

Americans' Ever-Changing Attitudes toward Homosexuality

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Abstract

Would increasingly liberal trends in Americans' attitudes toward homosexuality observed in prior research persist in an updated data set? Do specific demographic characteristics predict variations in attitudes toward homosexuality? The preceding two questions were the main focus of this study. Data from the General Social Surveys (GSS) were examined using correlational and regression analyses. Specific variables for analysis were selected based on prior research. The results showed that age, education, and political views were the most significant predictors of attitudes toward homosexuality. Contrary to prior research, it was found that race and sex were not as significant as previously believed. Implications for legislation and social policy are discussed.

Keywords: attitudes, homosexuality, predict/predictors, General Social Surveys (GSS)

Americans' Ever-Changing Attitudes toward Homosexuality

Attitudes toward homosexuality have changed drastically over the past several decades, with an increasing liberal trend (Loftus, 2001). Judging from empirical data, the changing trends are sometimes specific to certain aspects of attitudes toward homosexuality (Yang, 1997). Practically, these attitudinal shifts have resulted in increased media attention to homosexual issues, expansion of gay and lesbian culture, and political conflict over gay and lesbian rights (Andersen & Fetner, 2008). Several studies have examined attitudes toward homosexuality using General Social Surveys (GSS) data (Irwin & Thompson, 1978; DeJowski, 1992; Loftus, 2001; Treas, 2002), but have not made use of data that has been collected since 1998. The purpose of the current study was twofold. The first aim was to reexamine trends explored in prior research with an updated data set. Additionally, the strength of demographic predictor variables was examined using multiple linear regression models and effect-size indicators.

Operational definitions of attitudes toward homosexuality have varied greatly. Attitudes toward homosexuality have generally included dimensions of attitudes about same-sex sex behavior, attitudes toward homosexual individuals, and attitudes toward civil rights (Davies, 2004). In the context of this study, attitudes toward homosexuality are operationalized as a predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to homosexuality, according to Fishbein and Ajzen's (1974) denotation of attitudes. In America, there is a wide range of attitudes about homosexuality. For example, Weinberg (1972) propounded social acceptance of homosexual individuals, while others have argued that homosexual individuals should be treated as if they have a disorder (Nicolosi, 1993).

Over recent decades, there has been an expansion in the range of discourse surrounding attitudes about homosexuality. In 1972, George Weinberg invented the term *homophobia*

(Weinberg, 1972). The invention of this term indicated a conceptual reversal in which the problem became heterosexual intolerance of homosexuality rather than homosexuality or homosexual individuals themselves (Rosik, Griffith, & Cruz, 2007). Weinberg (1972) challenged the status quo by proclaiming, “I would never consider a patient healthy unless he had overcome his prejudice against homosexuality” (Weinberg, 1972, p. 1). He averred that phobic attitudes toward homosexuality negatively impacted both homosexual and heterosexual individuals, and society as a whole.

Around the same time, concern over civil rights resulted in widespread policy changes in professional circles. In 1973, a committee of activists met with the American Psychiatric Association, and argued that declassifying homosexuality as a diagnosable disorder would help eliminate discrimination and foster civil protection for gay people (Silverstein, 2009). They believed that declassifying homosexuality as a disorder was essential “because the psychiatric profession was one of the ‘gate-keepers’ of society’s attitudes” (Silverstein, 2009, p. 161). Numerous theorists have asserted that professionals define norms and deviance, and some contend that medical professionals define illness as a social state (Freidson, 1988). Foucault (1975/2004) criticized the abstract nature of poorly defined normalcy and psychopathology, which results in “laughable theoretical constructions that nonetheless have harshly real effects” (Foucault, 1975/2004, p. 323).

