A Transformed Society

*LGBT Rights in the United States*

It is apparent that condemnation of homosexuality is today almost universal. . . . Occasionally one encounters an attitude not so much of tolerance but of actual acceptance, but this is rare. . . . The basic problem is the *hostile spirit* pervading even the more permissive of modern peoples.

—Donald Webster Cory, *The Homosexual in America*, 1951

(emphasis added)

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a dramatic wave began to form in the waters of public opinion: American attitudes involving homosexuality began to change. The key to understanding why is simple. As the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) decimated the gay community in the late 1980s, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists demanded that the media begin to cover AIDS and other issues of importance to them. Then, as the public’s fear of AIDS waned and a national dialogue on gay rights emerged in the early 1990s, lesbians and gays across the country began to feel more comfortable living openly. So many people learned of gay family members, friends, and acquaintances that the basic negative reactions that most people had toward lesbians and gays began to evaporate. As this visceral negativity towards homosexuality dissipated in the wake of increased familiarity with lesbians and gays, a marked transformation of the American public’s views on gay rights started that has continued to this day.

The transformation of America’s response to homosexuality has been—and continues to be—one of the most rapid and sustained shifts in mass attitudes since the start of public polling. As late as 1987, the General Social Survey (GSS) found that 78 percent of the American public thought that same-sex relations were “Always Wrong.” A mere
twenty-five years later, the same survey found that only 45 percent believed homosexuality was “Always Wrong,” with an equal percentage saying same-sex relations were “Not Wrong at All.” Put another way, over a third of the American public has changed its view on just this one question. Since the 1990s, change among younger Americans has been so drastic that many pundits and academics have concluded that opposition to gay rights will soon go the way of support for segregated schools and opposition to interracial marriage. Only strong conservatives and the very religious have remained immune to this trend.

How has this change in public opinion occurred? What are its primary causes? Why do we not see attitude change of similar magnitudes on other issues? What makes gay rights different?

The change in Americans’ basic reaction to lesbians and gays is much broader than surveys have captured. In the 1960s and 1970s, journalists routinely dismissed gay issues as improper or unseemly for public consumption. Elected officials either ignored lesbians or gays or openly denigrated them. When presented with well-reasoned constitutional arguments for gay rights, federal judges concluded without a second thought that discrimination against lesbians and gays was perfectly legal.

Times have changed. Lesbian and gay issues are now regularly discussed in the national news. Many political figures tend to endorse laws supporting gay rights. Federal judges across the country and a majority of the US Supreme Court now appear persuaded that the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment renders many anti-gay laws unconstitutional. Lesbian and gay characters are now regularly depicted on American entertainment television, including shows geared toward teenage audiences like Teen Wolf and Glee. And, most important, a vast majority of the public now reports personally knowing out lesbian and gay relatives, friends, or coworkers.

All of these facets of the nation’s growing acceptance of lesbians and gays are interrelated with change in public support for gay rights. In democracies such as the United States, politicians generally respond to public opinion. Judges and television executives do not wish to appear too out-of-step with the public. LGBT people themselves feel more comfortable coming out to those perceived to be more supportive of gay rights.

Although public opinion may encourage these changes, it is often driven by them. The changing stances of politicians, television, and
personal experiences with respect to LGBT people have all been shown
to cause more liberal attitudes toward lesbians, gays, and their rights.\textsuperscript{13}
This interrelationship makes understanding the root cause of attitude
change difficult. But understanding why and how opinions have changed
is central to comprehending why many aspects of American society—
entertainment, politics, corporations—appear to be, at least rhetori-
cally, more tolerant of the existence of lesbians and gays. Recognizing
the central role that mass attitude change has had in these broader social
changes is key to understanding the social revolution regarding sexual-
ity in both the United States and across the globe. This, in turn, leads us
to consider the extent to which this process of attitude change may be
pertinent to other issue areas.

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The core argument of this book is simple: It is that the most important
factor that has allowed for a rapid, significant, and durable transforma-
tion in public opinion about lesbians and gays has been the tireless work
of LGBT activists, especially during the AIDS crisis. LGBT and anti-
AIDS activists reoriented the national dialogue by changing the way the
news media approached gay rights issues. As the national media began
to discuss gay rights, the lesbian and gay community no longer felt as
isolated from society at large. This led to a massive increase in “coming
out” and the transformation of American society.

This book is about how the explosion of tolerance for gay rights that
Americans are rapidly expressing on surveys has its origins in the ways
in which lesbians and gays have fought back against the stigma they
have felt from the larger society. As the LGBT movement assaulted this
stigma, it unleashed a series of contextual changes in American society
that cascaded into further change. The goal of this book is to disentangle
these various contextual shifts in media, politics, and society and to ex-
plain how LGBT activism eventually caused the metamorphosis of pub-
lic perceptions of lesbians and gays.

