

# Opinion Backlash and Public Attitudes: Are Political Advances in Gay Rights Counterproductive?

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*One long-recognized consequence of the tension between popular sovereignty and democratic values like liberty and equality is public opinion backlash, which occurs when individuals recoil in response to some salient event. For decades, scholars have suggested that opinion backlash impedes policy gains by marginalized groups. Public opinion research, however, suggests that widespread attitude change that backlash proponents theorize is likely to be rare. Examining backlash against gays and lesbians using a series of online and natural experiments about marriage equality, and large-sample survey data, we find no evidence of opinion backlash among the general public, by members of groups predisposed to dislike gays and lesbians, or from those with psychological traits that may predispose them to lash back. The important implication is that groups pursuing rights should not be dissuaded by threats of backlash that will set their movement back in the court of public opinion.*

As the value most closely associated with democratic governance, popular sovereignty is frequently used to guide and validate elites' policy choices (Barclay and Flores 2014; Burstein 2014). The emphasis on popular rule creates tension, however, when it conflicts with other democratic values like liberty and equality (e.g., Dahl 1971).

One long-recognized consequence of this tension is public opinion backlash where, fearing a loss of power or change in status quo, individuals recoil in response to some event. Because backlash may alter the political environment, it threatens current and future policy advances (e.g., Haider-Markel 2010).

While the concept of an angry public lashing back and paradoxically making it more difficult for a minority group to achieve their political objectives presents a powerful narrative, the concept of backlash is under-theorized. In some cases, the term is used to refer to a sharply negative change in public opinion in response to policy change, while in others, backlash merely reflects actions (e.g., protests, voting) taken by those who have always held negative opinions toward the group. Accounts of backlash vary in the roles they ascribe to different actors (e.g., masses vs. elites) and the manner in which backlash is manifest (e.g., opinion vs. behavior). Consequently, the differing practical uses

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of the term make it difficult to assess how, when, and among whom backlash occurs, if it occurs at all.

This article develops a clear definition of backlash and is among the first empirical investigations of public opinion backlash. We are the first to empirically investigate the effects of public opinion backlash resulting from institutional policy change using both experimental and observational evidence. Our results call the backlash narrative into question, as we find no evidence of backlash by the public as a whole or among relevant constituent groups. Further, we show that plausible alternative explanations for our results, such as backlash occurring only early in an issue's life cycle, or among particular data sets that are not nationally representative, cannot explain our findings. Our results thus contribute to the academic literature on minority politics, social movements, law and society, and public opinion, and they offer proscriptive advice to minority rights advocates.

## Defining Backlash

Backlash has traditionally been described as a reaction by members of dominant groups to any challenge to their sense of importance, influence, values, or status in which they seek to reverse or stop change through political means (Lipset and Raub 1970). The idea is that negative reactions to changes in the status quo are motivated by the attempt to maintain existing power arrangements (Sanbonmatsu 2008). It is therefore unsurprising that most references to backlash examine minority groups struggling to gain policy. Negative reactions to policy initiatives by disadvantaged groups include examples of backlash against women (Zagarri 2007), Latinos (e.g., Preuhs 2007), gays and lesbians (Fejes 2008), and African Americans (e.g., Bratton 2002). These earlier studies rely on speculation of the existence of backlash or find modest one-time observational evidence that backlash occurs, but they do not actually test it or operationalize it in the way that we do. We add to this literature not only through establishing a clear definition of backlash, but also through a rigorous and comprehensive test of the concept.

Our central interest lies in investigating whether policy advances lead to opinion backlash by the general public or groups of citizens. Beyond its theoretically important role in modern conceptions of democratic governance, mass opinion backlash is important because of the central role that public opinion plays in instigating and validating public policy change. Simply put, if the public turns against some policy in response to a group's attempt to advance its agenda, then the policy is not only less likely to

pass, but it may also signal elites that it is in their interest to support an opposing agenda.

Fear of backlash may also serve to temper the enthusiasm of supporters of minority rights. Speaking in anticipation of court rulings on gay rights, for instance, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg has repeatedly argued that "heavy-handed judicial intervention . . . appears to have provoked, not resolved, conflict" on the issue of abortion (Ginsburg 1985, 385). While substantial empirical work refutes the idea of opinion backlash following *Roe v. Wade* (e.g., Greenhouse and Siegel 2011) and draws distinctions between abortion and gay rights attitudes (Egan 2013), if fear of backlash causes policy makers to refrain from extending rights to minority groups or encourages the Court to issue rulings that lack the scope or force needed to protect them, it impedes their full incorporation in society.

Opinion backlash lies at the heart of explanations of a wide range of outcomes. Paul Frymer (1999) argues that Democratic politicians avoid pursuing policies preferred by African Americans for fear of galvanizing backlash by the white median voter. Similarly, scholars commonly attribute the inception of the Right to Life movement to the Supreme Court taking a strong position in *Roe v. Wade* (e.g., Klarman 2012). Still others suggest that attempts to pass gun control regulations and expanding laws to protect the disabled are stymied by politicians' fears of opinion backlash (e.g., Healy 2013; Krieger 2003). Public opinion is a significant predictor of Democratic legislators' opposition to gay marriage, as indicated by their support for the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act (Bishin and Smith 2013). In this way, public backlash may not just prevent the policy from being achieved, but it may also embolden a group's opponents and lead to the enactment of policies that make the group worse off than before it began. Consequently, public opinion backlash has potentially important practical implications for traditionally disadvantaged groups and their attempts to make policy progress.

The definition we offer of opinion backlash thus captures the notion that some event causes a negative opinion reaction that adversely affects the group promoting the policy. We define *opinion backlash* as a large, negative, and enduring shift in opinion against a policy or group that occurs in response to some event that threatens the status quo. Backlash may be evidenced by changes in any of several aspects of opinion, including policy positions, the intensity of feeling about an issue, or the attitudes expressed toward members of the group.

Each of these three characteristics has important implications for policy. If backlash impedes policy, then the opinion reaction to these proposals must be sufficiently

negative to impede the group's ability to obtain policy. Since the policies in question often speak to fundamental rights of minority groups, we expect that opinion swings must be large enough to at least garner the majority support of intense groups or of public opinion generally on the issue in order to attract policy makers' interest.

Taking or changing positions on contentious issues about which opinions are intensely held is costly for elected officials because doing so antagonizes people on at least one side of the issue (e.g., Bishin 2009). Politicians, therefore, may be reluctant to do so absent confidence that such opinion changes endure long enough to provide an electoral benefit. For decades, for example, both Democratic and Republican politicians in south Florida took positions supporting the Cuban travel ban and trade embargo. It was not until well after evidence emerged that opinion among the Cuban community had splintered that Democrats began to take positions opposing restrictions on travel and trade (e.g., Bishin and Klofstad 2012).

Recall that part of the value of public opinion in a democratic society lies in the legitimacy it provides those who advocate decisions based on it. If opinion is fleeting, policy makers are less able to make appeals based on opinion legitimacy or to converge around the issue and spend the time required to oppose the group's objectives. Our definition of backlash both reflects the substantive concept in a way consistent with its common usage and allows for fairly clear tests of its components. Specifically, it is straightforward to evaluate whether opinion has shifted negatively following some event, whether that shift was large, and whether it endures.

## What Stimulates Backlash?

Any actor or action that is sufficiently salient and challenges the status quo may cause backlash, including events ranging from court rulings, executive orders, or legislation (e.g., Fobanjong 2001) to the election to office of members of the traditionally marginalized groups (e.g., Haider-Markel 2010). Past research speculates that salience is a key component in triggering backlash, as virtually every case of backlash cited in either the academic literature or the press follows some high-profile event (e.g., Barclay and Flores 2014; Flores 2015).

Our central interest lies in investigating mass public opinion backlash in order to assess the extent to which majority opinion might shift against the group. Generally, two perspectives guide expectations about mass opinion backlash. The *opinion stability perspective* is grounded in the notion that individuals' attitudes are notoriously resistant to change, the central implication being that opinion backlash should be rare. In contrast, the *popular*

*opinion perspective* holds that on any controversial issue, the public as a whole, or some groups within it, may recoil at challenges to the status quo, leading to backlash among those who either care strongly about the issue or who feel most threatened by the change the events represent.

The opinion stability perspective builds on the finding that attitude change is a function of a multistep process that requires that an individual "receive" and then "accept" information (e.g., McGuire 1968; Zaller 1993). While theories differ slightly on how change occurs once the message is both received and accepted, whether the message is congruent or incongruent with existing beliefs appears to mediate whether the message is likely to be received. These studies suggest that the attitude change that underlies backlash should be relatively rare. Consider that those with well-formed beliefs on an issue are unlikely to accept arguments that are incongruent with their prevailing attitudes. Instead, those with firmly held views are likely to seek out information that reinforces those already strong views (Lebo and Cassino 2007; Redlawsk 2002). Conversely, while those lacking well-formed attitudes are more likely to accept new information and therefore change their (poorly formed) views, they are unlikely to receive new information in the first place (McGuire 1968; Zaller 1993). Consequently, neither those with well nor poorly formed views are likely to lash back.

The popular opinion perspective, in contrast, suggests that backlash is driven by those who are negatively predisposed to the group or issue. Generally, studies of backlash typically seek to identify social groups that either hold or are predisposed to take negative views toward a group to see how they respond. Those sensitive to challenges to the status quo, and therefore most likely to lash back, hold negative attitudes that emanate from psychological sources, political engagements or attachments, or sources relating to their social group identifications. Here, the salient event serves to galvanize negative predispositions into negative opinion by heightening the sense of threat, loss, or change to the status quo among social groups. Alternatively, the fact that those with strong opinions on a question seek to find additional confirmatory evidence might suggest that their opinions get stronger as a result of exposure to such circumstances (e.g., Redlawsk 2002). While we are agnostic about the precise psychological mechanisms that trigger backlash, this perspective suggests that backlash should occur in response to salient events that threaten an individual's satisfaction with the status quo.