Literature Review

Of course, it is conjecture to argue that the elimination of homosexuality as a diagnosable psychiatric condition directly caused a change in social attitudes. However, the removal of the homosexuality diagnosis does represent a paradigm shift. Regardless of whether or not the revision acted as a catalyst, a change in social attitudes did occur; empirical evidence shows this

change very clearly. For example, there was a remarkable change in attitudes regarding same-sex sexual relations and willingness to grant civil rights to homosexual people from the years 1973 to 1998 (Loftus, 2001). From 1973 to 1998, the percentage of Americans who thought that same-sex sexual relations were wrong in all circumstances declined from 72 to 58 percent (Loftus, 2001). Rapid changes in attitudes toward homosexuality have involved not only cultural changes, but legal and political changes as well (Anderson & Fetner, 2008).

Both Loftus (2001) and Treas (2002) conducted the most current studies that examine attitudes toward homosexuality using GSS data. However, the Treas (2002) study might have been confounded by comparing attitudes about heterosexual non-marital sex and attitudes about homosexual sex in general. As homosexual marriage is currently illegal in many states, comparing these behaviors may not be theoretically justified. Loftus (2001) focused more specifically on attitudes toward homosexuality, but GSS data were only available through 1998 at the time that study was conducted. A primary aim of the present study was to examine the trends explored in past research, augmented by ten more years of data (1973 to 2008).

Johnson, Brems, and Alford-Keating (1997) examined how attitudes about homosexuality vary by certain participant characteristics. Additionally, numerous others (Bobo & Licari, 1989; Brown & Henriquez, 2008; Heinze & Horn, 2009; Irwin and Thompson, 1978; Johnson et al., 1997; Treas, 2002) have studied a plethora of demographic characteristics that include age, education, political views, race, religious preference, and sex. The preceding six variables are discussed individually in the following paragraphs.

Regarding age, it has been found that young people with non-heterosexual friends have less negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Heinze & Horn, 2009). Close proximity to homosexual individuals could result in cohort changes occurring over time, with younger people

being more accepting of homosexuality. It is not definitive whether age differences are due to “birth cohort effects, period effects, or a combination of the two” (Anderson & Fetner, 2008, p. 314), but age differences are clear, with younger individuals having less negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Anderson & Fetner, 2008; Loftus, 2001; Treas, 2002). With regard to education, overall increasing trends in education level have been “the most pronounced [demographic] shift over the last 25 years” (Loftus, 2001, p. 765). This trend is meaningful because those with higher education are more tolerant of homosexuality (Irwin & Thompson, 1978). Education is a significant predictor of tolerant attitudes in general, and can act as a buffer against negative affective attitudes toward a target group (Bobo & Licari, 1989). Specifically, higher levels of education are associated with more favorable attitudes toward gay civil rights and less inclination to believe that homosexual sex is wrong (Loftus, 2001; Treas, 2002). Regarding political views, conservative views have been found to predict negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Brown & Henriquez, 2008). But, changing political views over time have virtually no impact on the trends in opinions on the morality of homosexuality (Loftus, 2001). Similar results were found for willingness to restrict civil rights of homosexual individuals (Loftus, 2001). However, political views do predict variation in attitudes toward homosexuality, with those who identify as liberal being more willing to grant civil rights and less likely to view homosexual sex as wrong (Loftus, 2001; Treas, 2002). With regard to race, Loftus (2001) examined race by year interactions. However, this analysis combined yearly samples into four-year samples by presidential term to increase the sample size of non-White participants. The pattern of change in attitudes for White and Black participants was generally not significant (Loftus, 2001). Regarding religiosity, overall religiosity, religious beliefs, and religious behavior are all significantly correlated with less favorable attitudes about homosexuality (Johnson et al.,

