

# Reframing the Marriage Debate: Wording, Context, and Intensity of Support for Marriage and Civil Unions\*

Brian J. McCabe<sup>1</sup> and Jennifer A. Heerwig<sup>2,†</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, Georgetown University and <sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology,  
New York University, USA

## Abstract

In the United States, the extension of marriage or civil unions to gay and lesbian couples has emerged as one of the most highly contested social issues. In response, research and polling organizations have sought to measure attitudes on the topic. In this article, we report the results of an Internet experiment testing for framing and context effects on attitudes towards the legal recognition of gay and lesbian relationships. We report an increase in the odds of respondents strongly expressing their opinion when the experiment utilizes the same-sex or homosexual frames, relative to when the experiment utilizes the gay and lesbian frame. We also report an increase in support for civil unions when asked in context, but not for marriage.

In recent years, the extension of marriage rights or civil unions to gay and lesbian couples has emerged as one of the most highly contested social issues in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The controversy has mobilized advocates on both sides, including organizations pushing to broaden civil rights for gay men and lesbians, as well as those dedicated to preserving so-called traditional family structures. These advocates, regardless of position, have sought to define

---

All correspondence concerning this article should Jennifer A. Heerwig, Department of Sociology, New York University, 295 Lafayette St, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10012, E-mail: jah321@nyu.edu

\*The authors will make available all data and coding information to those wishing to replicate the study. The experimental data used in this article were collected by Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences, NSF Grant 0818839, Jeremy Freese and Penny Visser, Principal Investigators.

<sup>†</sup>The authors' names are listed in reverse alphabetical order. Both contributed equally to the analysis.

<sup>1</sup>Research on framing effects inevitably deals with concerns about the frame used in the research paper and the implications of selecting a frame on readers' perceptions. To the extent possible, we simply refer to marriage and civil unions for gay and lesbian (or same-sex or homosexual) couples as "marriage and civil unions." When we do use a modifier, our preferred modifier, based on our read of mainstream discourse, is "marriage and civil unions for gay and lesbian couples."

the terms of the public conversation about the legal recognition of gay and lesbian relationships.

In the public discourse, three separate frames—those of gay and lesbian marriage, same-sex marriage, and homosexual marriage (or correspondingly, civil unions)—are prevalent, and public opinion researchers often use these terms inconsistently to measure Americans' attitudes on the subject. The public conversation has concurrently revolved around two disparate options for the legal recognition of gay and lesbian relationships—marriage or civil unions. Perhaps as a reflection of this ambiguity in the public sphere, survey research often asks respondents about both options, frequently as back-to-back questions, but other times in isolation.

As with public discussions about other controversial social issues, language matters in shaping attitudes and defining debates. Previous research suggests that the use of different frames may shift public opinion by drawing particular issues to the forefront, or heightening the emotional responses of survey respondents. Similarly, respondents' reactions to a particular question are often shaped by the order in which the questions appear. Given the direct link between public opinion and policy formation (e.g., see Brooks & Manza, 2007; Page & Shapiro, 1983), it is critical to understand how shifts in language and context impact aggregate opinion and, in turn, affect public policy outcomes.

In this article, we investigate the effect of both framing and context on attitudes toward marriage and civil unions. We begin by briefly reviewing the current research on framing and context effects in public opinion research. Next, we highlight evidence from publicly available opinion polls on marriage and civil unions that shows substantial variation in question framing and context. We then review the history of each frame to generate hypotheses about why alternative frames are likely to shift public opinion, and outline the limited evidence linking these effects to the contemporary debate on marriage and civil unions. In the following section, we introduce our Internet-based experiment, which randomizes respondents to framing and context conditions. To test for framing and context effects, we estimate a generalized ordered logistic regression predicting support for marriage and civil unions over a four-category outcome measure. Given vibrant public debates on marriage and civil unions, we conclude by offering guidance for survey researchers measuring contemporary attitudes on the topic.

### Framing and Context Effects

Public opinion measures are sensitive to the ways in which research questions are framed, and the context in which survey questions are asked. Through experimental studies and the exploitation of variation in existing surveys,

research reveals both framing and context effects on a range of substantive issues, including attitudes towards assistance for the poor (Nelson & Oxley 1999; Smith, 1987) and government spending (Jacoby, 2000; Rasinski, 1989). For the purposes of this article, question framing refers to within-question wording changes that shift survey responses and attitudes.<sup>2</sup> Question context, on the other hand, refers to the relationship of a particular research question to other questions in a survey.

Framing effects mediate support for particular positions by altering the relative weight survey respondents assign to competing beliefs, or by drawing particular stores of information to the forefront when answering survey questions. Frames often serve to raise emotional awareness, emphasize moral ideals, and remind respondents of particular pieces of knowledge before asking for an evaluation. In doing so, these frames shift the underlying calculus individuals deploy to conceptualize and evaluate public issues (Bradburn & Sudman, 1988; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Nelson & Oxley, 1999; Schuman & Presser, 1996; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004).

In a well-known set of framing experiments from the General Social Survey (GSS), a shift in the terminology of the national spending items yields substantial shifts in reported attitudes (Rasinski, 1989; Smith, 1987). Survey participants respond more favorably to national spending on “assistance to the poor” than spending on “welfare,” despite consistency in the underlying concept (Smith, 1987). The variation in underlying support as a result of subtle wording changes reveals the importance of question framing in measuring support.

In the debate over civil rights for gay and lesbians couples, the frames most frequently employed contrast marriage and civil unions as an extension of special rights to gay and lesbian couples against the protection of equal rights (Tadlock, Gordon, & Popp 2007). Evaluating the content of group discussions in an online forum, Price et al. (2005) reveal a polarization of attitudes and a widening of the ideological divide between conservatives and liberals as a result of the frame used to describe legal recognition. They report a larger gap in support between liberals and conservatives when legal recognition was framed as granting special marriage rights to homosexuals versus extending equal rights of civil unions to gay and lesbian couples.

While framing effects, as presented here, refer to changes in discrete levels of support that result from subtle changes in question wording, survey researchers often observe variation in respondents’ attitudes that result from

<sup>2</sup>In the broader research on public opinion and media studies, framing frequently refers to the ways in which media sources and elite discourse frame contemporary policy issues. Given the focus of this article on particular shifts in survey question wording, we limit our discussion to more subtle shifts in question wording.

changes in question context (Schuman & Presser, 1996). Question context refers to the order in which a series of questions are viewed and answered by respondents. Broadly speaking, there are two types of context effects observed by public opinion researchers: Within-question effects and between-question effects. An analysis of within-question effects refers to the change in the level of support for a single question as a result of being viewed in context. An analysis of between-question effects, on the other hand, refers to the change in the difference in the level of support between two questions as a result of the order in which they are viewed. The research presented in this article is concerned with the former, namely how support for marriage (and, separately, civil unions) changes as a result of the context in which the question is viewed.