Recent work developing integrated threat theory (ITT) shows that the four prominent explanations for outgroup antipathy are interrelated (Riek, Mania, and

Gaertner 2006; Stephan and Stephan 2000). Realistic group conflict theory holds that intergroup competition over resources motivates negative attitudes (Sherif et al. 1961). The resources in question can be tangible (e.g., money, jobs, physical security) or deal with issues of power, influence, or control (e.g., policy influence). Negative attitudes may also be a product of one's holding values and beliefs that conflict with the outgroup, thereby creating a symbolic threat to members of the dominant group (e.g., Kinder and Sears 1981). The theory of symbolic threat holds that negative attitudes emanate from the view that outgroup members violate important norms. Still another perspective, the intergroup anxiety thesis, holds that uncertainty about how to behave toward outgroup members leads to anxiety that results in hostility, a desire to avoid contact, and ultimately in negative attitudes toward group members (Plant and Devine 2003). Finally, the theory of stereotype threat holds that stereotypes create negative expectations for outgroup members' behavior, which cause negative attitudes (Stephan and Stephan 1996).

Psychological triggers for negative attitudes are not exclusively caused by threat, but they may occur more generally as a function of an individual's social outlook. Theories of authoritarianism and social dominance orientation (SDO) both hold that perceptions of individuals or groups are driven by views about their social position. Authoritarianism reflects a desire to defend a notion of order and sameness, which leads to a constellation of intolerant attitudes toward those who challenge this order (Stenner 2005). Similarly, SDO is rooted in the notion that society is organized by hierarchies, and one's SDO describes the desire that one's group be superior to other groups (Pratto et al. 1994). Both authoritarianism and SDO are highly associated with attitudes toward groups and social and political opinions (e.g., Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Pratto et al. 1994).

Taken together, evidence from the opinion stability perspective and the popular opinion perspective offers conflicting expectations about opinion backlash. The opinion stability perspective suggests that backlash should be rare, and to the extent it occurs, it should be seen only among those with weak or nonexistent attitudes. The popular opinion perspective, in contrast, suggests that those already holding negative attitudes or those who are negatively predisposed toward the group but lacking deeply held attitudes are most likely to lash back.

Existing research on backlash against gays and lesbians reflects these conflicting expectations. While several scholars illustrate or predict antigay backlash (Egan, Persily, and Wallsten 2008; Klarman 2012), the most comprehensive analysis of opinion over time finds that opinion in the states becomes more, rather

than less, favorable following changes in law pertaining to gay rights (Barclay and Flores 2014; Flores 2015). Besides Fontana and Braman's (2012) innovative work examining citizens' preferences about, and confidence in, the role of the Court versus Congress on gay marriage and gun control, all research on opinion backlash has been observational rather than experimental, making it difficult to evaluate the extent to which salient events pertaining to gay rights cause antigay opinion backlash.

## Gay Rights and Backlash

Civil rights for gays and lesbians became a salient dimension of political discourse in the early 1970s (Haider-Markel and Meier 2003). By the late 1970s, opposition to gay rights helped incorporate conservative Christians into the Republican Party (Karol 2009). In particular, the fight over Miami Dade County's nondiscrimination ordinance led to the crystallization of a nationwide movement against gay rights (Fejes 2008). While the recent debate over lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights has occurred against a backdrop of steadily improving attitudes toward the LGBT community (e.g., Flores 2015, 2015; Lax and Phillips 2009a, 2009b), gays and lesbians still face significant opposition (e.g., Coffman, Coffman, and Ericson 2013; D'Emilio 2006; Haider-Markel, Joslyn, and Kniss 2000; Haider-Markel and Meier 2003; Sherrill 1996; C. Smith 2007; M. Smith 2008). Discrimination against gays and lesbians is widespread across a variety of policy areas, ranging from employment, partners' health benefits and retirement, to adoption. Consequently, actions that extend gay rights seem likely to provide precisely the type of stimulus necessary to examine opinion backlash.

Today much of the opposition to gay rights is concentrated among religious groups. Religious variables, for instance, better predict attitudes toward gays and lesbians than do demographics like race and ethnicity (Abrajano 2010; Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006). In particular, research shows that white Evangelical Protestants—the “born again”—are the staunchest political opponents of gay rights (Fejes 2008; Lugg 1998). The incorporation of the religious right into the Republican Party has, in turn, led to the widespread promulgation of antigay legislation nationwide (Burack 2008). These findings suggest that white Evangelical Protestants are the group most likely to respond to events that precipitate backlash.

## Expectations and Hypotheses

Our central interest lies in examining whether and under what conditions opinion backlash occurs among the mass

public. In addition to examining mass opinion change, we are also interested in whether backlash is more likely or larger among subsets of the population. The popular opinion perspective suggests that backlash should occur among those who, for a variety of reasons, may hold negative predispositions or attitudes toward gays and lesbians that become activated when confronted by a salient event. These range from those who express more negative attitudes to those who have predispositions that have not yet been translated into attitudes. In contrast, the opinion stability perspective suggests that backlash is unlikely to occur at all, but those who lack firm party attachments, such as Independents, or those with low levels of political sophistication should be most susceptible since they are most likely to “accept” the new information.

We can operationalize these hypotheses more specifically. The popular opinion perspective implies that, first, as exposure to events that make gay rights salient increases, attitudes toward gays and lesbians should become sharply more negative among those who score highly on indicators of psychological threat and SDO, and those with strongly negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians (i.e., Evangelicals). The opinion stability perspective holds that if opinion backlash occurs at all, it is most likely to occur among those with weak partisan attachments or low levels of political sophistication. Scholars offer a variety of ways opinion backlash might be manifest, such as attitudes about policy, the strength of feeling about that policy, or these negative attitudes “spilling over” by affecting views of the group advocating the policy. Specifically, we should see negative, large, and enduring shifts in opinions for the relevant groups.

## Data and Methods

Fundamentally, opinion backlash is instigated by an individual’s response to changes in any number of a variety of dimensions of the status quo. In order to rigorously test these hypotheses, we begin by using an experiment employing a single factorial design with the conditions (five levels) seen in Table 1 to detect opinion change among the masses and relevant groups. We assess the effects of exposure to information about gays and lesbians (a short excerpt from a news article) on attitudes about same-sex marriage and LGBT Americans relative to a baseline condition that includes no information about gays and lesbians. After exposing subjects to one of five randomly assigned experimental conditions, we then assess their attitudes using a posttest instrument.

These conditions alter whether a subject is exposed to gay rights issues in the context of the legislature passing

a law, the court making the same issue legal, a public referendum passing the law, a news story highlighting gays and lesbians that is unrelated to policy (or institutions), or a news story about gun control that does not relate to gays and lesbians in any way. Because we are interested in detecting antigay backlash rather than conservative backlash, our baseline Condition 1 presents a treatment in which a liberal policy is enacted in the absence of exposure to LGBT content.<sup>1</sup> In this condition, subjects view a short paragraph about the state supreme court in Oregon banning the carrying of concealed weapons on college campuses. In Condition 2, there is no institutional action or policy change (i.e., court ruling, referendum, or legislative action), but a gay rights issue is presented. This condition allows us to assess change in attitudes based solely on nonpolicy information about gays and lesbians. For this condition, respondents viewed a short paragraph about a gay pride parade in Oregon. In Condition 3, we inform subjects that a legislature passed a pro-gay marriage bill. Similarly, Conditions 4 and 5 present this same issue (framed in the same way), but instead attribute gay marriage becoming legal to the action of the court and a public referendum, respectively.

We assess backlash by comparing the attitudes and intensity of positions on gay marriage and toward gays and lesbians across the conditions. While this experiment does not allow us to assess whether opinion change endures, it does allow us to see whether the large negative shift in attitudes occurs.<sup>2</sup> Opinion and intensity levels that are sharply more negative than those observed in the baseline condition are consistent with backlash. Attitudes and intensity are assessed through the instruments administered in the posttest, which are designed to assess our hypotheses and facilitate comparison to the instruments used in the 2004 National Annenberg Election Study, thereby allowing us to externally validate our experiments.

## Inducing Backlash via Experimentation

We test opinion backlash through an online survey experiment using Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) as a subject recruitment program.<sup>3</sup> Respondents recruited through AMT were given a pretest that asked basic demographic

<sup>1</sup>We find no difference in antigay attitudes between those exposed to the gun control condition and those exposed to an apolitical vignette about a charity run, suggesting that our findings do not stem from a conservative reaction to the baseline condition.

<sup>2</sup>We examine reactions across institutions to ensure they are not the source of observed changes.

<sup>3</sup>Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2012) find AMT to be more representative than in-person convenience or student samples. Further, experimental work demonstrates this procedure is both internally

**TABLE 1 Summary of Experimental Conditions**

Condition	LGBT Content	Policy Related	Institution	Article Headline
1	No	Yes	Courts	Court Overturns Concealed Carry Policy
2	Yes	No	n/a	Thousands Attend Gay Pride Parade
3	Yes	Yes	Legislature	Legislature Overturns Gay Marriage Ban
4	Yes	Yes	Courts	Court Overturns Gay Marriage Ban
5	Yes	Yes	Referendum	Referendum Overturns Gay Marriage Ban

and psychological questions, randomly assigned to one of five possible stimuli (see Appendix A), and a posttest that asked a variety of questions about political knowledge, equality, and attitudes toward gays and lesbians.<sup>4</sup> Overall, we recruited 2,402 respondents (who completed surveys) over 12 days. This period was selected to exploit an interesting natural experiment, as the U.S. Supreme Court rendered decisions on two gay rights–related cases on June 26, 2013. We began the survey on June 7 and stopped the survey on June 17. These participants were randomly assigned to one of the five experimental conditions. We then restarted the survey on June 27, the morning after the Supreme Court released its decisions, and stopped again on June 29. All post-ruling respondents were assigned to our baseline condition (1) and were used only for comparison with those in the pre-ruling baseline condition.