1997). A specific attitude toward homosexuality pertinent to the current study was “less willingness to grant gays human rights” (Johnson et al., 1997, pp. 66-67). However, some research suggests that attitudes toward homosexuality may be influenced by person-behavior distinction ideology; in other words, “love the sinner, hate the sin” (Rosik et al., 2007, p. 11). Thus, it is important to specifically ask how participants feel about homosexual sex relations; a GSS item directly assesses this by asking how wrong the participant perceives homosexual sex to be (see Measures section). Some have suggested that higher instances of homophobia in Christian individuals are associated with stricter sexual morals in general (Siker, 1994). Others take a more cautious approach, highlighting enormous variation in the degree to which religions denounce homosexuality, although religious individuals overall do have more disapproving attitudes toward homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). With regard to sex differences, in a meta-analysis that included over 100,000 participants, it was found that sex differences in attitudes toward homosexuality increased over time (Kite & Whitley, 1996). Overall, women tend to have more positive attitudes toward homosexuality than men (Anderson & Fetner, 2008). Significant gender differences were found for all three subscales of the Homophobia Attitude Scale (Johnson et al., 1997). However, men scored higher on Physical Proximity and Human Rights, while women scored higher on Beliefs, with higher scores indicating negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Johnson et al., 1997).

Summary

There is a wide spectrum of attitudes toward homosexual sex behaviors and toward those who identify as homosexual. However, the evidence suggests that certain demographic characteristics can predict attitudes toward homosexuality—specifically, age, education, political views, race, religious preference, and sex. By examining these relationships, a better

understanding can be gained about what Treas (2002) calls “the most revolutionary change in sexual attitudes in recent years” (p. 268).

Method

Participants

Data from the GSS, collected by Davis, Smith, and Marsden (1972-2008) were used. Demographic characteristics were selected based on the literature review (see Introduction) prior to running the analysis. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 89 ($M = 45.52$, $SD = 17.44$). In the GSS coding system, in order to accommodate codes for missing data, participants age 89 and older were all coded as 89, which results in artificial truncation of the sample age; however, given the small number of individuals age 89 and older ($n = 259$), this was not a limiting factor in the present analyses. With regard to sex, participants self-identified as male ($n = 23,368$) and female ($n = 29,675$); with regard to race, identified as Black ($n = 7,314$) and White ($n = 43,323$); and with regard to religious preference identified as Catholic ($n = 13,000$), Jewish ($n = 1,090$), Protestant ($n = 31,583$), None ($n = 5,363$), or Other ($n = 953$). Respondents’ political views ranged from “Extremely Liberal” (coded 1) to “Extremely Conservative” (coded 7). Years of education ranged from “No formal schooling” (coded 0) to “8 years of college” (coded 20; $M = 12.70$, $SD = 3.18$). Categories for the religious preference variable were dummy-coded. Categories for binary nominal variables (race and sex) were automatically treated as dummy-coded variables by the statistical software used for the analyses. As noted by Loftus (2001), “White” and “Black” were the only specific race categories in the GSS data set for all time periods; this results in a limitation in the form of incomplete analysis of racial/ethnic groups.

Measures

Questions about attitudes toward homosexuality asked between 1973 to 2008 were

incorporated in the current study. Questions were selected for inclusion based on similar past research examining attitudes toward homosexuality using GSS data (Loftus, 2001; Treas, 2002). To assess willingness to deny civil rights to homosexual individuals, a Civil Rights Scale (CRS) was made by combining three items. The items were in a section dealing with civil rights apropos to various groups and were prefaced by, “And what about a man who admits that he is a homosexual?” The three items were, “Suppose this admitted homosexual wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak, or not?”; “Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?”; “If some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote in favor of homosexuality should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?” The last item was reverse coded, and responses to the three items were averaged for each participant, with average scores ranging from “0” to “1”. A score of “0” indicated no desire to deny civil rights to homosexual individuals, while a score of “1” indicated a willingness to deny civil rights. Previously these items have been combined in the same manner (Irwin & Thompson, 1978; Loftus, 2001)

Loftus (2001) argued that this scale measures attitudes pertaining to restriction of civil rights, which is a specific aspect of attitudes toward homosexuality, and reported a Cronbach's alpha of .83 for responses to the items (Loftus, 2001). In the current sample, Cronbach's alpha for the CRS was .82, which indicates good internal reliability according to Ponterotto and Ruckdeschel's (2007) matrix for estimating adequacy of internal reliability consistency. Despite only three items concerning civil liberties being administered over several decades, this high reliability coefficient indicates that the CRS measures a unidimensional construct.