To illustrate context effects in public opinion research, Moore (2002) observed how the perceived trustworthiness of President Clinton shifted when viewed after a question about vice president Gore, rather than when viewed in isolation. When preceded by the question about his vice president, the perceived trustworthiness of President Clinton increased substantially, suggesting a within-question shift. The experiment also yielded between-question changes, as the difference in perceived trustworthiness between the two politicians grew as a result of the order in which the questions were viewed. The gap in trustworthiness between President Clinton and vice president Gore narrowed from eighteen points when each individual was viewed in the noncomparative context to only three percentage points when each was viewed in context.<sup>3</sup>

There is conflicting evidence on the importance of question context in public opinion research on marriage and civil unions. Past studies show sensitivity to question context in support of civil unions, but mixed results on the sensitivity of support for marriage (Brewer & Wilcox, 2005; Rutgers-Eagleton, 2006). These contrary results provide an opportunity for further empirical work to understand how context effects alter underlying levels of support in this policy domain.

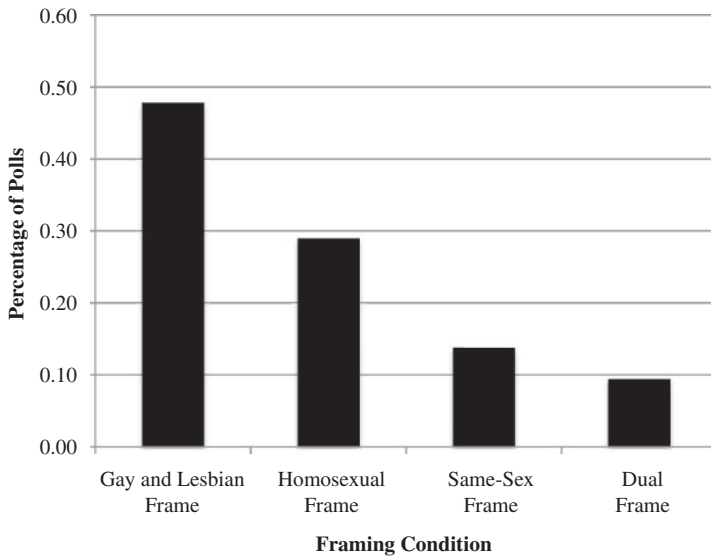
### Polling on Marriage and Civil Unions

Public opinion polling on marriage and civil unions oscillates between three competing frames: those of gay and lesbian marriage, same-sex marriage, and homosexual marriage. Drawing on a database of publicly available opinion

<sup>3</sup>Researchers have identified two *between*-question context effects—consistency and contrast effects (for examples, see Mason, Carlson, & Tourangeau, 1994; Moore, 2002; Schuman, Presser, & Ludwig, 1981; Schuman and Presser, 1996). Consistency effects occur when responses to the second question in a sequence are pushed closer to responses to the first question as a result of the context. Contrast effects, on the other hand, occur when responses to the latter question are pushed in the opposite direction as a result of being viewed in context.

Figure 1

*Distribution of polling frames for publicly available polls on marriage and civil unions, 1996–2009.*



*Note:* We compile 144 publicly available public opinion polls from the website [www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com). The polls span a 14-year time period from 1996 to 2009, although the vast majority of the polls (93%) were fielded between 2003 and 2009. The polls come from 23 unique news organizations, polling groups, or combinations thereof, and the three most frequent contributors to the data are polls conducted by CBS/New York Times ( $n = 16$ ), Gallup ( $n = 17$ ), and Pew ( $n = 20$ ). Of the polls in the sample, half asked exclusively about marriage ( $n = 72$ ), slightly fewer than one-quarter asked about civil unions ( $n = 34$ ) and the remainder included information on both marriage *and* civil unions ( $n = 38$ ).

polls, Figure 1 shows the distribution of these frames in polls dating to the mid-1990s.<sup>4</sup> During this period, polling organizations used each of the three frames in gauging public opinion on marriage and civil unions. Nearly half of the polls measure support for gay and lesbian marriage and/or civil unions, while more than one-quarter measure support for homosexual marriage and/or civil unions. Approximately 15% of polls measure support for same-sex marriage and/or civil unions, while approximately 10% utilize a dual frame (e.g., same-sex and homosexual marriage in a single question).

The variation in question wording presented in Figure 1 raises concerns about the equivalency of these frames in measuring support for marriage and civil unions. Although the policy outcome of each frame is logically equivalent (i.e., a law permitting marriage for same-sex couples has the same

<sup>4</sup>We compile 144 publicly available polls on marriage and civil unions in a unique dataset of publicly available polls from the website [www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com). Additional information on the database of polls is reported in the note accompanying Figure 1.

consequences as one permitting marriage for gay and lesbian couples), it is not immediately clear whether respondents view these frames as equivalent, or whether the frames carry different connotations. While there has been little empirical research evaluating the impact of these frames on opinions, the history of the three terms provides some clues as to how these frames may alter public attitudes.

The term homosexual is linked to a long history of social and psychological illness (Bullough, 1979; Weeks, 1977). In the mid-20th century, the psychiatric community classified homosexuality as a mental illness, and until 1973, the term was included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (Silverstein, 2009). Despite the discrediting of these ideas nearly four decades ago, we expect the homosexual frame to elicit more negative reactions than the other frames because of the historical association of homosexuality with mental illness. Moreover, to the extent that this connotation impacts support under the homosexual frame, we expect cohorts of older Americans who came of age prior to the gay rights movement (and, in particular, the Stonewall Riots) to be more sensitive to the medical overtones of the term.