Our five experimental conditions allow for the direct testing of the hypotheses developed in the previous section. Recall that previous literature suggests that backlash should occur among the general public as well as among those who are threatened by changes to the status quo and especially white *Evangelical* Christians.<sup>5</sup> To identify those who are most likely to perceive a sense of loss from policy change on gay marriage, we identify a group that scores highly on an index of questions that ask about perceived threat in the form of realistic group threat, symbolic or stereotype threats, or those that foster anxiety. The specific questions used in each battery are adapted from previous work on the subject and are shown in Appendix C. While we test each of these groups separately (see Appendix D), following integrated threat theory, we present the results for each of these types of threat as a joint group (*High ITT*), which are those scoring

and externally valid. Employing weights on age, race, gender, income, education, and party identification does not alter our results.

<sup>4</sup>A summary and randomization check is included in Appendix B.

<sup>5</sup>Evangelicals (12% of respondents) are defined as self-identified white Evangelical Protestants, and this correlates highly with church attendance, prayer frequency, and identifying as “born again.” However, previous research finds this group does not easily self-identify (Claassen and Povtak 2010).

highly on our combined measures of threat.<sup>6</sup> As backlash may similarly be incited by challenges to one’s status or sense of social hierarchy as articulated by SDO, we identify those scoring in the top third of a combined measure of all questions measuring SDO (*High SDO*).<sup>7</sup>

The opinion stability perspective suggests that opinion backlash should be concentrated among those with poorly crystallized attitudes (Independents or those with low levels of political awareness). Building on Zaller’s (1990) work on political sophistication, we create a political knowledge scale based on the five political knowledge questions asked in our survey to examine this possibility. As about one-quarter of the respondents got three out of the five questions correct, we use this as the cutoff for low political sophisticates. Additionally, we identify those who have weak partisan attachments, whom we label as *Independents*, those who identified themselves as leaning partisans or Independents.<sup>8</sup>

Our primary interest lies in mass policy opinion backlash, which we measure by asking respondents to rate their support for gay marriage on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 4 (*strongly favor*). We also examine issue intensity by asking respondents to indicate how strongly they feel about gay marriage on a scale ranging from 0 (*don’t care at all*) to 10 (*most important issue*).<sup>9</sup> Finally, we examine whether opinion backlash may “spill over” and negatively affect attitudes toward gays and lesbians by using a feeling thermometer, which asks

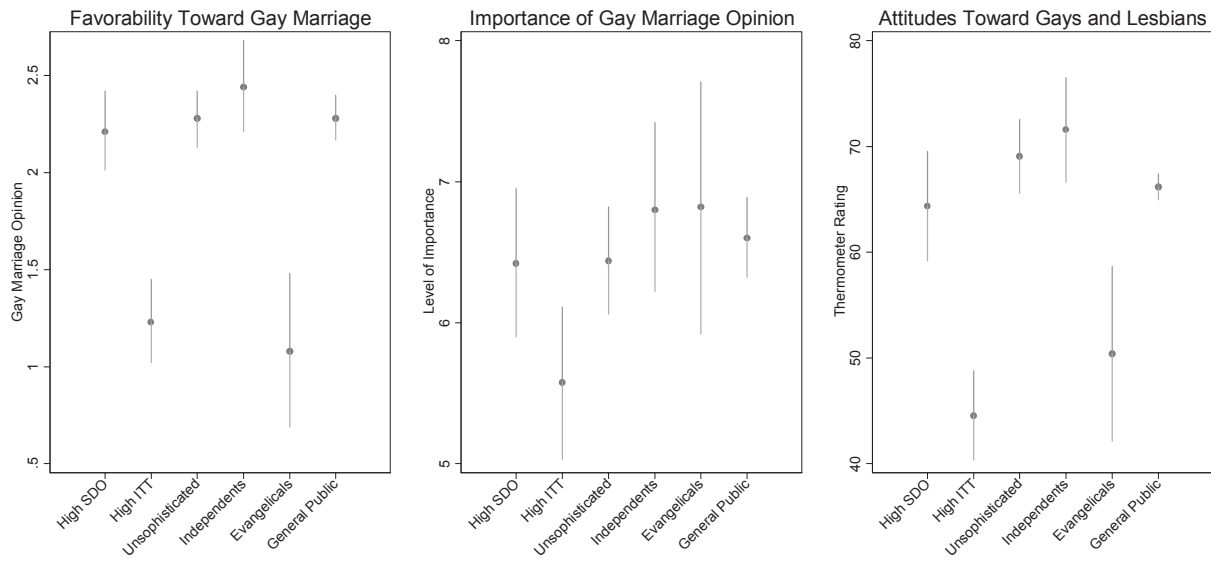
<sup>6</sup>Following convention, we use factor analysis to calculate this variable (see question wording in Appendix C). This combined index produces an eigenvalue of 9.74. We use the top third as the High-ITT group (which is 16% of respondents). Using individualized threat measures produces similar results (Appendix D).

<sup>7</sup>This corresponds to scores above .3028 on the SDO scale (18% of respondents), which ranges from –2 to 2. Resource limits precluded examining authoritarianism.

<sup>8</sup>This group accounts for 28% of the survey population. Our results are robust to alternative specifications in which we include only those identifying as Independent and exclude leaners.

<sup>9</sup>The correlation between support for gay marriage and the importance of the issue is .15.

**FIGURE 1 Attitudes on Gay Marriage, Opinion Intensity by Group, and Thermometer Ratings**



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

respondents to rate gays and lesbians on a scale ranging from 1 to 100.

We begin by examining the face validity of our measures. Specifically, we compare the ratings of gays and lesbians between those scoring highly on the SDO scale, the high ITT group, the politically unsophisticated, Independents, Evangelicals, and the general public across each of our three measures. Figure 1 shows the mean score on each of our three measures (indicated by a dot) for each group, where the lines above and below each dot are the 95% confidence interval around this estimate.

The pattern with respect to gay marriage (leftmost panel) is consistent with our expectations, as those groups most susceptible to backlash (high ITT, high SDO, and Evangelicals) exhibit the lowest support for gay marriage. Here, Evangelicals and the high ITT group exhibit significantly lower support than the other groups. Examination of intensity scores suggests that the high ITT group also claims to feel less strongly about gay marriage, whereas Evangelicals care about gay marriage about as strongly as the public as a whole. While the unsophisticated and those with high SDO also show slightly lower levels of intensity, the difference between their feelings and the public's is quite small. The thermometer ratings seen in the rightmost panel are also consistent with our expectations, as those groups most susceptible to backlash (high ITT, high SDO, and Evangelicals) feel less warmly toward gays and lesbians than do the general public, Independents, and the unsophisticated.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Our results might understate the amount of backlash if white Evangelicals in our sample are more progressive than those in the

### Does Backlash Occur?

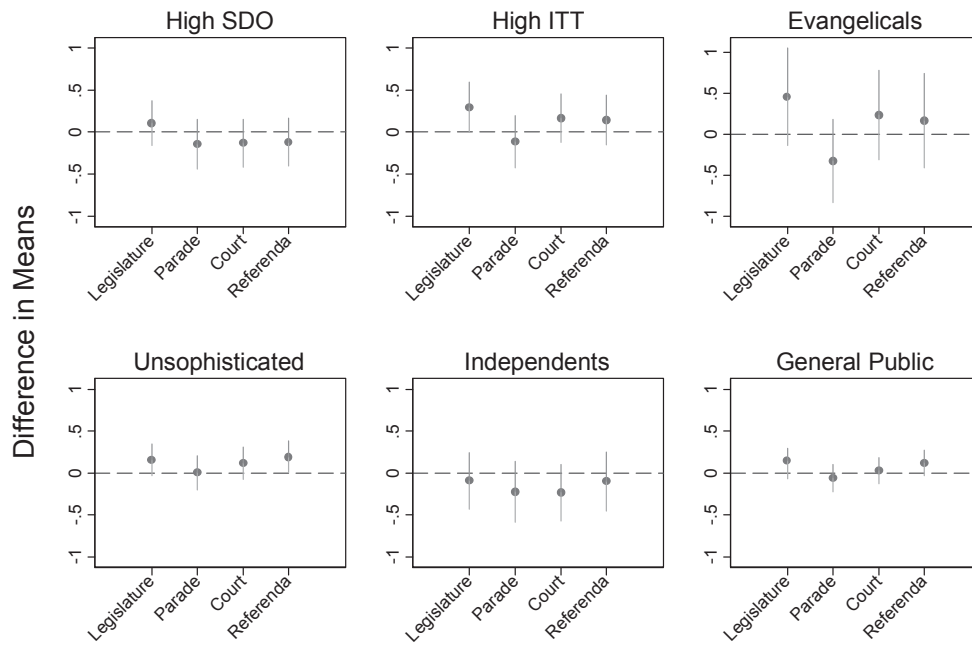
Having validated the measures, we now turn to assessing backlash. Recall that backlash is the negative, large, and enduring shift that occurs in response to a threatened change to the status quo. The online experiments allow us to examine the first two components of our definition—whether we see negative and large shifts in support. We measure backlash by subtracting the mean opinion in the baseline condition from the mean opinion in the treatment condition. Negative scores indicate backlash, whereas positive scores are inconsistent with backlash. The plots in Figure 2 show the difference in mean support for gay marriage.