Another item included in the present analysis asked, “What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex—do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong,

wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?” Higher scores indicated more negative attitudes toward homosexual sex. Responses ranged from “Not wrong at all” (coded 1) to “Always wrong” (coded 4). This item was included with the GSS for most years from 1973 to 2008, but not every year. This item conceptually measures the extent to which participants believe homosexual sex relations are wrong, so it is referred to as the Wrongness of Homosexual Sex item.

Results

Because the aim of this study was two-fold (to examine both trends over time and unique demographic predictors of attitudes), the analyses and discussion have taken a balanced methodological approach. Specifically, the aims of the study have driven the methodology used, a practice advised by research methodologists (Tracey & Glidden-Tracey, 1999). To accommodate all aims of this study, multiple regression statistics were used to discuss significance of demographic variables, Pearson’s *r* correlation coefficients were used to indicate effect-sizes, and line graphs served the purpose of examining trends over time.

Variables were assessed for normality assumptions using Tabachnick and Fidell’s (2007) guidelines and no deviations were found. Mean scores for the CRS and the Wrongness of Homosexual Sex item were examined by year. Because the items utilized different response anchors, mean scores were standardized using *z*-score transformations before being displayed graphically (see Figure 1). Bivariate correlations were assessed for the six demographic variables discussed in the introduction and the GSS questions regarding attitudes toward homosexuality. These correlations are displayed in Table 1. Regression models were constructed for both the CRS and the Wrongness of Homosexual Sex item; the general formula for a multiple linear regression equation is:

$$Y' = A + B_1 X_1 + B_2 X_2 + \dots + B_k X_k \quad (1)$$

“Where Y' is the predicted value of Y , A is the value of Y' when all X s are zero, B_1 to B_k represent regression coefficients, and X_1 to X_2 represent the IVs” (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007, 129).

In the present study, age, education, political views, race, religious preference, and sex were predictor variables. The models were calculated as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} (\text{CRS})' = & A + B_A(\text{AGE}) + B_E(\text{EDU}) + B_P(\text{POLIVIEW}) + B_R(\text{RACE}) + B_C(\text{CATHOLIC}) \\ & + B_J(\text{JEWISH}) + B_N(\text{NONE}) + B_O(\text{OTHER}) + B_T(\text{PROTESTANT}) + B_S(\text{SEX}) \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

$$\begin{aligned} (\text{WRONG})' = & A + B_A(\text{AGE}) + B_E(\text{EDU}) + B_P(\text{POLIVIEW}) + B_R(\text{RACE}) + B_C(\text{CATHOLIC}) \\ & + B_J(\text{JEWISH}) + B_N(\text{NONE}) + B_O(\text{OTHER}) + B_T(\text{PROTESTANT}) + B_S(\text{SEX}) \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Both of these models are displayed in Table 2. The squared multiple correlation coefficients for the models were converted to effect size indicators (f^2) using Cohen's (1992) conversion formula and are reported in Table 2.

$$f^2 = \frac{R^2}{1 - R^2} \quad (4)$$

Line graphs for responses to the CRS and the Wrongness of Homosexual Sex item were produced for selected categorical variables to facilitate interpretation (see Figure 2).

Discussion

Figure 1 shows that the increasingly liberal trends in attitudes toward homosexuality observed by Loftus (2001) have continued, judging from the additional ten years of data utilized in this study. These trends are evidenced by an overall decreasing willingness to deny civil rights to homosexual individuals, as well as by a decreasing perception of the wrongness of homosexual sex relations. While there is fluctuation in attitudes from year to year, Americans

appear to have become more liberal in their attitudes toward homosexuality since the early 1970s. Although one of the purposes of this study was to examine overall trends, another main purpose was to examine relationships between attitudes and specific demographic variables. According to Cohen's (1992) guidelines, the effect sizes for model 1 and model 2 (see Table 2) both correspond to a medium-large sized effects.