Following a long history of social and medical marginalization, the gay rights movement worked to publicly redefine its image, in part by advocating the usage of terminology divorced from that of mental illness. While the term gay was historically used to describe sexually promiscuous women, it gained prominence as a replacement for the term homosexual as the political momentum and consciousness of the gay community grew in the period immediately following the Stonewall Riots. In 1969, riots erupted outside the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City's Greenwich Village, after a police raid. The riots are widely considered to mark the beginning of the gay civil rights era, as groups began to organize to address homophobia and the socio-cultural structures that undergirded it (Carter, 2004). The term lesbian, on the other hand, assumed its modern, widespread usage during this period as a consequence of the intersection of the gay rights movement and the development of a separatist feminist identity (D'Emilio, 1983; Smith, 2005; Weeks, 1977). Both terms reflect the purposeful and public redefinition of the community in the wake of the civil rights era. The phrasing gay and lesbian is now the official preferred terminology of advocacy organizations, including the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), as well as most of the mainstream media, including the Associated Press and the New York Times.<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, the term same-sex gained popularity only recently as an alternative to gay and lesbian. Though the terminology of same-sex refers to the

<sup>5</sup>The GLAAD Media Reference Guide (available at <http://www.glaad.org/Document.Doc?id=25>) asks media outlets to use the terminology "marriage for gay and lesbian couples," rather than "gay marriage," believing that the latter evokes the idea that gay couples are seeking a separate institution.

biological sex (i.e., male/female) of individuals, this frame, like the homosexual frame, evokes the sexual nature of relationships, especially in the immediate response period afforded by opinion polling. By drawing sexual behavior to the forefront, we expect this frame to elicit more negative reactions to questions about marriage equality than the preferred terminology of gay and lesbian, but less than the historically fraught homosexual.

Evaluating the impact of framing conditions matters, as surveys with inconsistent frames may yield differing estimates of public attitudes. Likewise, evaluating the context in which surveys ask about marriage and civil unions matters, as well. The order in which questions are viewed and answered may affect how survey participants respond to questions. This is especially true in this policy domain where the correlation between attitudes on marriage and civil unions is strong, and the opportunity to express an opinion on one issue could influence how survey respondents respond to the second.

An examination of publicly available polls reveals substantial heterogeneity in question context for questions on marriage and civil unions. In some cases, a survey asking about support for marriage is conducted without reference to civil unions (or vice-versa); in other cases, the question on marriage is preceded by a separate question on support for civil unions; and still in other cases, a single question includes the options of support for marriage, support for civil unions, and, most often, a third option for respondents who support no legal recognition. In Table 1, we present an example of each type of context from our database of polls.

In 2003, the Pew Research Center survey reported results from a randomized experiment that found that the percent of respondents favoring civil unions increased from 37% to 45% when a question about civil unions was asked in context, or after the marriage question (Pew Research Center, 2003). This finding on order effects was replicated the following year by a Gallup poll, suggesting that support for civil unions rises when respondents are first allowed to express their disapproval of the legal extension of marriage rights (Moore & Carroll, 2004). The Pew and Gallup polls diverge, however, in their findings on the order effects for marriage. The Pew study reported no difference in attitudes towards marriage for gay and lesbian couples based on context, while the Gallup poll reported a decline in support for marriage when the question was asked in context (Newport, 2004). Given the further liberalization of public attitudes since these polls were conducted, the current study offers an opportunity for an up-to-date analysis adjudicating between these competing findings.

### Data and Methods

Our data come from the Time Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS), a National Science Foundation-funded initiative that allows social

Table 1

*Examples of Question Context from Publicly Available Opinion Polls*

	Example of a Question without Context	Example of a Question with Context	Example of a Question with Several Options
Question	“Do you think it should be legal or illegal for gay and lesbian couples to get married?”	Do you favor or oppose a law that would allow homosexual couples to legally form civil unions, giving them some of the legal rights of married couples? Thinking now about gay marriage, that is, allowing a couple who are gay or lesbian to marry one another legally, do you favor or oppose gay marriage?	Do you think same-sex couples should be allowed to legally marry, should be allowed legally to enter into civil unions but not marry, or should not be allowed to obtain legal recognition of their relationships?
Source	ABC News/ Washington Post Poll, April 21–24, 2009	National Public Radio Poll, December 10–15, 2003	Quinnipiac University Poll, April 21–27, 2009

science researchers to conduct large-scale, Internet-based experiments on a representative sample of the American population. TESS experiments are fielded directly through Knowledge Networks, which uses a combination of random digit dialing and address-based sampling techniques to recruit a representative panel of survey respondents.<sup>6</sup> Persons selected for inclusion in the panel are provided with Internet service and hardware if they do not already have it. Each experiment conducted by Knowledge Networks is given to a random sample of its active panel members. The present experiment was conducted between July 15 and July 21, 2009 on a sample of 3,338 panelists.<sup>7</sup>

In Table 2, we provide descriptive statistics for our sample. The sample is evenly divided between male and female respondents. Approximately 10% report less than a high school education, while the remainder is divided nearly evenly between the other three education categories—high school, some college, or college or more. Nearly three-quarters of our respondents

<sup>6</sup>Additional information on the Time Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS) and Knowledge Networks is available on their websites at <http://tess.experimentcentral.org/> and <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/>.

<sup>7</sup>The survey completion rate for this experiment was 66.8%.



Table 2  
*Descriptive Statistics*

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	1,666	49.91
Male	1,672	50.09
Education		
Less than High School	339	10.16
High School	1,037	31.07
Some College	996	29.84
College or more	966	28.94
Race		
White	2,450	73.4
Black	334	10.01
Other	554	16.6
Income		
<\$50K	1,599	47.9
>\$50K	1,739	52.1
Political ideology		
Liberal	864	25.88
Moderate	1,273	38.14
Conservative	1,201	35.98
Age (years)		
18–29	580	17.38
30–44	829	24.84
45–59	985	29.51
≥60	944	28.28

are white, while about ten percent are black. The sample includes substantial variation in the age and political ideology of respondents.

Each of our respondents was randomly assigned to one of three wording conditions.<sup>8</sup> In the first condition, respondents were asked two questions: Whether they strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry legally and whether they strongly favor, favor, oppose or strongly oppose allowing gay and lesbian couples to enter into civil unions. In the second wording condition, respondents were again asked about both marriage and civil unions, but this time using the term same-sex couples. Lastly, respondents in the third condition were asked about marriage and civil unions for homosexual couples. In each condition, the order of the marriage

<sup>8</sup>To check the randomization process, we conducted chi-squared tests for statistical independence by a number of important covariates including educational category (chi-squared = 2.611,  $p = .856$ ), income category (chi-square = 7.3676,  $p = .498$ ), gender (chi-square = 0.5223,  $p = .770$ ), religiosity (chi-square = 5.1721,  $p = .522$ ), race (chi-square = 2.1346,  $p = .711$ ), political ideology (chi-square = 1.7782,  $p = .776$ ), and the four-category age group (chi-square = 3.9018,  $p = .690$ ).