These results depict little evidence of opinion backlash. Among the general public, the differences are tiny. To the extent that differences exist—they are never statistically significant—they are often very slightly positive. Interestingly, among the high ITT and unsophisticated, attitudes toward gay marriage become statistically significantly *more positive* in response to legislative action and referenda, respectively (see also Garretson 2014a).<sup>11</sup> This

public. We investigated thermometer ratings of gays and lesbians from a recent national sample, the 2008 American National Election Study. The average thermometer score for white Evangelicals in 2008 was 46.5, versus 50.4 in 2013. These similar results suggest that our sample does not likely overstate warmth toward gays and lesbians.

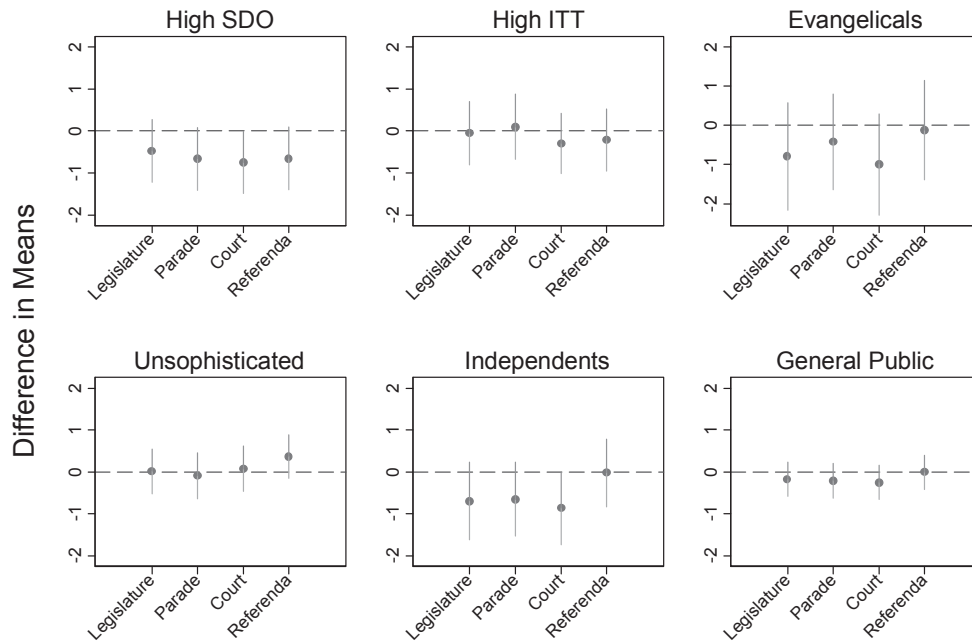
<sup>11</sup>The number of subjects in the control condition, and the power of each test, is presented in Appendix F. Pooling subjects across conditions produces similar results, suggesting that differences among Independents are not due to small samples.

**FIGURE 2 Difference in Support for Gay Marriage (Treatment vs. Control)**



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

**FIGURE 3 Differences in the Intensity of Feelings about Gay Marriage (Treatment vs. Control)**



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.



leads us to conclude that attitudes about gay marriage do not appear to change in response to its legalization. Could backlash occur through shifts in the intensity of feelings about gay marriage? To examine this, in Figure 3 we look at changes in the intensity of opinion for each group. Here, backlash is indicated by positive differences as people come to feel more intensely about the issue, when exposed to the treatments.

The results in Figure 3 are similar to the preceding figure, as changes in intensity of feelings about gay marriage among the general public are tiny and, in contrast to predictions of backlash, often slightly negative. Moreover, the differences are very small—never reaching even 1 point on the 10-point scale—indicating little change in intensity resulting from exposure to LGBT-related information.

Given that we do not see negative shifts in policy support or increases in how much people care about gay marriage, it seems unlikely that exposure to policy news would influence general warmth toward the group. We examine this directly by calculating differences in thermometer ratings across these conditions.

The results in Figure 4 provide little evidence of decreased warmth toward gays and lesbians. In general, the differences in thermometer ratings are very small, suggesting very little difference in attitudes between those exposed and those not. In only two cases (high SDO and Independents) do we see evidence of antigay backlash, and in both cases it is in response not to policy-making, but to the gay pride parade. Shifts in attitudes among the high SDO group and Independents in response to the court ruling are nearly, but not quite, statistically significant ( $p < .06$ ). Particularly noteworthy, in no case do actions by any of the political institutions register even a 10-point shift in attitudes about gays and lesbians.

Taken in combination, these results are remarkable. Contrary to the expectations of the backlash theorists, we are unable to detect negative and large opinion changes consistent with backlash in response to the legalization of gay marriage. We conducted 48 statistical tests and were able to detect opinion change consistent with backlash in only two of them, almost exactly what we would expect due to chance alone. In neither case did opinion change in response to policy change. Among those with high SDO, and among Independents, information about a gay pride parade causes about a 10-point drop in thermometer ratings of gays and lesbians. We find no evidence, however, that legalization of gay marriage (by any means) leads to increased opposition to gay marriage or intensity of feelings about the gay marriage issue by the general public or by any group. Consequently, we reject all of our

hypotheses with respect to the policy stimuli, as we find no evidence consistent with backlash among any of these groups, either in terms of thermometer ratings of gays and lesbians, attitudes toward gay marriage, or in the intensity of feelings about it.

Our experimental results to this point are quite striking—we find no evidence consistent with opinion backlash incited by the courts, the legislature, or referenda, and very limited evidence of backlash resulting from exposure to information about prominent gay public activity. Only Independents and those with high SDO exhibit backlash in the decreased warmth they feel in response to the gay pride parade. Moreover, we see two cases of “frontlash” in which the public appears to become very slightly more favorably disposed toward gay marriage when passed by the legislature. On balance, these results are largely consistent with the opinion stability perspective and raise serious questions about the existence of opinion backlash.

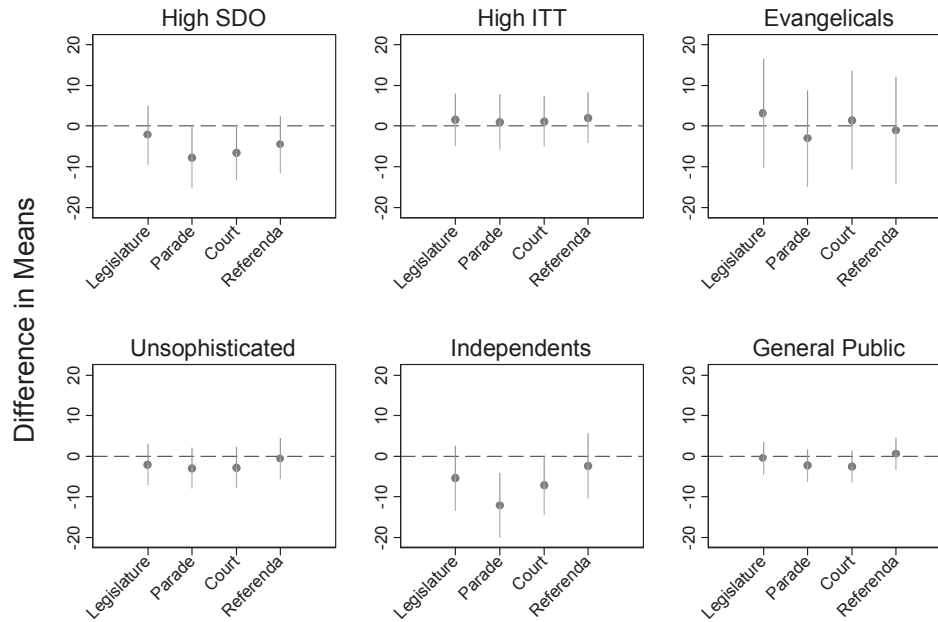
What might explain the absence of mass opinion change central to backlash? We can immediately rule out several possibilities. First, it is possible that our subjects did not fully consider our stimulus. To ensure that our subjects did fully consider the stimulus, we informed them that they were going to be asked questions about it, and we conducted checks to ensure they paid attention and read the vignettes by asking them a question about their content. To ensure our findings do not result from a failure to treat, however, we reestimated our results using only those subjects who correctly answered two questions about the stimulus. Our substantive findings (seen in Appendix E) are unchanged.

A second possibility is that for at least some groups, our tests may not have sufficient statistical power to detect modest negative shifts in opinions, intensity, or thermometer scores. We note, however, that standard power tests (seen in Appendix F) suggest that for most of our analyses, the groups we examine are sufficiently large to allow for 80% power in our tests, thereby meeting conventional levels required to assess significance. One other possibility is that the Mechanical Turk sample was substantially more favorably disposed toward gay marriage than the nation as a whole. However, as we discuss in note 11, our thermometer scores for Evangelicals are comparable to those seen in a national sample.