The strongest predictors for attitudes toward homosexuality were age, education, and political views (see Table 2). This held true over both regression models. For age, older participants were more willing to deny civil rights to gay individuals and more likely to view homosexual sex as wrong. With regard to education, those with higher levels of schooling had less negative attitudes toward homosexuality. With regard to the political views continuum, more liberal views predicted more favorable attitudes toward homosexuality.

Additionally, religious preference was a unique predictor of attitudes toward homosexuality in both regression models (see Table 2). Pearson's r effect sizes for the association between religious preference categories and attitudes toward homosexuality ranged from near-zero to small (Cohen, 1992). Religious preference predicted attitudes toward homosexuality fairly consistently across time, with patterns indicating less negative attitudes over time among all groups, but little overlap between groups (see Figure 2).

Participants' sex was not associated with responses to the CRS ($r < .01$, ns). Similarly, the association between participants' sex and responses to the Wrongness of Homosexual Sex item ($r = .02$) did not correspond to the minimum guidelines for even a small effect (Cohen, 1992). The findings regarding the effect size of sex on attitudes toward homosexual sex were contrary to meta-analysis findings by Kite and Whitley (1996), who found a small-sized effect of sex differences on attitudes toward homosexual sex, $d = .26$, according to Cohen's (1992)

guidelines. The meta-analysis finding of a near-zero effect-size (Cohen, 1992), $d = .04$, of sex on attitudes toward civil rights was supported by the current study. However, sex was a statistically significant predictor of small amounts of variation in attitudes toward homosexuality in both model 1 and model 2. In light of the large sample size, statistical significance in this case should be interpreted cautiously and in conjunction with the near-zero effect size. When the trends in male and female responses to the CRS were examined by year, no trends emerge (see Figure 2).

Black participants responded that they were more willing than White participants to deny civil rights to homosexual individuals ($r = .04, p < .01$), and scored higher than White participants on the Wrongness of Homosexual Sex item ($r = .08, p < .01$). However, these correlation coefficients did not meet criteria for a small effect-size. Loftus (2001) examined the interaction between race and year, but in four-year increments according to presidential elections, and found the racial groups did not differ significantly when responses were combined in this manner. In the present study, trends over time suggest that Black Americans are more likely to endorse that homosexual sex is wrong than White Americans (see Figure 2). Additionally, race did predict a small amount of variation in attitudes toward homosexuality (see Table 2)

Limitations

The main limitations of this study are common to most secondary data analyses, and essentially arise from limited variables available for analysis. In the current study, GSS ignores female homosexuality by phrasing questions with “he” when referring to a homosexual individual. Thus, it is not clear whether GSS data reflect attitudes toward homosexuals in general, or male homosexuals specifically. Specific variables that have been found to be strong

predictors of attitudes toward homosexuality (e.g., gender role beliefs, Brown & Henriquez, 2008) were not assessed in the GSS dataset. Also, attitudes toward specific civil rights such as equal-opportunity housing and employment were not assessed in the items concerning civil rights. Another limitation arises from the fact that the GSS only deals with U.S. data. Countries such as Canada allow same-sex marriage, but countries in most African nations are staunchly opposed to homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). Thus, the results of the present analysis are not immediately generalizable across geographical contexts.

Future Research

These trends should continue to be examined when future GSS data becomes available. From 1998-2008, additional religious preference categories were incorporated into the GSS, and could be the focus future work. Studies that do not use GSS data should incorporate other sexual orientation minorities or use gender neutral language in the wording of questions.

Conclusion

Changing attitudes toward homosexuality have wide-ranging implications for legislature, social policy, and politics. For example, racial disparities in attitudes toward homosexuality received national attention when an exit poll found that Black Americans were more likely to vote in favor of Proposition 8, which nullified same-sex marriage laws in California (Grad, 2008). Later analyses showed these trends to be much smaller than previously believed, and that somewhat higher support for Proposition 8 by Black voters was moderated by religiosity (Egan & Sherrill, 2009). The current study showed very little evidence for Black Americans having differing attitudes concerning the civil rights of gay individuals. However, it was noted that Black participants, on average, scored higher on the Wrongness of Homosexual Sex item every year, indicating stronger beliefs that homosexual sex is wrong. On the whole, the majority of

Americans are in favor of civil unions for same-gendered couples, but a much smaller number of Americans (around one third) are in favor of full marriage rights (Avery et al., 2007).

