



Policy Institute of the

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Foundation

The 2000 National Elections Study and Gay and Lesbian Rights: Support for Equality Grows

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Public attitudes toward three key gay and lesbian rights issues have undergone a striking liberalization over the past decade, according to recently released data from the 2000 National Election Study (NES) analyzed for this report.¹ Public support for adoption rights² for gay men and lesbians, the right of gay men and lesbians to serve in the military³, and sexual orientation nondiscrimination laws⁴ has increased substantially. The American people are closely divided in their support for adoption rights, but this represents a substantial increase in support since 1992, when just over one-quarter of the public supported adoption rights. Strong majorities now back nondiscrimination laws⁵ (by a better than two to one margin) and service by gay men and lesbians in the US military (by a better than three to one margin). Even among Republicans, there is now majority support for nondiscrimination laws and substantial support for military service (by a nearly two to one margin). Similarly, more self-described conservatives favor than oppose nondiscrimination laws and a strong majority (by a nearly two to one margin) support military service. These findings confirm that American people have become increasingly receptive to lesbian and gay equality rights across a range of issues. Still, lesbian and gay people remain the least liked social group, according to the NES's "feeling thermometer,"⁶ though there has been a significant "thaw" in the public's coldness, or lack of affection, toward lesbians and gays over the course of the 1990's.

Increasing Support for Adoption by Gay Men and Lesbians

According to the 2000 NES data, the American people are divided on the issue of gay adoption, with 41.4 percent supporting gay adoption, 50.5 percent opposed, and 8.2 percent undecided. This represents a substantial liberalization since 1992, the first year NES asked the question. The percentage supporting adoption rights has grown by 15.1 points since 1992, when only 26.3 percent backed adoption rights. Also, the percentage opposing gay adoption dropped 18.3 points, from 68.7 percent opposed in 1992. The majority of self-described political moderates (52.2 percent) and liberals (72.4 percent) support adoption rights. The increase in support among moderates since 1992 is particularly striking: from 27.8 to 52.5 percent⁷ in favor of adoption by gay men and lesbians. (*See table below*)

When determining their policy preference on the issue of adoption rights for same sex couples, the public is most influenced by two factors: whether or not they like gay men and lesbians as a group, and their political ideology.⁸ Feelings of warmth toward gay men and lesbians as a group⁹ are strongly associated with support for gay adoption, while ideological liberals are more likely to support adoption rights compared to moderates and conservatives.¹⁰ In 1992 affect was the most important factor by far influencing support for adoption rights; by 2000, while feelings of closeness toward gay men and lesbians remain the most important determinant of support for adoption rights, political ideology has become roughly as important. This suggests that ordinary Americans have become more willing to evaluate adoption rights through the prism of more abstract ideological orientations as opposed to relying predominantly on whether they happen to like or dislike gay men and lesbians as a group.¹¹

<i>Adoption Rights</i>	1992 Support	2000 Support
Affect (Feeling Therm)¹²		
Absolute Coldness (0)	4.1%	3.0%
Feel Coldly (Nonzero)	11.0%	21.1%
Neither Cold nor Warm (50)	38.8%	52.1%
Feel Warmly (above 50)	59.8%	70.6%
Ideology¹³		
Liberal	53.9%	72.4%
Moderate	27.8%	52.2%
Conservative	17.0%	26.2%
Religiosity		
Lowest (Few times yr or less)	37.6%	55.0%
Middle Low (1-2 times/mo.)	25.4%	46.4%
Middle High (Almost weekly)	20.4%	40.9%
Highest (Every week or more)	15.7%	25.1%
Education		
Less than HS Diploma	14.0%	32.5%
HS Graduate	23.7%	36.8%
Some College	29.3%	46.8%
College Grad or more	40.3%	55.5%

Strong Majority Support for Military Service

The American public supports the right of gay men and lesbians to serve in the military by a better than three to one margin; the 2000 NES shows that 71.2 percent of Americans back military service, while 22.9 percent are opposed and 5.9 percent are undecided. This is a marked change since 1992 (the year NES first asked the question), when 55.4 percent supported military service (versus 39.2 percent opposed and 5.4 percent undecided).¹⁴ This nearly 16 point increase in overall support between 1992 and 2000 suggests that the debate and residual aftershocks of the well-publicized gays in the military controversy and ensuing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy have resulted in a growing consensus toward equality on this issue.