Table 3  
*Experimental Framing Conditions*

Condition 1 ( $n = 1,109$ )	Condition 2 ( $n = 1,110$ )	Condition 3 ( $n = 1,119$ )
... allowing <i>gay and lesbian couples</i> to marry legally? ( $n = 544$ )	... allowing <i>same-sex couples</i> to marry legally? ( $n = 564$ )	... allowing <i>homosexual couples</i> to marry legally? ( $n = 556$ )
... allowing <i>gay and lesbian couples</i> to enter into civil unions that would give them many of the same rights as married couples? ( $n = 565$ )	... allowing <i>same-sex couples</i> to enter into civil unions that would give them many of the same rights as married couples? ( $n = 546$ )	... allowing <i>homosexual couples</i> to enter into civil unions that would give them many of the same rights as married couples? ( $n = 563$ )

Note: Each question begins, "Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose or strongly oppose..."

and civil unions questions was randomized such that approximately half of respondents within each condition received the marriage question first, while the other half received the civil unions question first. In Table 3, we present the precise question wording for each group.

After randomizing respondents to context and framing conditions, we begin by comparing the mean level of support for marriage and civil unions across question frames and context. The comparison collapses levels of support, comparing only whether a respondent supported marriage or civil unions, but not the strength of opinion. In this preliminary analysis, respondents who *favor* or *strongly favor marriage* (or civil unions) are coded "1" and respondents who *oppose* or *strongly oppose* them are coded "0".

Next, we estimate a generalized ordered logistic regression predicting the level of support for marriage and civil unions. This model is more flexible than the traditional ordered logistic regression model because it relaxes the proportional odds assumption that requires the beta coefficients to be invariant across discrete levels of the outcome. Instead, the model allows the effect of independent variables to vary according to the level of the dependent variable when the parameter estimates do not meet the proportional odds assumption. For each parameter in the model, we test whether the estimate meets the proportional odds assumption at the  $p < .05$  level. For the parameter estimates that do not meet this assumption, including our framing and context variables, the generalized ordered logistic regression allows for the effect of these variables on the odds of moving to a more favorable response category to vary across the dependent variable. For the remainder of the covariates, we restrict the coefficients to the proportional odds assumption.

Because of these relaxed assumptions, the generalized ordered logistic regression provides more nuance in understanding how framing conditions and

question context affect the odds of transitioning to more favorable responses. The interpretation of the results from the generalized ordered logistic regression is analogous to the interpretation of results from a model in which the restrictive proportional odds assumptions hold. In each case, the listed outcome and those below it should be interpreted as the reference category. In the results section, we report coefficients for the log of the odds in the regression models predicting support for marriage and civil unions.

In each regression, we model the dependent variable using “*strongly oppose*” as the “lowest” category and “*strongly favor*” the “highest.” Thus, the first set of coefficients (corresponding with the heading “> *strongly oppose*” in Table 4) reports the change in the log odds of a respondent moving from “*strongly oppose*” to the combined response categories “*oppose*,” “*favor*,” and “*strongly favor*.” The second set of coefficients (corresponding with the heading “> *oppose*”) reports the change in the log odds of respondents crossing the threshold from the combined reference categories of “*strongly oppose*” and “*oppose*” to the combined categories of “*favor*” and “*strongly favor*.” This set of coefficients corresponds to a change in the odds of respondents supporting marriage (or civil unions), relative to opposing it. The third set of coefficients (corresponding with the heading “> *favor*”) reveals how framing and context affect the likelihood of moving from the combined reference categories “*strongly oppose*,” “*oppose*,” and “*favor*” to the category “*strongly favor*.”<sup>9</sup>

After estimating the effect of framing and context on support for marriage for the entire sample, we re-estimate our generalized ordered logistic regression models for each of the four age cohorts. As noted earlier, we hypothesize that Americans who came of age prior to the gay rights movement will be most sensitive to the historically specific negative connotation of the homosexual frame. Similarly, we expect older cohorts to be more sensitive to the same-sex frame, as it brings to the forefront the sexual nature of gay and lesbian relationships. For younger Americans, who grew up in an age of increased tolerance, we expect to find little difference in attitudes across the three framing conditions. Although we limit this set of analyses to the differences across framing conditions within each age cohort, previous research also suggests that support for marriage and civil unions should be higher across all framing conditions for younger cohorts (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Egan, Persily & Wallsten, 2008; Loftus, 2001; Treas, 2002).

<sup>9</sup>The results reported in Table 4 are substantively similar to an alternative specification in which we estimate a series of logistic regressions predicting support (strongly disagree, disagree vs. agree, strongly agree), the conditional probability of strongly opposing given opposition, and the conditional probability of strongly supporting given support. The results of this alternative model specification are available from the authors upon request.

## Results

Across the entire sample, 40.6% of respondents express support for marriage and 54.4% of respondents express support for civil unions. We find no significant variation in the mean level of support across framing conditions. The percentage of respondents who express support for marriage and civil unions does not change significantly when the experiment switches between the gay and lesbian, same-sex and homosexual frames. However, we do report differences in the percentage of respondents who support civil unions based on the question context. When asked in context, or after the question about marriage, 59.8% of respondents support civil unions; when asked before the question about marriage, only 49.0% of respondents support civil unions. We do not find significant differences in the mean level of support for marriage based on the context of the question.

These findings for the mean levels of support across framing and context conditions do not speak to the intensity of opinion. In Table 4, we report the results of our generalized ordered logistic regression predicting the odds of transitioning from “*strongly oppose*” to a more favorable response. In both cases, female respondents are more likely to be supportive than male respondents. Self-identified conservatives and Republicans are substantially less likely to register support than liberals or Democrats. We also report a liberalizing effect of education on support for the extension of civil rights (Wilcox, Brewer, Shames, & Lake 2007) as the likelihood of supporting marriage and civil unions increases monotonically with educational attainment. In keeping with past research on the extension of civil rights to gay men and lesbians, the odds of supporting marriage and civil unions declines with age.

In Column 1, we report a significant effect of question framing on the likelihood of moving from “*strongly oppose*” to more favorable responses. Compared to the gay and lesbian frame, both the homosexual and same-sex frames significantly decrease the odds of respondents moving to more supportive categories. Likewise, viewing the question about marriage in context, or after the civil unions question, decreases the odds of respondents reporting more favorable attitudes.