Practical implications of attitudes toward homosexual are salient at the individual level. Although adolescents who have non-heterosexual friends are more accepting of homosexuality (Heinz & Horn, 2009), out of high school students 1 in 10 said they had been physically harassed as a result of their “real or perceived sexual orientation” (Brown & Henriquez, 2008).

More empirical research is needed to understand the underlying forces behind Americans’ changing attitudes toward homosexuality. While it is true that attitudes and social policies have changed, in what ways do they influence each other?

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Table 1

Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7a	7b	7c	7d	7e
<i>Response Variables</i>											
1. Civil Rights Scale (CRS)											
2. Wrongness of Homosexual Sex	.42*										
<i>Demographic Predictors</i>											
3. Age	.25*	.19*									
4. Education	-.38*	-.28*	-.22*								
5. Political Views	.15*	.26*	.12*	-.04*							
6. Race ^a	-.04*	-.09*	.06*	.12*	.09*						
7. Religious Preference											
a. Protestant	.19*	.24*	.13*	-.10*	.14*	-.17*					
b. Catholic	-.08*	-.04*	-.04*	.00	-.02*	.16*	-.69*				
c. Jewish	-.07*	-.12*	.03*	.10*	-.07*	.06*	-.18*	-.08*			
d. None	-.14*	-.24*	-.13*	.08*	-.15*	.04*	-.41*	-.19*	-.05*		
e. Other	-.02*	-.05*	-.05*	.05*	-.04*	.00	-.16*	-.08*	-.02*	-.05*	
8. Sex ^a	.00	-.02*	.04*	-.04*	-.03*	-.05*	.07*	.00	-.00	-.10*	-.02*

^aBinary nominal variables: For race, Black was coded 1, and White was coded 2, so correlations listed are for White participants. For sex, male was coded 1, and female was coded 2, so correlations listed are for female participants. Correlations for Black or male participants are found by simply reversing the sign.

* $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Table 2

Regression Analysis

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	f^2
1. Civil Rights Scale (CRS)				.25
Constant	.56**	.03		
Age	.00**	.00	.14	
Education	-.04**	.00	-.33	
Political Views	.03**	.00	.10	
Race	.00	.01	.00	
Religious Preference				
Catholic	.00	.02	.00	
Jewish	-.05*	.02	-.02	
None	-.05*	.02	-.04	
Other	.07**	.03	.02	
Protestant	.09**	.02	.11	
Sex	-.02**	.00	-.03	
2. Wrongness of Homosexual Sex				.27
Constant	3.78**	.08		
Age	.00**	.00	.09	
Education	-.09**	.00	-.21	
Political Views	.19**	.01	.21	
Race	-.25**	.02	-.07	
Religious Preference				
Catholic	.09	.06	.03	
Jewish	-.63**	.08	-.07	
None	-.59**	.06	-.14	
Other	-.16*	.08	-.02	
Protestant	.32**	.06	.13	
Sex	-.15**	.01	-.06	

Note. For model 1: $R = .45$, $R^2 = .20$, adjusted $R^2 = .20$, SE of Estimate = .35. For model 2: $R = .46$, $R^2 = .21$, adjusted $R^2 = .21$, SE of Estimate = 1.11.