While feelings of warmth toward gay men and lesbians as a group is the factor most affecting support for gays in the military, gender differences and party identification are also important determinants of support. Women are substantially more likely than men to support gays in the military. In fact, the “gender gap” affects support for gays in the military more in terms of magnitude than ideology, party identification, or religiosity.¹⁵ While women (82.2 percent in 2000) are clearly more supportive than men, by 2000 support among men had increased substantially (from 47.6 percent in 1992 to 67.4 percent in 2000). The NES data also document liberalization across all ideological groups on this issue; by 2000 conservatives support military service by better than 2 to 1 (65.5 percent), while liberals and moderates moved even more strongly into the support column (90.6 and 81.6 percent respectively). Finally,

Republican identifiers showed a substantial liberalization between 1992 and 2000; by 2000, Republicans supported gays in the military by nearly 2 to 1 (65.7 percent).

<i>Gays in the Military-Support</i>	1992 Support	1996 Support	2000 Support
Affect (Feeling Therm)			
Absolute Coldness (0)	22.1%	34.0%	28.8%
Feel Coldly (Nonzero)	44.5%	54.3%	57.7%
Neither Cold nor Warm (50)	57.9%	83.6%	83.8%
Feel Warmly (above 50)	88.7%	91.4%	94.9%
Gender			
Men	47.6%	60.7%	67.4%
Women	68.2%	75.3%	82.2%
Ideology			
Liberal	78.7%	90.1%	90.6%
Moderate	60.2%	75.3%	81.6%
Conservative	44.8%	53.3%	65.5%
Party Identification			
Democrat	66.8%	79.2%	81.7%
Independent	60.9%	71.7%	76.7%
Republican	44.2%	51.2%	65.7%

Strong Majorities Back Sexual Orientation Nondiscrimination Laws

Americans support sexual orientation nondiscrimination laws by a two to one margin, with 63.9 percent in favor, 30.9 percent opposed, and 5.3 percent undecided in the 2000 NES. For the first time since the question has been asked, a majority of Republicans expressing an opinion, 55.6 percent, back such laws,¹⁶ while substantial majorities of Independents and Democrats (69.5 and 74.8 percent respectively) support sexual orientation nondiscrimination laws. Since the early 1990's, according to Gallup and Princeton Survey Research Associate surveys, over 80 percent of the American public has backed the concept of equal rights in employment for gay men and lesbians. However, a comparatively smaller percentage has backed the concrete laws that would guarantee nondiscrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation.

In 1988, when NES first asked the question, only a plurality (46.9 percent) supported "laws to protect homosexuals against job discrimination," while 39.6 percent opposed them and 10.4 percent were undecided. Since the question was first asked, support has increased 17 points (to 63.9 percent); this figure is particularly striking because of the way the question is worded. The clear mention of "laws" to protect against discrimination provides a sterner test of the public's willingness to move from overwhelming support for the general concept of equal rights in employment to comparable support for more concrete measures to combat discrimination (e.g., the passage of legislation that provides some "teeth" in terms of enforcement and sanction

mechanisms). These most recent NES data indicate that clear support is emerging (better than 2 to 1) for concrete implementation.

Of particular interest are the results of multiple regression analysis, which show that in 1988, affect was the most important factor associated with support for employment nondiscrimination legislation, followed by gender, ideology, religiosity, and education.¹⁷ By 2000, only affect and ideology remained important determinants of support for employment nondiscrimination legislation, suggesting that the importance of gender-, political party-, religiosity- and education-based differences have grown less important over time on this issue.¹⁸

<i>Job Nondiscrimination</i>	1988 Support	1992 Support	1996 Support	2000 Support
Affect (Feeling Therm)				
Absolute Coldness (0)	25.0%	29.1%	34.3%	31.9%
Feel Coldly (Nonzero)	54.3%	46.5%	50.9%	50.9%
Neither Cold nor Warm (50)	78.9%	74.4%	75.2%	71.0%
Feel Warmly (above 50)	88.2%	87.6%	85.6%	85.7%
Ideology				
Liberal	72.3%	79.8%	84.9%	82.1%
Moderate	57.7%	62.5%	70.9%	72.9%
Conservative	46.5%	47.7%	46.1%	51.8%
Gender				
Men	47.9%	54.2%	59.0%	60.3%
Women	59.0%	65.2%	67.7%	73.0%
Education				
Less than HS Diploma	45.9%	53.2%	57.8%	61.3%
HS Graduate	47.8%	57.0%	62.1%	64.3%
Some College	59.0%	60.9%	63.9%	67.1%
College Grad or more	66.5%	68.5%	68.5%	72.3%
Party Identification				
Democrat	56.7%	68.4%	73.5%	74.8%
Independent	57.2%	61.8%	64.8%	69.5%
Republican	47.0%	46.9%	48.9%	55.6%

Examining Affect Itself: Growing Signs of a Thaw

The above analyses demonstrate that the American people are, to significant extent, guided by their basic like or dislike of gay men and lesbians as a group when forming their policy preferences on adoption, military service and employment nondiscrimination laws. The pronounced liberalization in public attitudes toward gay rights cited above can be, in part, attributed to the corresponding thaw in public dislike that has occurred over this same period.