In Column 2, we report no change in the odds of being in one of the categories favoring marriage (*favor*, *strongly favor*) relative to being in one of the categories opposing it (*oppose*, *strongly oppose*) as a result of changes in the frame or context. Consistent with the mean difference results noted earlier, neither the wording used, nor the context in which the question is viewed, change the likelihood that a respondent would switch from supporting marriage to opposing it.

Finally, Column 3 estimates the likelihood of transitioning to strongly favoring the statement about marriage. In this case, the positive coefficients reveal that both the homosexual and same-sex frames increase the likelihood

Table 4  
*Generalized Ordered Logistic Regression Results Predicting Response Patterns,  
 Marriage and Civil Unions*

	Marriage			Civil Unions		
	(1) <i>y</i> > Strongly <i>Oppose</i>	(2) <i>y</i> > <i>Oppose</i>	(3) <i>y</i> > <i>Favor</i>	(4) <i>y</i> > Strongly <i>Oppose</i>	(5) <i>y</i> > <i>Oppose</i>	(6) <i>y</i> > <i>Favor</i>
Framing and Context						
Frame: Same-Sex	-0.221* (0.104)	0.117 (0.101)	0.202* (0.138)	-0.324** (0.110)	-0.081 (0.096)	0.223 (0.123)
Frame: Homosexual	-0.291** (0.103)	0.090 (0.101)	0.301* (0.138)	-0.233* (0.110)	-0.017 (0.097)	0.293* (0.122)
Context: In Context	-0.182* (0.084)	-0.074 (0.082)	0.258* (0.112)	0.277** (0.090)	0.455** (0.079)	0.076 (0.099)
Political Ideology						
Moderate	-0.608** (0.114)	-0.615** (0.100)	-1.007** (0.123)	-0.541** (0.118)	-0.601** (0.103)	-0.856** (0.112)
Conservative	-1.805** (0.110)	-1.805** (0.110)	-1.805** (0.110)	-1.341** (0.105)	-1.341** (0.105)	-1.341** (0.105)
Education						
High School	0.334** (0.129)	0.334** (0.129)	0.334** (0.129)	0.280* (0.125)	0.280* (0.125)	0.280* (0.125)
Some College	0.433** (0.132)	0.433** (0.132)	0.433** (0.132)	0.493** (0.128)	0.493** (0.128)	0.493** (0.128)
College or more	0.809** (0.138)	0.809** (0.138)	0.809** (0.138)	0.953** (0.135)	0.953** (0.135)	0.953** (0.135)
Race						
Black	-0.276 (0.152)	-0.787** (0.152)	-0.435* (0.221)	-0.402** (0.127)	-0.402** (0.127)	-0.402** (0.127)
Other	-0.065 (0.095)	-0.065 (0.095)	-0.065 (0.095)	-0.134 (0.093)	-0.134 (0.093)	-0.134 (0.093)
Female	0.185* (0.086)	0.333** (0.084)	0.059 (0.113)	0.153* (0.068)	0.153* (0.068)	0.153* (0.068)
Income						
2nd	-0.139 (0.114)	-0.139 (0.114)	-0.139 (0.114)	-0.073 (0.111)	-0.073 (0.111)	-0.073 (0.111)
3rd	-0.142 (0.113)	-0.142 (0.113)	-0.142 (0.113)	-0.069 (0.111)	-0.069 (0.111)	-0.069 (0.111)
4th	-0.061 (0.113)	-0.061 (0.113)	-0.061 (0.113)	0.096 (0.111)	0.096 (0.111)	0.096 (0.111)
5th	0.076 (0.126)	0.076 (0.126)	0.076 (0.126)	0.134 (0.125)	0.134 (0.125)	0.134 (0.125)
Married	-0.345** (0.076)	-0.345** (0.076)	-0.345** (0.076)	-0.331** (0.075)	-0.331** (0.075)	-0.331** (0.075)
Age (years)						
30-44	-0.294* (0.125)	-0.233 (0.121)	0.108 (0.140)	-0.079 (0.107)	-0.079 (0.107)	-0.079 (0.107)
45-59	-0.347** (0.105)	-0.347** (0.105)	-0.347** (0.105)	-0.173 (0.104)	-0.173 (0.104)	-0.173 (0.104)
≥60	-0.660** (0.112)	-0.660** (0.112)	-0.660** (0.112)	-0.207 (0.110)	-0.207 (0.110)	-0.207 (0.110)
Religion						
Protestant	0.956** (0.137)	0.557** (0.140)	0.585** (0.183)	0.769** (0.118)	0.769** (0.118)	0.769** (0.118)
Catholic	0.854** (0.136)	0.551** (0.135)	0.612** (0.174)	0.893** (0.117)	0.893** (0.117)	0.893** (0.117)
Other Christian	-0.020 (0.135)	-0.020 (0.135)	-0.020 (0.135)	-0.039 (0.144)	0.210 (0.142)	0.386* (0.192)

(continued)

Table 4  
Continued

	Marriage			Civil Unions		
	(1) <i>y</i> > Strongly Oppose	(2) <i>y</i> > Oppose	(3) <i>y</i> > Favor	(4) <i>y</i> > Strongly Oppose	(5) <i>y</i> > Oppose	(6) <i>y</i> > Favor
Other, Non-Christian	0.111 (0.158)	0.342* (0.164)	0.559** (0.211)	-0.119 (0.157)	0.464** (0.154)	0.713** (0.183)
No Religion	1.337** (0.140)	1.337** (0.140)	1.337** (0.140)	1.319** (0.134)	1.319** (0.134)	1.319** (0.134)
Political Party						
Independent	-0.120 (0.085)	-0.120 (0.085)	-0.120 (0.085)	-0.030 (0.085)	-0.030 (0.085)	-0.030 (0.085)
Republican	-0.534** (0.121)	-0.828** (0.133)	-0.994** (0.227)	-0.602** (0.108)	-0.602** (0.108)	-0.602** (0.108)
Other Party	-0.488** (0.186)	-0.488** (0.186)	-0.488** (0.186)	-0.724** (0.222)	-0.218 (0.211)	-0.685* (0.306)
Gay Friend	0.818** (0.087)	0.999** (0.091)	1.435** (0.164)	0.897** (0.091)	0.934** (0.083)	1.273** (0.135)
Constant	1.130** (0.223)	-0.499* (0.222)	-2.903** (0.279)	0.962** (0.213)	-0.571** (0.209)	-2.904** (0.239)
Observations	3248	3248	3248	3245	3245	3245
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.174	0.174	0.174	0.139	0.139	0.139

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ . Reference categories are *gay and lesbian* (Frame), *Liberal* (Political Ideology), *Less Than High School* (Education), *White* (Race), *First Quartile* (Income), *18–29 years old* (Age), *Baptist* (Religion), and *Democrat* (Political Party).

of respondents moving from strongly opposing, opposing, and favoring to strongly favoring marriage. When viewed in context, the likelihood of strongly supporting marriage increases substantially.

