities? Inclusion and acceptance of lesbians and gays into existing institutions of the family and marriage comprise a particularly salient issue for the lesbian and gay movement at century’s end. The implications of increased recognition and respect for nontraditional family forms are clear at both the symbolic and practical level. The potentially transformative effect of reconfiguring ideas of legitimate family arrangements to include same-sex couples (with or without children) underlines just how important the symbolic dimension of the battle over lesbian and gay families is. The American people, while willing to extend certain tangible benefits attached to legal marriage, have been far more resistant to the notion that lesbian and gay families should be accorded the same public and legal recognition as heterosexual families. In four PSRA surveys done between 1996 and 1998, support for “adoption rights for gay spouses” ranged from 36 to 40% (though there is some evidence that support has grown from a baseline of 29% in 1994). Support for “marriages between homosexual men and between homosexual women [being] recognized as legal by the law” ranged from 27 to 31% in four Yankelovich surveys conducted between 1992 and 1998, while PSRA showed a range of

“Americans support equality of tangible benefits even while opposing symbolic equality.”

support for “equal rights for gays in terms of legally-sanctioned gay marriages” of 29 to 35% in four surveys done between 1994 and 1998.

These data are striking in the context of the increasing and often substantial majority support for the equal rights of lesbian and gay citizens. Inclusion and equality in this particular institution—marriage and the family—however, might be seen as different in kind when compared to inclusion and equality in the polity or sectors of the economy. For lesbians and gays, the effects of centuries of moral disapprobation toward homosexuality via organized religion, natural-law based assumptions of legitimate family and relational arrange-

ments, and the insidious stereotype of homosexuals as corrupters of children, work in tandem with existing social, political and economic arrangements that reproduce heterosexuality (and heterosexual family forms), to reinforce existing ideas about what constitutes a legitimate marriage and family. While these same structural and ideological institutions serve to marginalize gayness in a general sense, they are less relevant when thinking about equality as an economic agent—in terms of employment non-discrimination, for example.

Finally, we come to anti-gay violence and hate crimes. While violent crime has decreased in recent years, hate crimes have been on the rise. Lesbians and gay men are the most likely people, per capita, to be the victims of such crimes. Further, hate crimes against gay people tend to be disproportionately violent. The brutal and highly-publicized 1998 killing of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming shocked the conscience of the nation and has led to numerous efforts to counter or lessen such violence. For our current purposes, we note that the explanation most often given by perpetrators of hate crimes for their behavior is that they were enforcing social norms. One can most readily conjecture that this most extreme form of mandating standards of conduct is most likely to occur when challenged by what Lasswell called the “sense of collective responsibility for perfecting a free society.”⁷ Indeed, this country has a long history of individuals and collectivities using violence and murder to enforce existing social norms, particularly with regard to race. The effects of extralegal violence in the form of the southern lynch mob went far beyond local and particular administration of vigilante justice; this type of barbarism served to perpetuate white dominance and existing racial hierarchies and roles. Similarly, anti-gay violence, if left unchecked, might be thought of as society’s way of legitimizing extralegal methods of enforcing norms of compulsory heterosexuality and gender conformism.

In fact, public opinion data suggest that a clear majority of the public sees hate crimes against lesbians and gays as a matter of public concern. In a 1998 Yankelovich poll, a large majority—76%—supported “a federal law that would mandate the same treatment (i.e., increased penalties for people who commit crimes against blacks or other minorities out of prejudice against them) for people who commit crimes against homosexuals out of prejudice against them.” This statistic suggests that a majority of Americans views anti-gay hate crimes at least as seriously as hate crimes against other minority groups, which in turn suggests that the lesbian and gay movement has at least partially succeeded in transforming lesbians and gays into an intelligibly recognized minority group—one among many in a pluralist system that has over time been able to incorporate new collective identities into the political process.

On the other hand, if hate crimes against lesbians and gays can be seen as motivated by a need to enforce traditional norms pertaining to gender and sexuality, then it is clear that in some cases, these same norms continue to hold broad sway over the mass public. While Americans increasingly support the proposition that lesbians and gays should have equal rights, the absolute levels of disapproval and dislike (as opposed to the relative, which do show liberalization) both reflect and promulgate a climate of fear and distance that exists within pockets of straight America.

If we have read our data correctly, Americans’ attitudes toward the rights of gay people have moved dramatically in recent years in the direction of understanding the collective responsibility to perfect a free society. This sense of collective responsibility, however, is not yet deeply felt. Society retains significant outcroppings that serve to enforce traditional norms—with force and violence or by limiting rights if necessary—as they seek to prevent the developing consensus that we must further perfect a free society. The history of advances in civil rights and civil liberties in the United States is one of long periods of quiet followed by sudden surges of progress. The American people’s changing attitudes toward homosexuals and homosexuality may presage a period of progress, but it is quite likely there will be intense conflict surrounding efforts to bring about this progress.

Endnotes

¹Harold D. Lasswell, *The Political Writings of Harold D. Lasswell* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1951), pp. 477-78.

²See Kenneth Sherrill, “The Political Power of Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, September 1996.

³See Alan S. Yang, “Trends: Attitudes Towards Homosexuality,” *Political Science Quarterly* 1997, Vol. 61, No. 3, pp. 477-507.

⁴See Alan S. Yang, “From Wrongs to Rights: Public Opinion on Gay and Lesbian Americans’ Moves to Equality: 1973 to 1999.” Publication of the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Washington, DC, second edition, December 1999.

⁵Lasswell, *Political Writings*, pp. 476-77.

⁶Lasswell, p. 477.

⁷Lasswell, pp. 476-77.