Since their inclusion in the NES's feeling thermometer battery in 1984, gay men and lesbians have consistently been the most despised and least-liked social group. The mean thermometer rating reached its lowest point in 1988, when over one-third (35.2 percent) of the public rated gay men and lesbians at the lowest possible thermometer reading—zero. A mere 11.0 percent in 1988 rated gay men and lesbians “warmly” (above 50). Not surprisingly, the mean thermometer rating in 1988 is low—28.5, placing gay men and lesbians at the lowest mean rating of any social group measured that year. By way of comparison, feminists (52.7), blacks (61.7), Hispanics (57.0), environmentalists (76.8), Christian fundamentalists (51.5), people on welfare (50.0), and “illegal aliens” (35.7) were comparatively better-liked. Between 1988 and 2000, the public's coldness toward gay men and lesbians showed clear signs of thawing. The mean thermometer rating over this period climbed 19 points—from 28.5 in 1988 to 47.5 in 2000. Further, the proportion of respondents rating lesbians and gays at zero declined dramatically; by 2000, only 11.9 percent took this coldest possible response (down from over one-third in 1988). Correspondingly, the proportion that felt “warmly” toward gay men and lesbians climbed to just over 30 percent (from 11.0 percent in 1988).

Despite these growing signs of the public's increasing affection, gay men and lesbians continue to be the least liked social group. When examining mean thermometer ratings for 2000, feminists (54.5), blacks (67.5), Hispanics (64.3), environmentalists (64.3), Christian fundamentalists (51.2), people on welfare (51.9), and members of the Christian Coalition (52.4) continue to have higher mean ratings and a substantially smaller proportion of respondents rating at zero. However, when taking into account mean thermometer values and the proportion of respondents who feel warmly, gay men and lesbians are now comparable to the Christian Coalition and Christian fundamentalists in public esteem.

When multiple regression is used to sort out the important factors that shape the public's like or dislike of gay men and lesbians, the most important factors in 1988 were education, political ideology and region. By 2000, the two predominant factors are education and political ideology. Gender differences have become more prominent since 1988, and are roughly comparable to the effect of party identification.¹⁹

When examining mean thermometer ratings through the prism of education, ideology, party identification and gender, it is evident that all subgroups have grown steadily more accepting of gay men and lesbians over time (1988-2000). This thaw in antigay affect is evident across all subgroups. Not a single subgroup in 1988 felt “warmly” toward gay men and lesbians; by 2000 moderate and liberal ideologues, Democrats, women, and college graduates rate gay men and lesbians “warmly” overall.

<i>Affect-Feeling Thermometer</i> (0-100 Scale)	1988 Mean Rating	1992 Mean Rating	1996 Mean Rating	2000 Mean Rating
Education				
Less than HS Diploma	22.5	28.5	31.1	37.1
HS Graduate	23.5	34.5	35.3	41.9
Some College	30.5	41.5	42.5	47.6
College Grad or more	40.0	44.3	46.5	55.2
Ideology				
Liberal	39.2	52.8	56.9	61.9
Moderate	31.7	39.2	44.3	51.0
Conservative	23.7	31.2	31.2	39.5
Party Identification				
Democrat	29.7	42.4	44.9	52.3
Independent	30.0	37.9	41.6	48.7
Republican	25.4	31.6	31.4	39.9
Gender				
Men	27.3	34.1	35.4	43.1
Women	29.5	40.9	43.6	51.1

Conclusion: An Emerging Consensus for Equality

The 2000 NES data confirm trends toward majority support for sexual orientation nondiscrimination laws and military service by gay men and lesbians, trends in place since the early 1990's. Support for adoption rights has increased substantially, with nearly as many respondents supporting adoption rights as opposing them. The percentage of the American people who oppose adoption by gay men and lesbians is likely to drop should the trend of the past decade continue. Finally, while the public continues to hold gay men and lesbians in comparatively low esteem, we find evidence of a marked thaw in dislike over the period examined. The NES data indicate positive development in the American public's attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, but they also demonstrate how far the movement for gay and lesbian equality still has to go in order to obtain full equality and social acceptance.