To derive a more intuitive interpretation of our findings, we estimate the predicted probability of each response option evaluated at the mean or modal category of each independent variable in the model.<sup>10</sup> Strong opposition is lowest when our experiment utilizes the gay and lesbian frame, and highest when the experiment utilizes the homosexual frame. The predicted probability of strongly opposing marriage is 0.17 when the experiment utilizes the gay and lesbian frame, but rises to 0.20 and 0.21 when the experiment utilizes the same-sex and homosexual frames, respectively. Likewise, the predicted probability of simply opposing marriage is highest when the experiment utilizes the gay and lesbian frame, and declines by about 20% when it utilizes the same-sex and homosexual frames.

The patterns are similar when we predict the probability of strongly supporting marriage, although the findings are less stark. The predicted

<sup>10</sup>The mean or modal category for each independent variable in the model is moderate (liberal/conservative scale), high school education (education), white (race), 4th quartile (income), 45–59 years (age), married (marital status), female (gender), Catholic (religion), Independent (political party), and has a gay friend (gay friend). The predicted probabilities are evaluated with marriage seen in context.

probability of strongly supporting marriage is lowest when the experiment utilizes the gay and lesbian frame (0.14) and highest when it utilizes the same-sex or homosexual frame (0.18 and 0.18). By intensifying the likelihood that respondents hold strong opinions, these predicted probabilities illustrate the role of the homosexual and same-sex frames in polarizing attitudes towards marriage.

In Columns 4–6, we report the results of our framing and context experiments on support for civil unions. The results for the framing experiments largely mirror those for marriage. Both the same-sex and the homosexual frames decrease the likelihood respondents will move from strongly opposing civil unions to more favorable attitudes, as reported in Column 4. Column 5 shows that neither frame is associated with a change in the likelihood of respondents selecting one of the agreement options for civil unions, as opposed to one of the disagreement options. Again, as reported in Column 6, the homosexual frame increases the likelihood of respondents transitioning to strongly favoring civil unions from the less favorable categories (and the same-sex frame reveals a parallel direction, but is significant only at the .10 level).

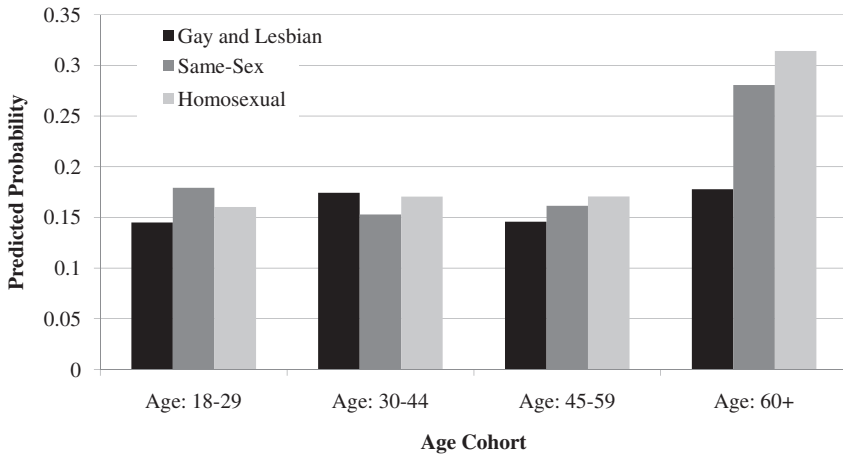
The effect of question context on support for civil unions, however, differs from the pattern observed in support for marriage. When viewed in context, or after the question on marriage, the experiment reveals that respondents are significantly more likely to support civil unions. Column 4 reveals that respondents are more likely to oppose, favor, or strongly favor civil unions when the question is viewed in context, and Column 5 shows that the chances of moving to favoring or strongly favoring are significantly increased when the marriage question is viewed first. When viewed in context, the predicted probability of favoring civil unions rises substantially from 0.42 to 0.50. The predicted probability of opposing civil unions falls from 0.22 to 0.15. Unlike the results for marriage, where a shift in context results in a slight increase in support for the extreme positions (e.g., *strongly favor*, *strongly oppose*), a shift in context for the question on civil unions results in a decline in the predicted probability of strongly opposing or opposing civil unions, and an increase in the predicted probability of supporting or strongly supporting them.

The results of question framing on support for civil unions parallel the results presented for marriage. Relative to the gay and lesbian frame, both the same-sex and homosexual frames increase the predicted probability of strongly opposing or strongly favoring civil unions. The predicted probability of strongly favoring civil unions rises from 0.20 when the experiment utilizes the gay and lesbian frame to 0.23 and 0.24 when it utilizes the same-sex and homosexual frames, respectively. The predicted probability of strongly opposing marriage rises by a similar magnitude when the experiment shifts between frames.

After predicting the odds of supporting marriage and civil unions for the entire sample, we stratify our sample by age cohort to determine whether

Figure 2

*Predicted probability of strongly opposing marriage across framing conditions, by age cohort.*