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed). ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

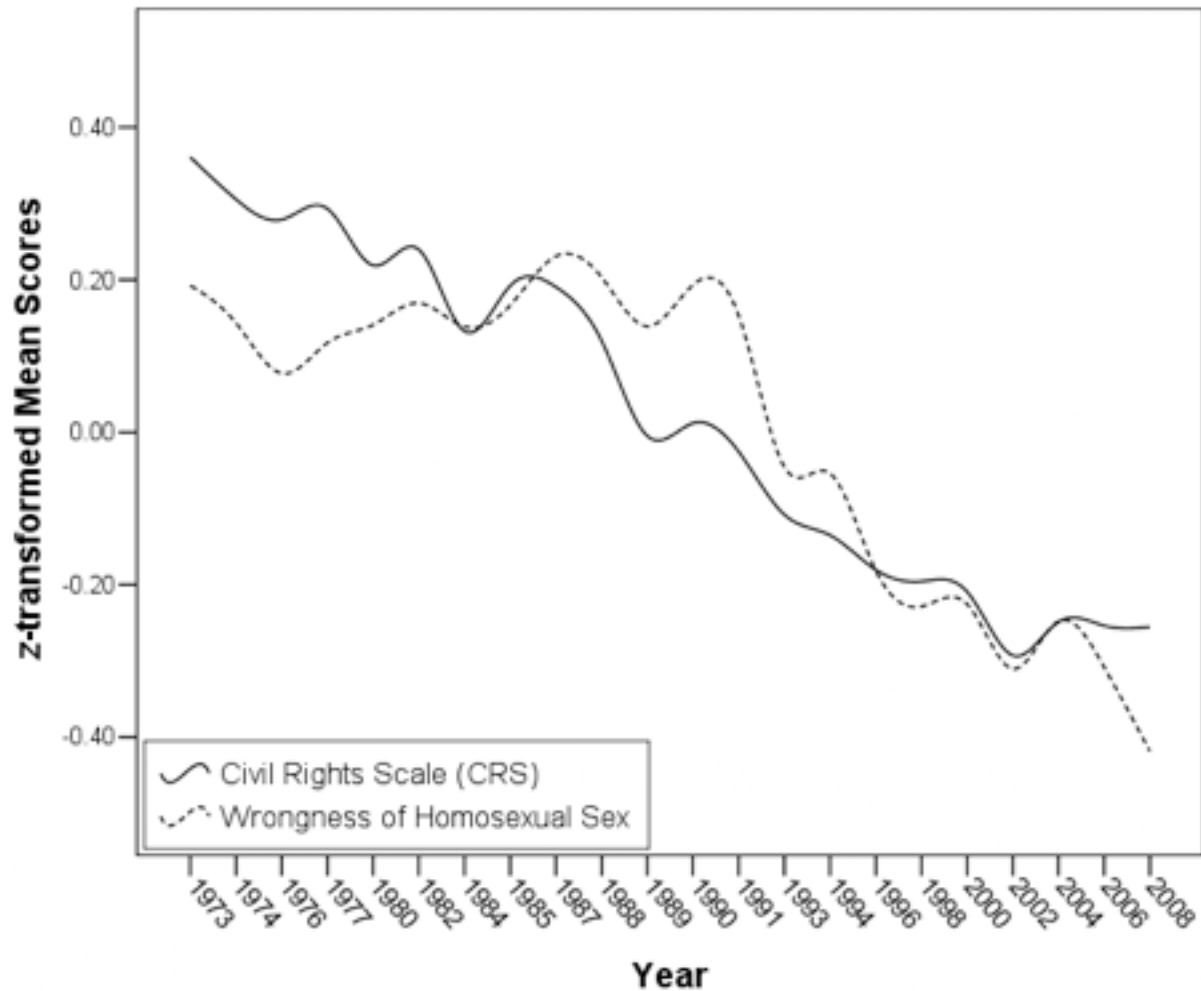


Figure 1. Line graph showing a decrease in willingness to deny civil rights to homosexual individuals and a similar decrease in perception of the wrongness of homosexual sex relations over time. Standardized z -transformed means are a function of year (see Analysis section for explanation).