## A Natural Experiment Using Supreme Court Rulings

Another possibility is that policy made in Oregon either was not relevant to some of the respondents or did not

**FIGURE 4 Differences in Thermometer Ratings of Gays and Lesbians (Treatment vs. Control)**



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

provide the degree of threat to the status quo necessary to evince the sort of reaction that theories of backlash suggest. To address this possibility, we leveraged an opportunity for a second experimental condition. In the summer of 2013, we “arranged” for the U.S. Supreme Court to rule on two prominent issues related to gay rights. The first ruling (*Perry v. Schwarzenegger*) covered Proposition 8, which prevented gays and lesbians in California from marrying, and the second ruling (*United States v. Windsor*) examined the constitutionality of some of the federal government’s restrictions on marriage recognition and limitation of benefits to same-sex married couples in the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). These rulings served to legalize gay marriage in California and made parts of DOMA unconstitutional nationwide, marking a dramatic expansion of gay rights, which should activate a significant threat to the status quo for those susceptible to backlash. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to create a stimulus stronger than a Supreme Court ruling expanding both gay marriage and gay rights.<sup>12</sup>

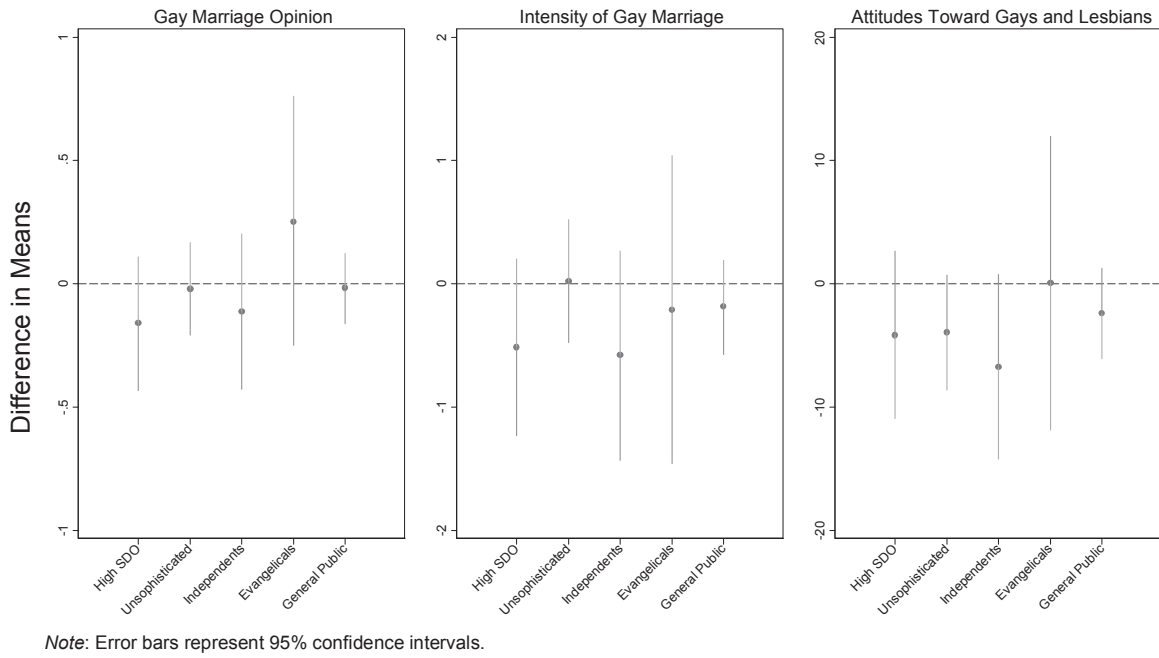
<sup>12</sup>One concern is that subjects unaware of the Court ruling are untreated. This assumes that opinion change is fostered only directly by the Court ruling rather than through the both direct and indirect (e.g., media, social networks) wide range of social actors and actions suggested by the literature. Given our primary interest in detecting opinion change inherent in backlash among the general public, we examine attitude change among the public as a whole.

In order to examine the effects of the hearings and whether they induced opinion change, we readministered our control condition (on gun control) beginning the day following the rulings. Thus, we have an almost perfect natural experiment, allowing us to externally validate our previous results by comparing attitudes before and after the Supreme Court rulings. Specifically, we subtract scores for subjects administered our control condition before the rulings began from the ratings for those administered that same condition after the rulings.<sup>13</sup> Again, backlash is indicated in Figure 5 by differences that are large and negative.

Once again, our results are inconsistent with the predictions of backlash. Despite an extremely strong stimulus with policy implications for citizens in every state, and overwhelming media coverage of the rulings, their magnitude is tiny and we find no difference, before versus after the rulings, in opinion on gay marriage, intensity of feelings about gay marriage, or warmth of feelings. These results are also small in relative terms, as Garretson (2014b), for instance, finds that exposure to a television show with a gay character increases warmth toward gays and lesbians substantially more than any of the stimuli we employ.

<sup>13</sup>We exclude the high ITT group because we are concerned that the Court rulings may have heightened one’s sense of threat or discomfort with gays and lesbians, and hence one’s ITT score.

**FIGURE 5 Differences in Ratings Before and After Supreme Court Rulings (Gun Control Only)**



### Is the Absence of Backlash Due to Changes in Attitudes toward Gays and Lesbians over Time?

The preceding sections suggest that our inability to detect opinion change is not likely the product of failure to treat, use of weak stimuli, or low power in our tests. One additional possibility is that the results stem from the increasingly positive attitudes exhibited by the general public over the last few years. One reason for this may be that backlash only occurs early in an issue’s life cycle. Alternatively, it is possible that despite our validity checks and the extensive research validating the Mechanical Turk sampling process, this sample differs from the American public in some important but unobservable way that affects our results.

We address these possibilities by turning to large-sample surveys conducted at a time when attitudes toward gays and lesbians were much less favorable than they are today. We employ the 2004 National Annenberg Election Studies (NAES), which conducted a representative national public opinion poll at a time when only about 22% of Americans favored granting gays and lesbians the right to marry (Roberts 2004).

The NAES surveyed about 200 respondents daily, between October 2003 and November 2004, on attitudes toward gay groups and on gay rights policy. This survey allows us to assess attitudes before and after events that

might threaten those who are concerned about changes to the status quo. As questions were asked over a long period of time, the duration of opinion change can also be examined. Moreover, because their surveys were randomly administered, the NAES data allow us to approximate a natural experiment by treating subjects as if they were randomly assigned to pre- and posttreatment groups. That is, while we cannot tell whether respondents were aware of these events, our central interest lies in seeing whether, as the public opinion perspective predicts, the attitudes of the general public change following them.

Following the procedure used in the previous section, we examine opinions before and after three salient events during the survey period. On November 18, 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that banning gay marriage violates the state constitution. On February 24, 2004, President George W. Bush announced his support for the Federal Marriage Amendment (FMA), which would have banned gay marriage nationwide. Finally, on March 11, 2004, the California State Supreme Court ordered officials in San Francisco to stop performing gay marriages.<sup>14</sup>

We begin by using the NAES data to examine opinion toward gay marriage. For short, intermittent periods of time, the NAES administered questions that asked

<sup>14</sup>Research suggests backlash is induced by threats as well as changes to the status quo. While the California court ruling affirmed the ban, and Bush expressed support for the FMA, the fact that the ruling was required reflected a threat to existing power arrangements.

**TABLE 2** Difference in Support for Marriage Before and After the Court Rulings

	Massachusetts Ruling	Bush Announcement	California Ruling
<i>Federal Marriage Amendment</i>			
General Public	0.02	-0.03	0.03
Evangelicals	0.12	-0.05	0.10
Independents	0.03	-0.07	-0.10
Unsophisticated	0.04	0.08	-0.14
<i>State Marriage</i>			
General Public	—	-0.10	0.04
Evangelicals	—	0.21	0.03
Independents	—	0.10	-0.04
Unsophisticated	—	-0.18	0.32

Note: \*\*p < .05.

whether gay marriage should be legalized by the state and whether the respondent supported the Federal Marriage Amendment. These questions allow us to examine whether large public opinion change occurred. Specifically, we look to see whether the public's attitudes toward gays and lesbians shift in response to these court cases and announcement. To do so, we pool respondents to the 2004 NAES in eight-day periods before and after the court rulings were made.

In Table 2, we compare attitudes toward the FMA and toward legalizing marriage in the state before and after the rulings for each group for whom data are available. For the Massachusetts ruling, we employ only the FMA measure, as the state opinion question was not asked during this time period; for Bush's FMA announcement and the California ruling, we employ both measures.<sup>15</sup> If backlash occurs, then attitudes should become less favorable after the court rulings.

Table 2 presents the difference in opinion observed before and after the Bush announcement and the Massachusetts and California court rulings for the general public, white Evangelicals, Independents, and the unsophisticated. The differences in support for these issues are tiny. In no case do we observe the large negative shifts in attitudes, as the estimates hover around zero, suggesting very little opinion change following these events.<sup>16</sup>

These differences suggest little opinion backlash, though it is hard to be sure that the differences we observe are not the product of some other set of factors that might be peculiar to respondents' political or background char-

acteristics. To investigate the possibility that the (null) results we observe are driven by samples that have disproportionate numbers of respondents who hold pro-gay attitudes, for instance, we employ regression analyses that control for political and demographic factors thought to correlate most highly with attitudes toward gays and lesbians.<sup>17</sup>

The independent variables in our analyses consist of demographic and political factors. Partisanship is widely shown to be associated with attitudes toward gays and lesbians, so we control for whether respondents identify as Republican or Democrat as well as their ideological liberalism. Similarly, we also control both for religious affiliation and how often they attend church as a measure of religiosity. Finally, we also account for a series of demographic variables that past research indicates are related to LGBT attitudes, which include race, gender, and age.

Our central interest in these analyses is whether the ruling led to a shift in people's attitudes. To test this, we create an indicator variable, called *Ruling*, scored 0 if the respondent was surveyed in the eight days preceding the court ruling or announcement and 1 if he or she was surveyed in the eight days after the court ruling. We then examine whether this variable is large and significant for each of the groups most likely to exhibit backlash on the rulings. If backlash drives attitudes, we would expect to find large, statistically significant, negative coefficients for the *Ruling* variable after controlling for all of the other possible influences on attitudes. To estimate these models, we employ ordered logistic regression to estimate support for the Federal Marriage Amendment. The results of these analyses (with cut points suppressed) are seen in Table 3.

<sup>15</sup>Question wording and item numbers are seen in Appendix H.

<sup>16</sup>One possibility is that the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling produces backlash only among Massachusetts residents. We find no evidence of backlash even when restricting our results to residents of the Commonwealth.