Endnotes

¹ Burns, Nancy, Donald R. Kinder, Steven J. Rosenstone, Virginia Sapiro, and the National Election Studies. *National Elections Studies, 2000: Pre-/Post-Election Study* (dataset). Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies (producer and distributor), 2001. The primary content of the 2000 NES questionnaire involves items tracking long-term time series on political beliefs, attitudes and behavior. A freshly drawn cross section of the electorate was taken to yield 1807 cases. The 1807 cases in the data file include all respondents from the 2000 Pre- and Post-Election surveys. The 65-minute pre-election survey went into the field September 5. The 65-minute post election study went into the field November 9, and remained in the field until December 18th. The core study preserves the NES's commitment to probability area sampling and face-to-face interviewing: 1006 respondents were interviewed prior to the election and 694 were re-interviewed face-to-face after the election. Supporting the core study, NES used random digit dialing (RDD) sampling and telephone interviewing: 801 respondents were interviewed by phone prior to the election and 862 respondents were interviewed by phone after the election.

² Question wording for 1992 and 2000 NES adoption question: "Do you think gay or lesbian couples, in other words, homosexual couples, should be legally permitted to adopt children?" (Should/Should not)

³ Question wording for 1992-2000 NES military service question: "Do you think homosexuals should be allowed to serve in the United States Armed Forces, or don't you think so?" (Should/Should not)

⁴ Question wording for 1988-2000 NES employment nondiscrimination question: "Do you favor or oppose laws to protect homosexuals against job discrimination?" (Favor/Oppose)

⁵ Here, question wording effects are of particular importance. While public support for the principle of "equal rights in terms of job opportunities" has consistently measured above 80% since the early 1990's, (see Yang, *From Wrongs to Rights, 1973-1999: Public Opinion on Gay and Lesbians Americans Moves Toward Equality*, New York: NGLTF Policy Institute, 1999) support for "laws to protect...against job discrimination" has been comparatively lower during this same period. The distinction made by the public between its overwhelming support for the principles of equality for minorities (e.g., black Americans) and its more measured support for concrete policies, or laws designed to implement said principles of equality is well documented. (See Schuman, Howard, Charlotte Steeh, Lawrence Bobo, and Maria Krysan, *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).)

⁶ Question wording for 1984-2000 feeling thermometer: "I'd like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. I'll read the name of a person and I'd like you to rate that person using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward that person. Ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward that person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50-degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward that person. Just tell me and we'll move on to the next one...Gay men and lesbians; that is, homosexuals." (Scale from 0-100.)

⁷ All analyses of changes in support over time for different subgroups (e.g., by ideology, education levels, etc.) are given with "Don't Know" responses excluded, in order to track the balance of opinion among those expressing an opinion. "Changes in proportions of 'don't knows' occasionally (though only occasionally) play an important part in altering the balance of opinion...if 'don't knows' were not generally excluded, they would confuse the presentation and interpretation of percentages favoring or opposing a given policy...Excluding 'don't knows' makes it possible to report trends in a compact fashion by simply citing percentages over time for a single category of response (e.g., '33 percent favored in both years,' or 'the 33 percent favor rose to 42 percent in just one year'), since response frequencies for other substantive categories are simply mirror images of those that are given-100 percent minus the reported percentages." Quoted in Benjamin Page & Robert Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), footnote 8, p. 423. Tracking the balance of opinion among respondents who actually expressed an opinion (favor/oppose) has the effect of inflating both "Support" and "Oppose" levels, though the effect is modest in cases when the "Don't Know's" constitute a small proportion of responses. For example, in the case of support for adoption rights among moderates, this author has just cited an increase in support, from 27.8 percent in 1992 to 52.2 percent in 2000 (with "Don't Know's" excluded). This means the corresponding opposition was 72.2 percent in 1992 (100.0 percent minus 27.8 percent) and 47.8 percent in 2000 among those expressing an opinion. By contrast, when "Don't Knows" are not excluded, moderates were 26.3 percent in favor, 68.3 percent opposed, and 5.3 percent undecided in 1992 and 46.9 percent in favor, 43.0 percent opposed, and 10.1 percent undecided in 2000.