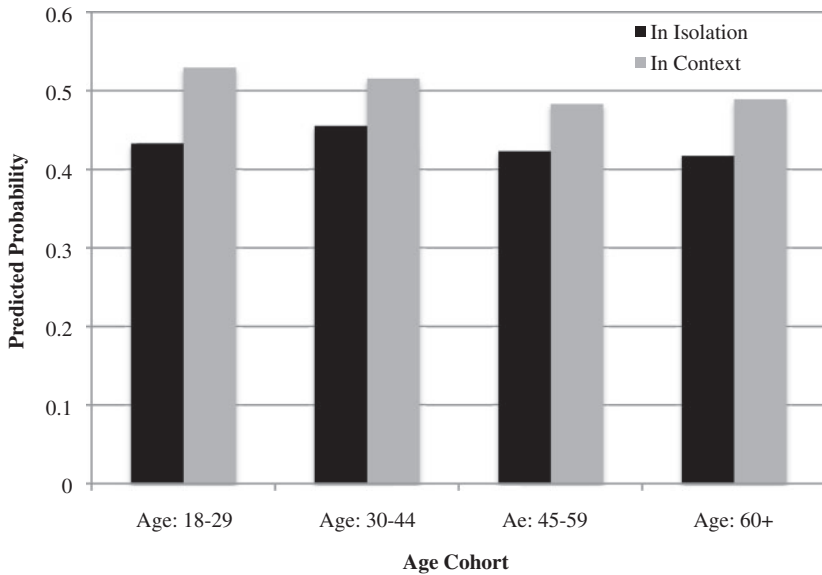
*Note:* These predicted probabilities are evaluated at the mean or modal category of each independent variable in our model. For the oldest cohort of respondents (age: 60+ years), the differences are statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level; for the other three cohorts, the differences are *not* statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level

the effects are concentrated amongst particular groups, or whether they are consistent across the population. As noted earlier, we expect the effect of the homosexual and same-sex frames in depressing support for marriage and civil unions to be particularly pronounced amongst the oldest cohort of respondents. In the stratified sample, we find substantial evidence for our hypotheses about variation across cohorts. In Figure 2, we show the predicted probability of strongly opposing marriage across framing conditions for each age cohort. Across wording conditions, the predicted probability of strongly opposing hovers narrowly in the range of 0.14 to 0.17 for each of the bottom three age cohorts—those aged 18–29, 30–44, and 45–59 years—and the difference is not statistically significant. In the top cohort of respondents aged 60 years and above, the predicted probability of strongly opposing marriage jumps from 0.18 when the experiment relies on the gay and lesbian frame to .281 and 0.31 when the experiment employs the same-sex and the homosexual frames, respectively. The results suggest that the intensification of opposition from framing is concentrated in the oldest cohorts.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>The pattern for the oldest cohort is consistent with the results for civil unions, although we also observe an increase in strong disagreement amongst the second cohort, as well. However, the predicted probability of strongly disagreeing with the statement about civil unions is significantly lower than the predicted probability of strongly disagreeing with the marriage statement. When we examine the intensification of support for marriage (i.e., *strongly favor*), we find the positive effect of the homosexual and same-sex frames concentrated amongst the cohort aged 45–59 years who came of age immediately following the Stonewall Riots and the gay liberation movement.



Figure 3  
*Predicted probability of favoring civil unions, by age cohort.*



*Note:* These predicted probabilities are evaluated at the mean or modal category of each independent variable in our model. For each cohort of respondents, the differences are statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level

When we explore the context effects observed for civil unions, we reveal a very different pattern. Instead of concentrating context effects amongst the oldest cohorts, the pattern of increased support for civil unions when viewed in context is consistent across age cohorts. In Figure 3, we show that the predicted probability of agreeing with civil unions increases when viewed in context, rather than when viewed in isolation. Instead of revealing heterogeneity across cohorts, our findings reveal remarkable consistency.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Anticipating the responsiveness of the political process to shifts in public attitudes, advocacy organizations work to reframe public issues (Jacoby, 2000). This process of reframing has emerged noticeably in debates surrounding marriage and civil unions. Opponents of marriage have invariably sought to reframe the debate around homosexual marriage, carefully crafting their ads to deploy terminology aimed at depressing support for the legalization of marriage. Proponents, on the other hand, have resisted this framing, preferring the framing of gay and lesbian marriage or civil unions in an effort to boost support.

Despite ongoing efforts to shift the terms of the debate, the current study is the first to systematically examine the effect of wording on these attitudes. The results are, in a sense, surprising. We report no variation in mean support across wording frames. For both marriage and civil unions, the shift between the gay and lesbian, same-sex and homosexual frames does not significantly impact the odds of support. However, we report substantial shifts in the intensity of support and opposition across framing conditions, and reveal a concentration in framing effects amongst older Americans. We find the effect of framing on the strength of opposition concentrated among respondents who came of age before the Stonewall riots, but report no variation in the strength of support or opposition across wording conditions for the youngest cohort.

The fact that the homosexual frame and, to a lesser extent, the same-sex frame intensifies public opinion suggests that the current shift in mainstream political discourse towards talking about gay and lesbian relationships is likely to moderate discussions. By conjuring up the now discredited images of mental illness or by foregrounding the sexual nature of relationships, we believe the homosexual and same-sex frames exacerbate perceived differences between heterosexual relationships and gay and lesbian relationships. In doing so, these frames result in a polarization of attitudes toward the extension of marriage rights. We expect the mainstream transition to the gay and lesbian frame to tone down the political discourse surrounding the legal recognition of gay and lesbian relationships, although we do not expect this reframing to increase overall support for marriage (or other forms of civil rights).

Our findings partially explain the substantial resources invested by advocacy organizations in promoting the adoption of their preferred terminology. By intensifying opposition to marriage and civil unions, the public reframing as a debate around homosexual marriage could motivate Americans—and especially older Americans—to participate in political processes (e.g., by writing letters, participating in ballot initiatives, attending public rallies) likely to impact public policy.

Our results serve as a reminder of the importance of nuanced analyses of the ways in which framing matters. Typically, support for marriage and civil unions is reported as a dichotomous outcome with little acknowledgement of the latent variable underlying levels of support. When we examine the results from a dichotomous measure of support, rather than a four-category ordered outcome, our results reveal no sensitivity to framing effects. Instead, reporting on the results of a four-category ordered outcome, we find that framing impacts the intensity of support and opposition. To the extent that intensity of opinion matters in shifting policy agendas, we suggest that public opinion researchers continue to evaluate the effect of question framing on the polarization of political attitudes.

The second part of our experimental findings shows a significant context effect in support for civil unions. Adjudicating between previous experimental results, our study concludes that a shift in question context alters support for civil unions, but does not alter support for marriage. After being primed by a more pointed question on support for marriage and being offered an opportunity to express their opinions on this question, respondents are more likely to support civil unions. The results suggest that the range of potential policy options is likely to impact the way that citizens settle on their preferred choice. While civil unions remain more popular than gay and lesbian marriages as a stand-alone policy proposal, our research suggests their popularity increases when compared to the possibility of marriage.