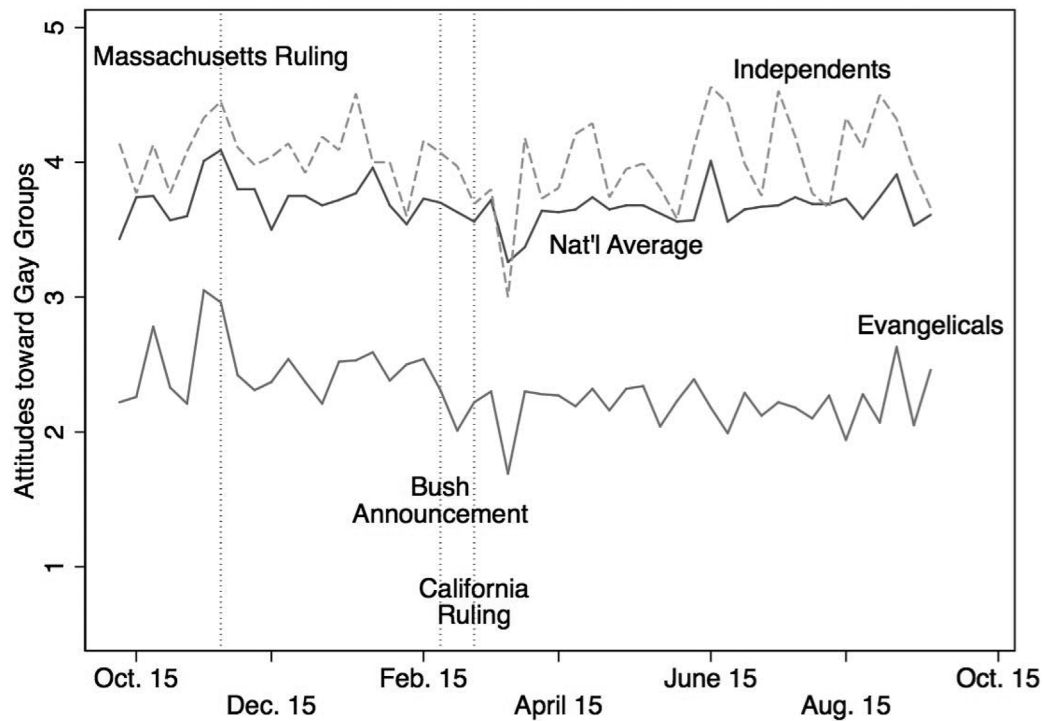
<sup>17</sup>As our results may be driven by changes in response rates, we compare demographics (see Appendix G) before and after each event and find no significant differences.

TABLE 3 Ordered Logit of FMA Support before and after the Bush Announcement and Court Rulings

	Massachusetts Ruling				Bush Announcement				California Ruling			
	All	Evangelicals	Independents	Low Info	All	Evangelicals	Independents	Low Info	All	Evangelicals	Independents	Low Info
Ruling	0.11 (0.083)	-0.02 (0.158)	0.11 (0.162)	0.22 (0.177)	-0.11 (0.081)	-0.18 (0.156)	-0.10 (0.154)	0.11 (0.176)	0.15 (0.089)	0.23 (0.171)	-0.00 (0.164)	-0.07 (0.192)
GOP	0.34***	0.27		0.21	0.31***	0.34		0.06	0.39***	0.34		0.11
Democrat	(0.104)	(0.189)		(0.223)	(0.106)	(0.185)		(0.234)	(0.113)	(0.209)		(0.246)
	-0.10	0.05		-0.13	-0.30***	0.15		-0.15	-0.23**	0.09		-0.02
Mormon	(0.106)	(0.218)		(0.212)	(0.099)	(0.211)		(0.204)	(0.109)	(0.229)		(0.230)
	0.26	-0.07	0.07	0.12	0.40	-0.64	0.48	-0.63	1.11***	-0.35	1.44**	-1.99
Catholic	(0.317)	(0.774)	(0.506)	(0.594)	(0.282)	(0.586)	(0.603)	(0.593)	(0.406)	(0.873)	(0.674)	(1.240)
	-0.08	-0.38	-0.28	-0.50**	0.08	-0.15	0.56***	-0.06	0.05	-0.51	0.17	0.12
Evangelical	(0.099)	(0.251)	(0.190)	(0.216)	(0.101)	(0.262)	(0.193)	(0.229)	(0.108)	(0.274)	(0.199)	(0.245)
	0.79***		0.56***	0.32	0.83***		0.88***	0.69***	0.72***		0.70***	0.76***
Attend	(0.106)		(0.202)	(0.214)	(0.104)		(0.200)	(0.224)	(0.113)		(0.216)	(0.236)
	0.29***	0.39***	0.35***	0.23***	0.20***	0.37***	0.24***	0.12	0.23***	0.29***	0.12	0.22***
White	(0.035)	(0.068)	(0.067)	(0.074)	(0.034)	(0.065)	(0.067)	(0.076)	(0.037)	(0.074)	(0.069)	(0.079)
	-0.66***		-0.57*	-0.69	-0.20		-0.47	-0.01	-0.27	0.02	0.02	-0.49
Black	(0.185)		(0.319)	(0.364)	(0.177)		(0.304)	(0.352)	(0.197)	(0.318)	(0.318)	(0.375)
	-0.51**		-0.56	-0.53	0.26	0.01	0.01	-0.15	0.04	0.42	0.42	-0.71
Hispanic	(0.248)		(0.486)	(0.455)	(0.223)		(0.429)	(0.423)	(0.251)	(0.461)	(0.461)	(0.471)
	0.09	-0.37	0.08	0.17	0.57***	0.16	0.65**	0.82**	0.32	0.88	0.16	0.03
Female	(0.177)	(0.418)	(0.330)	(0.333)	(0.176)	(0.381)	(0.331)	(0.334)	(0.184)	(0.486)	(0.323)	(0.343)
	-0.23***	-0.25	-0.36**	-0.40**	-0.34***	-0.45***	-0.03	-0.32	-0.14	0.01	-0.08	-0.25
Age	(0.085)	(0.164)	(0.159)	(0.187)	(0.082)	(0.160)	(0.157)	(0.185)	(0.089)	(0.170)	(0.164)	(0.210)
	-0.00	-0.01	-0.00	-0.00	0.00	0.01	-0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01**
Liberalism	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)
	-0.46***	-0.55***	-0.40***	-0.21**	-0.44**	-0.29***	-0.61***	-0.29***	-0.53***	-0.52***	-0.64***	-0.26**
Observations	(0.050)	(0.097)	(0.095)	(0.098)	(0.049)	(0.093)	(0.098)	(0.101)	(0.055)	(0.104)	(0.101)	(0.109)
	2,242	688	601	468	2,405	705	665	483	2,077	646	587	425

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. \*\* p < .05, \*\*\* p < .01.

**FIGURE 6 Favorable Attitudes toward Gay Groups during 2003–2004 (10-Point Scale)**



The results in Table 3 are entirely consistent with our previous findings. While we do find the occasional negative coefficient, in no case are the effects significant or large. Similar results are observed when we examine changes in attitudes toward gay groups as our dependent variable (see Appendix I). These results suggest that the null findings observed in the difference-of-means tests are not likely the result of differences in sample demographics between the respondents who completed the survey before and after the rulings and announcement.

We can also examine attitudes toward gays and lesbians as a group, and whether any change in attitudes is enduring, by comparing responses over time for the general public, the unsophisticated, Independents, and white Evangelical Protestants to the question “On a scale of zero to ten, how favorably do you rate gay and lesbian organizations?” which was asked before and after all three of the salient events.<sup>18</sup> The data we employ are average responses by week for the entire period during which the question was asked, which corresponds roughly to the year preceding (i.e., October 7, 2003–September 19,

2004) the 2004 presidential election. The horizontal lines in Figure 6 show the degree to which attitudes toward gay groups are favorable during late 2003 and most of 2004.

To assess backlash against gay groups, we ask whether there is a negative, large, and enduring drop in opinion. For each of the three groups, we observe small negative responses to both of the court rulings and President Bush’s announcement. The results differ somewhat across rulings in that opinion at the time of the Massachusetts ruling was at approximately its highest point during the series, making the drop that followed it appear especially pronounced. A close look, however, shows that in every series, the attitudes just following the ruling are comparable to those expressed just a few weeks before the ruling. The small drop we observe at the time of the ruling is neither large nor sustained.

The California ruling and President Bush’s announcement are noteworthy because, in contrast to the Massachusetts ruling, they threatened gay rights by stopping or proposing to outlaw marriages. Despite this, the pattern we observe is similar to the pro-gay rights ruling in Massachusetts except that we see a tiny positive uptick in attitudes toward gay groups following the court ruling before we see a small drop the following

<sup>18</sup>A pilot experiment shows that the gay groups question corresponds to our thermometer scores, at  $r = .88$ . Unfortunately, the NAES did not include instruments that allow us to assess SDO or ITT.

week. To the extent that a negative reaction occurs, it is slightly delayed and even then very short lived. Here too, opinion seems to revert to preruling levels within just a couple of weeks of the ruling. The changes in aggregate opinion seem to be little more than short-term spasms.

## Conclusion: Contributions and Broader Impacts

When the people express their will by voting for policies they favor and politicians who support these policies, public opinion plays a central role in democratic governance. The threat of opinion backlash—a negative, large, and enduring reaction against a policy or group—is a widely offered explanation for why minority groups should avoid pressing too hard for policy gains, as doing so may lead to policy losses if the public countermobilizes. We systematically investigated mass public opinion backlash, a type of backlash frequently offered to explain the inability of minority groups to obtain their policy goals, on gay marriage, a highly visible and controversial issue typical of those claimed to evoke backlash. We find no evidence to support the claim of opinion backlash against advances in gay marriage. Instead, these results are more consistent with the expectations of research on attitude change than of past work examining backlash.

