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Survey: Americans turn sharply favorable on gay issues

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Analysis Washington

Americans? attitudes toward the lives and choices of gays and lesbians have changed radically since Massachusetts first legalized same-sex marriage a decade ago.

A new survey [1] finds a significant shift toward tolerance across every religious, political and age group and every region of the country, said Robert P. Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute. PRRI?s survey, released Wednesday, Feb. 26, reveals the ramifications of these changes in family, church and community life.

?Only the issue of marijuana looks anything like this in terms of rapid movement in favorability,? Jones said. ?But with that one exception, it?s unusual to see this much change in a relatively short amount of time.?

Overall support for same-sex marriage jumped 21 percentage points, from 32 percent in 2003 in a Pew Research survey [2] to 53 percent in 2013 in PRRI?s survey. During this period, gay marriage became legal in 17 states and the District of Columbia and the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act, that blocked federal recognition of legally wed gay couples.

Since 2003, the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America opened their doors to gay bishops and clergy, even as most other major U.S. denominations kept their teachings against homosexual behavior intact. Yet over the decade, PRRI found, the number of people who say same-sex marriage is against their religious beliefs dropped, from 62 percent to 51 percent.

Within specific groups, the drop was less dramatic but still apparent:

- For white evangelical Protestants, the number fell from 84 percent to 78 percent.
- Black Protestants, down from 66 percent to 61 percent.
- Catholics, down from 65 percent to 53 percent.
- White mainline Protestants, down from 59 percent to 45 percent.

Only one group, the fast-growing numbers of people who say they are not affiliated with any religion, showed an increase, rising from 18 percent to 26 percent. Jones said the increase came largely from less educated minorities who have moved away from church but still consider themselves religious.

Overall, most people (51 percent) say sex between adults of the same gender is morally wrong. Still, 43 percent ? and 56 percent of millennials (ages 18-33) ? say it is morally acceptable.

Even so, ?support for legality outstrips moral acceptability in several religious groups,? said Jones. For example, 47 percent of white Catholics find gay sex to be morally acceptable, ?but 58 percent of the same group say they favor allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry. It is not only that they are more tolerant of a legal norm. They are shifting their own moral lens on the issue.?

Meanwhile, religious leaders? continued preaching against homosexual behavior is driving some people out the church doors, Jones said. PRRI found people perceive three major religious groups to be ?unfriendly? toward lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people:

- The Catholic Church (58 percent)
- The Mormon church (53 percent)
- Evangelical Christian churches (51 percent)

Among those who say they left their childhood religion and now have no religious identity, nearly one in four (24 percent) say their church?s negative teachings or treatment of LGBT people was an important reason they left. That rises to 31 percent of millennials, damaging churches? ability to bring in ? and keep ? young adults, Jones said.

At the root of change: A personal connection to someone who is LGBT. The number of Americans who say they have a close friend or family member who is gay or lesbian rose from 22 percent in 1993 to 65 percent today. Again, millennials lead the way: 71 percent say they have a close friend or relative who is gay or lesbian.

?We looked at the power this has over views toward social policy issues,? said Jones, and found that the two related factors ? age and social connection ? ?overlap to create a different worldview of ?normalcy.??

And those with personal ties to an LGBT person are almost twice as likely to favor same-sex marriage (63 percent to 36 percent against). PRRI reports: ?This ?family and friends? effect is present across all major demographic, religious and political groups.?

Republicans with personal ties are doubly likely to support same-sex marriage than Republicans with no such connections: 43 percent vs. 21 percent. For Democrats, the ?friends and family? split is even greater: 73 percent vs. 44 percent.

Political divisions remain sharp, although all major groups moved toward more support for gay marriage:

- Democrats, from 39 percent in 2003 to 64 percent today;
- Independents, from 39 percent to 57 percent;
- Republicans, from 18 percent to 34 percent.

There?s also a change in how people would like to see same-sex marriage become legal. In 2006, 46 percent thought it should be decided by the states. Now, it?s 52 percent.

The survey did find several issues of widespread agreement on LGBT issues:

- About seven in 10 surveyed say LGBT people face ?a lot of discrimination.?
- 72 percent favor laws protecting LGBT people from workplace discrimination, although only 15 percent of Americans correctly say such discrimination is currently legal under federal law.
- Roughly 6-in-10 (58 percent) Americans favor allowing gay and lesbian couples to adopt children.
- Almost all Americans overestimate how many people are LGBT. The median estimate is 20 percent of the U.S. population ? four times the correct number of 5 percent.

?Americans are terrible demographers,? said Jones. ?We asked them to estimate a number of minority groups and every category was wildly overestimated.?

Neither are many people good at projecting public opinion. Despite multiple surveys in the last two years showing majority support for same-sex marriage, PRRI finds, ?Nearly half (49 percent) of the public incorrectly

believes that most Americans oppose same-sex marriage, and roughly 1-in-10 (9 percent) believe the country is divided on the issue.?

The survey of 4,500 U.S. adults was conducted in English and Spanish, on landlines and cell phones, between Nov. 12 and Dec. 18. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 1.7 percentage points.

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