⁸ Methodological note: Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the effect of standard sociodemographic factors (race, age, education, gender, region, political ideology and party identification) on the questions of adoption rights, military service, and employment nondiscrimination laws. Additionally, “affect,” or feelings of closeness toward gay men and lesbians (as measured by the NES feeling thermometer) is included alongside of the sociodemographic factors in order to assess how much of the public’s policy preferences on gay rights can be attributed to simply liking or disliking gays as a group when taking into account (controlling for) the simultaneous impact of race-based, gender-based, ideological, party identification-based, religiosity-based, regional, age-based, and education-based differences that may also stratify opinions. In short, these analyses allow us to identify the factors that most influence support for lesbian and gay equality across a range of policy issues.

⁹ E.g., scoring high on the NES feeling thermometer. In this report, like/dislike, warmth/coldness, positive/negative affect will be used interchangeably to refer to this feeling thermometer measure.

¹⁰ In 1992, Religiosity, education, and region also have discernible, although comparably smaller, effects on attitudes toward adoption rights. Thus, respondents who attended religious services frequently were less likely to support adoption rights, while greater formal education was associated with greater support. Finally, Southerners were more likely to oppose adoption rights than Northerners.

¹¹ In 2000, affect, ideology, and religiosity (in that order) were the most important factors influencing support for adoption rights. Education, although statistically significant, had a modest impact on support for adoption rights, while regional differences (apparent in 1992) were not evident in 2000.

¹² For the purposes of this analysis, affect was divided into four categories: 1) respondents who rated homosexuals at the lowest possible feeling thermometer rating (zero) 2) those who feel “cool” toward homosexuals (nonzero, though less than the neutral point of 50) 3) respondents who are completely neutral—who feel neither cool nor warm toward homosexuals and 4) those who report having “warm” feelings; that is, those whose thermometer scores exceed the neutral (50 degrees) point. For example, in the full 1988 sample, 35 percent rated homosexuals at zero, 27 percent rated “coolly” (nonzero but below 50), 27 percent were neutral (at 50), and 11 percent felt “warm” (above 50). By 2000, percentages had shown a growing public “thaw” toward lesbians and gays: 12 percent rated at zero, 21% were cool (nonzero), 37 percent were now neutral, and 31 percent now reported having warm feelings toward lesbians and gays.

¹³ For more detailed information on coding for these summary tables (exact coding of ideology, religiosity, education, gender, party identification) see Yang, *From Wrongs to Rights, 1973-1999: Public Opinion on Gay and Lesbians Americans Moves Toward Equality*, New York: NGLTF Policy Institute, 1999, especially Endnote 3 on page 26. One note: In only one case was coding/collapsing of categories modified: all analyses that examine education cross-tabularly collapsed (8 years or less) and (9-12 years) into a single “less than high school diploma” category.

¹⁴ The 1996 NES shows that this liberalization has been both marked and steady: in 1996, 66.4 percent of Americans supported military service (versus 30.2 percent opposed and 3.3 percent undecided).

¹⁵ Party identification and ideology also were important determinants of support for gays in the military when holding constant all other factors. Interestingly, ideology is far less important in shaping policy preferences on this issue compared to adoption rights. Finally, while religiosity was statistically significant in 1992, it was not as potent a predictor as affect, gender, party identification, or ideology. In 2000, religiosity had no impact on support for gays in the military.

¹⁶ This figure is up from 47.0 percent favor in 1988, 46.9 percent in 1992, and 48.9 percent favor in 1996.

¹⁷ Party identification, although not a significant predictor in 1988, was an important determinant (even more so that ideology and gender) in 1992 and 1996. Further, in 1992, while affect, party identification, ideology, and gender were statistically significant predictors, religiosity and education were not. An example of the declining importance of educational cleavages on this issue is illustrated in Figure 5 (p. 9) of *From Wrongs to Rights*.

¹⁸ This can be seen in the trend that is broken down by education levels. Note that, over time, support levels for different educational backgrounds cluster more closely together; there is increasingly less that separates the less educated vs. the highly educated in terms of their support for employment nondiscrimination.

¹⁹ By 2000, region is not a statistically significant predictor.

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We thank the generous funders of the Policy Institute

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Larry Basile

Sally Brunsman

Dave Chandler and Jeff Strassburgh

Chase Foundation

Kate Clinton and Urvashi Vaid

Herbert Cohen and Daniel Cook

Jenny Durkan and Dana Garvey

Ford Foundation

David Geffen Foundation

Allan Gilmour and The Gilmour Fund

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