We conducted three analyses to test these claims. First, we conducted an online survey experiment, which we then extended to incorporate two actual U.S. Supreme Court rulings as a stimulus. In neither case did we see opinion change consistent with predictions of backlash. We validated these two studies using large-sample national survey data from 2003 and 2004, suggesting that our findings are not driven by the use of the Mechanical Turk sample or by any decrease in likelihood that backlash might occur later in the evolution of an issue owing to increasing support over time. In no case were we able to detect opinion change consistent with backlash.

The cautionary lessons that those espousing opinion backlash claim—go slow or risk harming your cause—appear more politically than empirically motivated. Appeals to group members made by their opponents, like the white Alabama clergy who urged blacks not to march for civil rights in April 1963, are fairly transparent political acts. Appeals become consequential, however, when prominent public advocates of minority rights, like Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, employ backlash claims to justify ambiguous or limited court rulings in favor of minority rights (DeVogue 2013).

Our results call these claims of backlash into question. We find little evidence of backlash among the general public or particular groups. The negative reactions we do observe are very small and fleeting. The important implication is that neither jurists nor politicians should use fear of backlash as a rationale for failing to act on questions of minority rights.

What then explains the widespread belief that opinion backlash occurs? One simple explanation is that claims of opinion backlash are often made without considering that the outcome may have occurred regardless of the supposed backlash-inducing event. That is, opinion backlash may mistakenly be used to describe *existing negative opinion* rather than *opinion change* in response to a salient event.

These events highlight the need for additional research that examines the forms backlash can take. Relatively few studies examine how elites mobilize in response to such events and what sorts of behavior they stimulate among constituent groups. It is also important to emphasize that while we study mass opinion backlash, it is possible, though we think unlikely, that backlash might occasionally be manifest through behavior (e.g., Fontana and Braman 2012). Specifically, while attitudes may not have changed in response to the events we study here, individuals' propensity to act might have. Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to examine this possibility.

This project is among the first systematic investigations into the individual attitudes that motivate opinion backlash. To the extent that our findings about backlash against gays and lesbians are generalizable to other traditionally disadvantaged groups or to other issues, they raise questions about whether backlash occurs at all. Given that backlash is typically used to justify impeding minority rights, additional research is clearly needed to evaluate these possibilities.

## Appendix A: Experimental Vignettes

Respondents were assigned to one of five conditions randomly.

**Court Condition: Court Overturns Gay Marriage Ban.** In a highly anticipated decision in Salem today, the Oregon State Supreme Court voted to legalize gay marriage. The 6–3 decision, which goes into effect immediately, takes a major step toward legalizing gay marriage by overturning a longstanding prohibition banning it. Unless overturned by the United States Supreme Court, the ruling promises to grant gays and lesbians all of the protections and benefits extended to heterosexual couples.

**Legislature Condition: Legislature Overturns Gay Marriage Ban.** In a highly anticipated decision in Salem today, the Oregon State House of Representatives and Senate voted to legalize gay marriage by overturning a longstanding prohibition banning it. The vote passed both chambers by a 60–30 margin and the governor has promised to sign it immediately. Unless overturned by the United States Supreme Court, the ruling promises to grant gays and lesbians all of the protections and benefits extended to heterosexual couples.

**Gun Control Condition: Court Overturns Conceal Carry Policy.** In a highly anticipated decision in Salem today, the Oregon State Supreme Court voted to ban the carrying of concealed weapons on college campuses. The 6–3 decision, which goes into effect immediately, overturns a longstanding University of Oregon policy allowing ‘concealed carry’ for permit-holders. Unless overturned by the United States Supreme Court, the ruling would prevent Oregonians with a concealed weapons permit to carry a gun on any of the state college campuses.

**Parade Condition: Thousands Attend Gay Pride Parade.** Thousands of people filled the streets on Saturday for

Salem’s 41st annual Gay Pride Parade. The festivities began at 10:30 a.m. on Saturday and were still going on well into the evening. If there ever was a day in Oregon where just about anything goes, this is it. Whether a person is clothed, on a float, on a bike, on the sidewalk dancing or just plain watching, the 41st annual Gay Pride Parade kicked off in all its feathered and rainbow glory. While Oregon politicians were out in full force on Saturday, it was the parade’s celebrity grand marshal Chaz Bono who won over the crowd.

Police say it’s been nothing but a calm and festive event.

**Referendum Condition: Referendum Overturns Gay Marriage Ban.** In a highly anticipated special election today, the citizens of Oregon voted to legalize gay marriage. The 60–40 result, which goes into effect immediately, takes a major step toward legalizing gay marriage by overturning a longstanding prohibition banning it. Unless overturned by the United States Supreme Court, the referendum promises to grant gays and lesbians all of the protections and benefits extended to heterosexual couples.

## Appendix B

TABLE B1 Randomization Check

Variable	Court	Legislature	Gun Control	Parade	Referendum
Female	51%	50%	52%	54%	54%
Evangelical	12	10	12	14	10
Republican	17	16	15	15	15
Conservative	24	21	23	24	21
African American	7	7	7	8	6
Hispanic/ Latino	5	4	6	4	6
College Degree or Higher	46	47	45	43	43



**TABLE B2 Demographic Summary**

Variable	MTurk Sample	
Gender	Female	52.7
	Male	47.3
Race	White	78.4
	Black	7.0
	Hispanic	5.0
	Asian	7.1
Education	College degree or higher	45.3
Income	Under 40k	50.5
	40–85k	34.4
	Over 85k	15.2
Party ID	Democrat	60.7
	Republican	23.3
	Independent	15.9
Age	18–24	31.3
	25–44	53.3
	45–64	13.8
	65+	1.5

## Appendix C: Question Wording for SDO and ITT Groups

### Social Dominance Orientation

*Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

1. Some groups of people are simply not the equals of others.
2. Some people are just more worthy than others.
3. Some people are just more deserving than others.
4. It is not a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others.
5. Some people are just inferior to others.
6. To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on others.

### Integrated Threat Theory

*Symbolic. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

1. American identity is being threatened by gays and lesbians.

2. Gays and lesbians are a threat to American culture.
3. American norms and values are being threatened by gays and lesbians.
4. The American way of life is being threatened by gays and lesbians.
5. The values and beliefs of gays and lesbians are similar to Americans.

*Anxiety. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

1. I would feel uncomfortable when interacting with a gay person.
2. When interacting with a gay person, I would feel relaxed.

*Group Conflict. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

1. Because of the presence of gays, Americans have more difficulty finding a job.
2. Because of the presence of gays, Americans have more difficulty finding a place to live.
3. Because of the presence of gays, unemployment in the US will increase.
4. Because of the presence of gays, crime in the US has increased.
5. Because of gays, the American people are less safe.

*Stereotype. On a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means not well at all and 10 means extremely well, how well do the following characteristics describe gays?*

1. Well dressed
2. Promiscuous
3. Mentally ill
4. Effeminate
5. Pedophiles
6. Industrious
7. Immoral
8. Burden on society
9. Hard working

## Appendix D

**TABLE D1 Attitudes on Gay Marriage, Opinion Intensity, and Thermometer Ratings by Individual Threat Measures**

	Gays and Lesbians			Gay Marriage			Intensity		
	Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval	
Symbolic	44	39.8	48.2	1.21	1	1.4	5.61	5	6.1
Anxiety	44.1	39.2	49.1	1.27	1.04	1.51	5.59	5	6.1
Group Conflict	42.5	37.2	47.9	1.22	.98	1.47	5.7	5	6.3
Stereotype	44.4	39.9	48.9	1.26	1.03	1.48	5.96	5.4	6.4

**TABLE D2 Difference in Support for Gay Marriage by Individual Threat Measures (Treatment vs. Control)**

	Legislature			Court			
	Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		
Symbolic	-.23	-.06	.52	.17	-.1	.4	
Anxiety	.25	-.07	.59	-.07	-.42	.27	
Group Conflict	.22	-.12	.57	.23	-.1	.57	
Stereotype	.34	.03	.66	-.15	-.15	.45	
		Parade			Referenda		
	Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		
Symbolic	-.1	-.4	1.9	.14	-.14	.43	
Anxiety	.19	-.12	.52	-.12	-.21	.45	
Group Conflict	-.11	-.47	.25	.15	-.18	.51	
Stereotype	-.01	-.33	.31	.15	-.16	.48	

**TABLE D3 Differences in the Intensity of Feelings about Gay Marriage by Individual Threat Measures (Treatment vs. Control)**

	Legislature			Parade			
	Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		
Symbolic	-.2	-.9	.53	-.05	-.81	.71	
Anxiety	-.03	-.87	.8	-.08	-.95	.77	
Group Conflict	-.13	-1.04	.76	-.22	-1.1	.71	
Stereotype	-.55	-1.3	.21	.05	-.69	.8	
		Court			Referenda		
	Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		
Symbolic	-.35	-1.06	.35	-.42	-1.5	.303	
Anxiety	-.3	-1.1	.52	-.31	-1.1	.53	
Group Conflict	-.52	-1.4	.36	-.56	-1.4	.32	
Stereotype	-.52	-1.2	.21	-.16	-.93	.6	

**TABLE D4 Differences in Thermometer Ratings of Gays and Lesbians by Individual Threat Measures (Treatment vs. Control)**

	Legislature			Parade		
	Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval	
Symbolic	.74	-5.3	6.8	.91	-5.6	7.4
Anxiety	2.6	-4.6	9.9	-1.5	-9.1	5.9
Group Conflict	3.36	-4.4	11.2	-1.4	-9.4	6.6
Stereotype	1.04	-5.3	7.49	2.7	-4	9.5
		Court		Referenda		
	Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval	
Symbolic	1.5	-4.5	7.6	1.77	-4.1	7.7
Anxiety	.39	-6.8	7.6	1.06	-6.1	8.2
Group Conflict	.38	-7.3	8.1	2.06	-5.4	9.5
Stereotype	1.3	-5.4	8	.71	-5.8	7.3