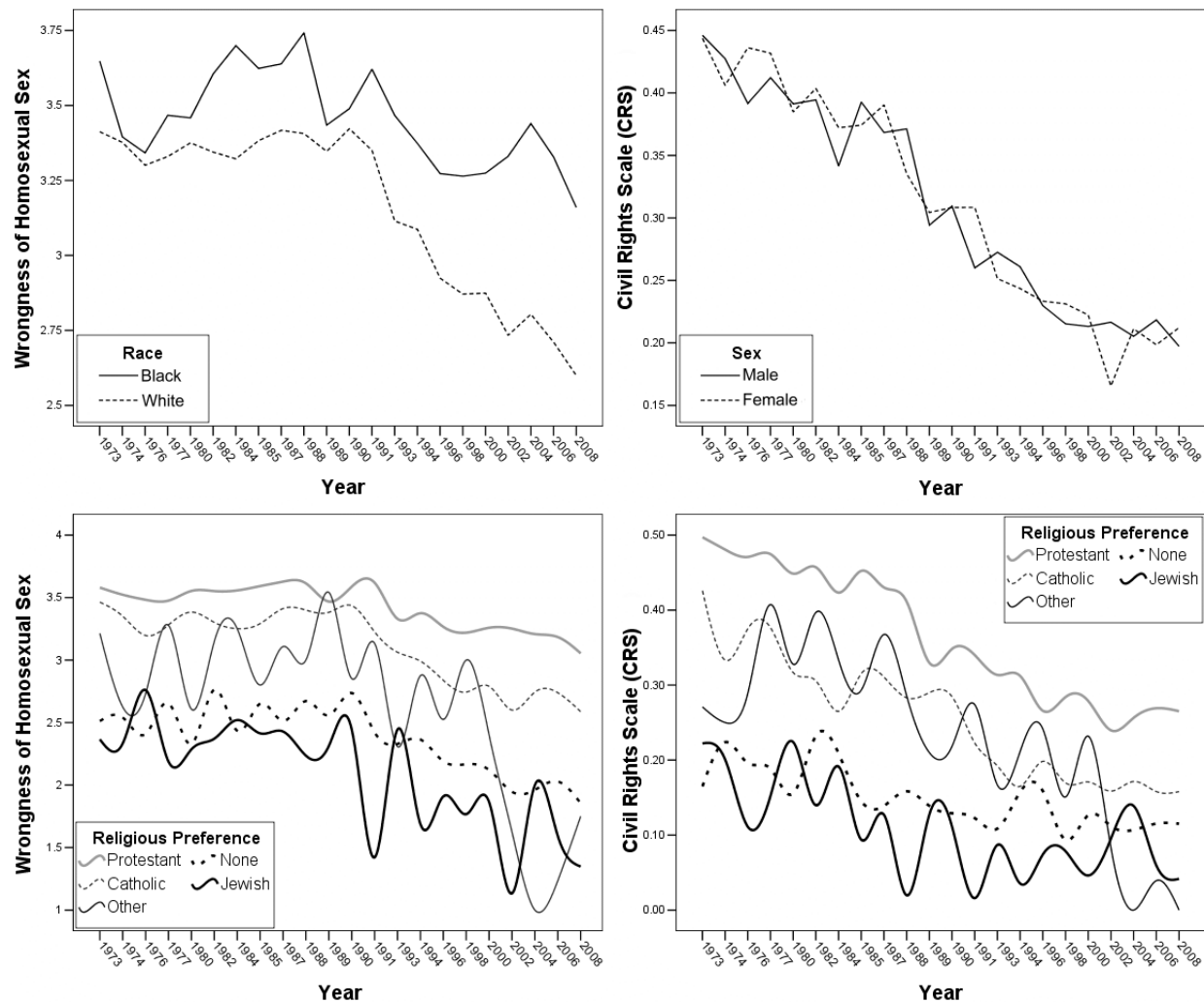


Figure 2. Selected relationships between categorical demographic variables and response variables. Black participants thought homosexual sex was more wrong than White participants did. Participants' sex was not consistently associated with attitudes toward restricting civil rights of homosexual individuals. Patterns in attitudes toward homosexuality are visible for categories of religious preference, with Protestant participants generally having the most negative attitudes toward homosexuality and Jewish participants generally having the least negative attitudes.