Since the 2004 Presidential election, the issue of marriage and civil unions has taken center stage in the American political agenda. Although this issue remains contentious in the United States, it has been settled in many European countries by either instituting gender-neutral marriage laws or formalizing procedures for civil unions (Adam, 2003; International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2004). Moreover, linguistic differences limit the generalizability of our framing effect results to other national contexts. While we cannot generalize across countries, we can generalize across policy domains within the umbrella of civil rights for gays and lesbians. In the United States, we suspect that the results we observe in the debate on marriage and civil unions are not unique to this policy domain. Several other issues have emerged as central to the gay rights movement in recent years, including employment nondiscrimination legislation and repeal of the military policy banning the service of openly gay and lesbian soldiers. We expect that similar processes undergird opinion formation on these issues, and that they are subject to a similar polarization in attitudes when framed as the extension of civil liberties to homosexuals, rather than to gay men and lesbians.

While our research confirms that framing matters in this policy domain, it offers limited insight into why framing matters. Although our analysis of the etymology of each of frame suggests a possible explanation for variation, future work should take a qualitative approach to understanding why framing matters, both in this policy domain and others. Although logically equivalent in their implications for public policy, we expect that each frame evokes a different set of meanings when employed in a survey context. Extensions of this research should interrogate why frames matter, and how survey context shapes opinion in discussions of contemporary policy issues.

## References

- Adam, B. (2003). The defense of marriage act and American exceptionalism: The 'gay marriage' panic in the United States. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 12, 259–276.

- Andersen, R., & Fetner, T. (2008). Cohort differences in tolerance of homosexuality: Attitudinal change in Canada and the United States, 1981-2000. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 72, 311-330.
- Bradburn, N. M., & Sudman, S. (1988). *Polls and surveys: Understanding what they tell us*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Brewer, P. R., & Wilcox, C. (2005). The polls-trends: Same-sex marriage and civil unions. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 69, 599-616.
- Brooks, C., & Manza, J. (2007). *Why welfare states persist: the importance of public opinion in democracies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bullough, V. L. (1979). *Homosexuality, a history*. New York: New American Library.
- Carter, D. (2004). *Stonewall: The riots that sparked the gay revolution*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Chong, D., & Druckman, J. N. (2007). Framing theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10, 103-126.
- D'Emilio, J. (1983). *Sexual politics, sexual communities: The making of a homosexual minority in the United States, 1940-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Egan, P. J., Persily, N., & Wallsten, K. (2008). Gay rights. In N. Persily, J. Citrin & P. J. Egan (Eds.), *Public opinion and constitutional controversy* (pp. 234-266). New York: Oxford University Press.
- International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association. (2004). World Legal Map on LGBT Legislations. Retrieved <http://ilga.org/ilga/en/article/1118>.
- Jacoby, W. G. (2000). Issue framing and public opinion on government spending. *American Journal of Political Science*, 44, 750-767.
- Loftus, J. (2001). America's liberalization in attitudes toward homosexuality, 1973 to 1998. *American Sociological Review*, 66, 762-782.
- Mason, R., Carlson, J. E., & Tourangeau, R. (1994). Contrast effects and subtractions in part-whole questions. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 58, 569-578.
- Moore, D. W. (2002). Measuring new types of question-order effects. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 66, 80-91.
- Moore, D. W., & Carroll, J. (2004). Support for gay marriage/civil unions edges upwards. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/11689/Support-Gay-Marriage-Civil-Unions-Edges-Upward.aspx>.
- Nelson, T. E., & Oxley, Z. M. (1999). Issue framing effects on belief importance and opinion. *The Journal of Politics*, 61, 1040-1067.
- Newport, F. (2004). Opposition to legalized same-sex marriage steady. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/10960/Opposition-Legalized-SameSex-Marriage-Steady.aspx>.
- Page, B. I., & Shapiro, R. Y. (1983). Effects of public opinion on policy. *The American Political Science Review*, 77, 175-190.
- Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (2003). *Republicans unified, democrats split on gay marriage: Religious beliefs underpin opposition to homosexuality*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.
- Rasinski, K. A. (1989). The effect of question wording on public support for government spending. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 53, 388-394.
- Rimmerman, C. A. & Wilcox, C. (Eds.). (2007). *The politics of same-sex marriage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Rutgers-Eagleton, P. (2006). New Jerseyans now support gay civil unions by 2-1. Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling, Press Release 159-3. Retrieved from [http://eagletonpoll.rutgers.edu/polls/release\\_06-23-06.pdf](http://eagletonpoll.rutgers.edu/polls/release_06-23-06.pdf).
- Schuman, H., Presser, S., & Ludwig, J. (1981). Context effects on survey responses to questions about abortion. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 45, 216-223.
- Schuman, H., & Presser, S. (1996). *Questions and answers in attitude surveys: Experiments on question form, wording, and context*. London: Sage Publications.
- Silverstein, C. (2009). The implications of removing homosexuality from the DSM as a mental disorder. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 38, 161-163.
- Smith, M. (2005). The politics of same-sex marriage in Canada and the United States. *Political Science and Politics*, 38, 225-228.
- Smith, T. W. (1987). That which we call welfare by any other name would smell sweeter: An analysis of the impact of question wording on response patterns. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51, 75-83.
- Sniderman, P. M., & Theriault, S. M. (2004). The structure of political argument and the logic of issue framing. In W. E. Saris & P. M. Sniderman (Eds.), *Studies in public opinion: Attitudes, nonattitudes, measurement error, and change* (pp. 133-165). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tadlock, B. L., Gordon, C. A., & Popp, E. (2007). Framing the issue of same-sex marriage: traditional values versus equal rights. In C. A. Rimmerman & C. Wilcox (Eds.), *The Politics of Same-Sex Marriage* (pp. 193-214). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tourangeau, R., Rips, L. J., & Rasinski, K. A. (2000). *The psychology of survey response*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Treas, J. (2002). How cohorts, education, and ideology shaped a new sexual revolution on American attitudes toward nonmarital sex, 1972-1998. *Sociological Perspectives*, 45, 267-283.
- Weeks, J. (1977). *Coming out: homosexual politics in Britain from the nineteenth century to the present*. London: Quartet Books.
- Wilcox, C., Brewer, P. R., Shames, S., & Lake, C. (2007). If I bent this far will I break? Public opinion about same-sex marriage. In C. A. Rimmerman & C. Wilcox (Eds.), *The Politics of Same-Sex Marriage* (pp. 215-242). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

### Biographical Notes

Brian J. McCabe is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Georgetown University.

Jennifer A. Heerwig is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Sociology at New York University.