**TABLE D5 Differences in Ratings Before and After Supreme Court Rulings by Individual Threat Measures (Gun Control Only)**

	Gays and Lesbians			Gay Marriage		
	Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval	
Symbolic	6.08	.04	12.1	.56	.2	.8
Anxiety	.81	-5.6	7.2	.07	-.22	.37
Group Conflict	2.2	-4.7	9.1	.1	-.2	.41
Stereotype	1.5	-4.6	7.8	.06	-.22	.35

## Appendix E

TABLE E1 Main Effects on Those Who Accepted Treatment

Attitudes Toward Gays and Lesbians	Difference in Means	95% Confidence Interval
Legislature	.81	[-2.4, 4.1]
Parade	-.91	[-4.2, 2.4]
Court	-1.1	[-4.4, 2.11]
Referenda	1.98	[-1.28, 5.25]
Post-SCOTUS	-2.4	[-6.07, 1.25]
Support for Gay Marriage		
Legislature	.152	[.02, .28]
Parade	-.05	[-.18, .08]
Court	.03	[-.09, 1.6]
Referenda	.12	[-.0003, .258]
Post-SCOTUS	-.01	[-.16, .132]
Intensity of Feelings		
Legislature	-.07	[-.41, .27]
Parade	-.106	[-.46, .24]
Court	-.14	[-.49, .209]
Referenda	.096	[-.25, .44]
Post-SCOTUS	-.186	[-.573, .199]

Note: Differences in means refers to the differences relative to the gun control condition

## Appendix F: Approximate Power Calculations (Statistics Refer to Control Condition)<sup>19</sup>

TABLE F1 Favorability toward Gay Marriage (Assuming an Effect Size of 1 Point)

Group	N	Mean	SD	Statistical Power
High SDO	114	2.22	1.10	>99.9%
High ITT	113	1.24	1.14	>99.9%
Evangelicals	45	1.09	1.31	95.2%
Unsophisticated	83	2.06	1.17	>99.9%
Independents	69	2.45	0.99	>99.9%
General Public	360	2.29	1.09	>99.9%

<sup>19</sup>These are approximate power calculations. These calculations are based on the assumption that the number of observations in each treatment condition is equal to the number of observations in the control condition (this is true in expectation) and that the standard deviation is the same across all treatment and control conditions.

TABLE F2 Attitudes toward Gays and Lesbians (Assuming an Effect Size of 10 Points)

Group	N	Mean	SD	Statistical Power
High SDO	123	64.35	29.95	74.5%
High ITT	127	44.57	24.21	90.8%
Evangelicals	50	50.4	29.08	40.5%
Unsophisticated	93	67.88	28.08	68.0%
Independents	69	71.58	20.62	81.3%
General Public	380	67.19	27.56	>99.9%

TABLE F3 Importance of Gay Marriage Opinion (Assuming an Effect Size of 2 Points)

Group	N	Mean	SD	Statistical Power
High SDO	122	6.42	2.93	>99.9%
High ITT	125	5.58	3.03	99.9%
Evangelicals	50	6.82	3.16	88.6%
Unsophisticated	92	5.75	3.40	97.9%
Independents	69	6.83	2.49	99.7%
General Public	378	6.61	2.85	>99.9%

## Appendix G

**TABLE G1 Differences in Sample Characteristics in the Periods before and after the 2003 and 2004 Court Rulings and Marriage Announcement**

	CA	FMA	MA
GOP	0.02	0.03	0.06
Democrat	0.02	0.00	-0.02
Mormon	0.00	-0.01	0.00
Catholic	0.00	0.01	0.01
Evangelical	0.00	-0.01	-0.03
How Often	0.10	0.03	0.03
Massachusetts	0.00	-0.01	0.00
White	0.00	0.01	-0.01
Black	-0.01	0.00	0.01
Hispanic	-0.02	-0.01	-0.02
Female	0.00	0.01	-0.01
Age (in Years)	1.47	-1.09	0.34
Liberalism	-0.06	0.01	-0.06

*Note:* These are calculated by subtracting the population means in the eight days preceding the ruling from the mean from the eight days following the rulings.

## Appendix H: Question Wordings from the 2004 Annenberg on Opinion Questions

cAE06: “On a scale of zero to 10, how would you rate gay and lesbian organizations? Zero means very unfavorable, and 10 means very favorable. Five means you do not feel favorable or unfavorable. Of course you can use any number between zero and 10.”

cCE17: “The federal government adopting a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage—do you favor or oppose the federal government doing this?” (recoded 1–5 such that higher scores indicate greater opposition to gay marriage).

cCE21: “Would you favor or oppose an amendment to the U.S. Constitution saying that no state can allow two men to marry each other or two women to marry each other?”

cCE24: “Would you favor or oppose a law in your state that would allow gays and lesbians to marry a partner of the same sex?”

**Appendix I**  
**TABLE II OLS Regression of Gay Group Favorability before and after Rulings and Announcement**

	Massachusetts Ruling				Bush Announcement				California Ruling			
	All	Born Again	Independents	Low Info	All	Born Again	Independents	Low Info	All	Born Again	Independents	Low Info
Ruling	0.00 (0.131)	-0.09 (0.228)	-0.07 (0.252)	-0.08 (0.319)	-0.19 (0.127)	-0.18 (0.218)	-0.60** (0.246)	0.02 (0.309)	0.11 (0.142)	0.34 (0.235)	-0.06 (0.267)	0.54 (0.323)
GOP	-0.57*** (0.165)	-0.59*** (0.275)		-1.15*** (0.408)	-0.40** (0.166)	-0.60** (0.255)		-0.07 (0.403)	-0.18 (0.182)	-0.25 (0.297)		-0.29 (0.403)
Democrat	0.19 (0.166)	0.08 (0.324)		0.43 (0.384)	0.15 (0.158)	-0.53 (0.312)		0.35 (0.366)	0.59*** (0.174)	0.19 (0.333)		0.07 (0.384)
Mormon	-0.70 (0.485)	-0.55 (1.035)	-0.54 (0.827)	-0.49 (0.962)	-0.55 (0.427)	-0.36 (0.871)	-0.87 (0.954)	-0.40 (0.949)	-0.88 (0.598)	-1.59 (1.720)	-4.12*** (1.560)	-0.28 (1.979)
Catholic	0.39** (0.157)	0.93** (0.380)	0.37 (0.294)	1.25*** (0.394)	0.25 (0.162)	0.59 (0.387)	0.41 (0.318)	0.76 (0.408)	0.41** (0.176)	1.08** (0.423)	0.66** (0.324)	1.04** (0.414)
Born Again	-1.00*** (0.166)		-0.73** (0.315)	-0.25 (0.387)	-1.42*** (0.166)		-0.99*** (0.323)	-1.17*** (0.395)	-1.32*** (0.185)		-1.32*** (0.348)	-1.05** (0.406)
Attend	-0.27*** (0.054)	-0.56*** (0.096)	-0.29*** (0.101)	-0.41*** (0.129)	-0.24*** (0.053)	-0.43*** (0.092)	-0.36*** (0.110)	-0.25 (0.132)	-0.24*** (0.060)	-0.30*** (0.103)	-0.19 (0.111)	-0.41*** (0.131)
White	0.54 (0.292)		0.78 (0.490)	0.67 (0.626)	0.34 (0.286)		0.63 (0.503)	0.13 (0.703)	0.80** (0.316)		0.82 (0.529)	0.12 (0.598)
Black	-0.22 (0.392)		1.30 (0.741)	0.41 (0.805)	-0.92** (0.360)		-0.19 (0.707)	-0.34 (0.826)	-0.64 (0.401)		-0.82 (0.721)	-0.45 (0.767)
Hispanic	-0.37 (0.277)	-0.56 (0.550)	-0.60 (0.536)	-0.39 (0.561)	-0.51 (0.281)	0.31 (0.562)	0.37 (0.497)	-1.03 (0.625)	-0.53 (0.287)	-1.01 (0.629)	-1.25** (0.511)	-0.52 (0.535)
Female	0.53*** (0.133)	0.46 (0.235)	0.85*** (0.247)	1.26*** (0.344)	0.47*** (0.129)	0.45** (0.220)	-0.00 (0.249)	1.01*** (0.325)	0.48*** (0.142)	0.39 (0.235)	0.67** (0.262)	1.00*** (0.344)
Age	-0.02*** (0.004)	-0.02*** (0.007)	-0.02*** (0.008)	-0.02*** (0.010)	-0.03*** (0.004)	-0.03*** (0.007)	-0.02** (0.008)	-0.04*** (0.010)	-0.03*** (0.004)	-0.03*** (0.007)	-0.03*** (0.009)	-0.03*** (0.010)
Liberalism	0.87*** (0.078)	0.75*** (0.137)	0.93*** (0.144)	0.58*** (0.177)	0.93*** (0.075)	0.74*** (0.125)	0.91*** (0.151)	0.49*** (0.172)	0.82*** (0.085)	0.71*** (0.149)	0.94*** (0.155)	0.66*** (0.186)
Constant	3.09*** (0.432)	3.95*** (0.649)	2.60*** (0.743)	3.18*** (0.953)	3.34*** (0.445)	3.54*** (0.637)	3.35*** (0.827)	4.09*** (1.069)	2.57*** (0.490)	2.61*** (0.727)	2.05** (0.873)	3.41*** (1.016)
Observations	1,597	500	437	348	1,726	504	474	353	1,460	446	415	313
R-squared	0.263	0.249	0.229	0.214	0.284	0.199	0.246	0.184	0.263	0.171	0.227	0.259

Note: Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01.

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