Although LGBT activists started the process of change by pressuring
political elites and the national media to pay attention to the AIDS crisis
and other gay issues, the eventual responsiveness of these institutions to
activist pressure provided another crucial link in causing social change.
The notion that institutional change can bring about shifts in public opinion is hardly a new theory. However, the actual process through which institutions have brought about change in public perceptions of lesbians and gays has been misunderstood. The central problem with preexisting theories of change in mass opinion on gay rights—framing and elite-signaling (explained below and in chapter 2)—is that they tend to operate *directly* through news media. In the media, framing involves the use of phrases and words that cause readers or viewers to apply certain values, like beliefs in equality and fairness, to gay rights, while elite-signaling involves individuals adopting the positions of political leaders on an issue when those positions are communicated through news media.

Such media-led theories are ill-suited as an explanation for the distinctive features of change in support for gay rights. For instance, *not only* has the public become more liberal in its attitudes toward gay rights in time periods of *intense news attention* to gay rights, but it has also grown more tolerant in time periods when *news attention to gay issues has been close to zero*. Furthermore, attitudinal change on gay rights has occurred both among those who follow the news regularly and among those who report *complete inattention to the news*. If attitude change comes directly from news coverage of gay rights, then why is it not most concentrated among those that watch the news?

This book argues that institutional changes in the American media and political system, specifically the start of a prominent national dialogue on lesbian and gay rights, did not act *directly* on the American public as is usually the case when the media causes attitude change on other issues. Instead, rather than causing the distinctive changes that we have seen on gay rights, what these institutional changes did—in reality—*was to encourage lesbians and gays to “come out” en masse*. Thus, institutional change brought about a “boom” in public exposure to lesbians and gays—both through media *and interpersonally*. It was this “boom” in exposure to lesbians and gays that resulted in all of the distinctive features of change in gay rights and ultimately led tolerance to triumph. Figure 1.1 summarizes this causal sequence of attitude change.

I term this theory—that exposure to lesbians and gays was the defining factor that has caused distinctive change on gay rights attitudes as
compared to other issues—the theory of affective liberalization. Evidence in this book demonstrates that exposure to lesbians and gays increased support for gay rights by significantly warming the automatic emotional reactions—positive or negative—that spring to mind when people think about lesbians and gays. While other factors also affect support for gay rights, it is this increased exposure—in the form of interpersonal and mediated contact with lesbians and gays—that has largely defined the most prominent features of opinion change on gay issues: its broadness, its durability, its rapidity, and its concentration among the millennial generation.

The next section outlines change in American attitudes on gay rights over the last forty years. After illustrating these trends, I outline my theory of affective liberalization. One other major feature of this work is also previewed in this chapter: a strong emphasis on the role of the LGBT movement in providing a catalyzing force for change through years of sustained activism. Other academic accounts miss that centrality. A brief outline of the book follows.

When we survey attitude change on gay rights, we are first struck by the rapidity and scale of the change. However, an equally impressive feature of this change is that it has occurred across nearly every question asked by pollsters regarding lesbians, gays, or homosexuality regularly. From public acceptability of homosexuality to support for allowing gay teachers, we have seen a sustained shift in public support.15

Civil Liberties

Without legal support for the rights of minorities to communicate with the public—in the form of speeches, books, rallies, and parades—the public will likely never encounter the viewpoints of minorities.

The first national survey to ask about support for the civil liberties of lesbians and gays was the General Social Survey (GSS) in 1972.16

Figure 1.2. Trends in Support for Gay Civil Liberties.

These trends involve the percentage of the public who would allow a library book or a public speech on homosexuality in their community by an “admitted homosexual.” The largest shifts take place in the late 1980s as mass attention to AIDS increased.

Approximately every two years, this survey asks a different representative sample of the American public an expansive battery of questions during interviews that last well over an hour. Four frequently asked questions involve gay rights. Three questions ask about support for the free speech rights of gays. Of these three, two questions directly involve civil liberties for lesbians and gays: one asks respondents if they believe that homosexuals should be allowed to make a speech in their community; the other asks if it would be proper to have a book favoring homosexuality and written by an “admitted homosexual” removed from a library in a respondent’s community.

Figure 1.2 plots the trend in the numbers of respondents that would allow a pro-gay book in the library and allow a pro-gay speaker. In terms of allowing a pro-gay book in a library, there was little overall change until 1988. Before that year, support for allowing such a book hovered around 58 percent on average. Beginning in 1988 and continuing until 1991, support rose rapidly to 70 percent. A steady increase in support then began in the 1990s and 2000s and reached 78 percent in 2012.

A similar trend emerges from the question involving allowing a gay speaker. The only difference is that there does appear to be some more consistent upward trending in support prior to 1988. Support for a gay community speaker rose about 9 percent in the fifteen years from 1972 to 1987. By 1993, the percentage of the public who would allow a gay speaker had risen to 81 percent. Support remained in the low 80s until 2008, before finally rising to 88 percent in 2012. While this represents a much quicker increase in support for gay speakers than for pro-gay books, both questions see similar trends—a rapid increase in support starting in the late 1980s.

**Employment Nondiscrimination**

No single cluster of issues has been more consistently polled for a longer period of time than the rights of lesbians and gays to hold various forms of employment free from discrimination. Prior to the start of same-sex marriage in 2003, nearly every national battle that occurred over gay rights involved some battle over equal employment opportunities, from California’s 1978 vote on Prop 6, which sought to ban lesbian and gay
schoolteachers, to the current struggle to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) in Congress.

Figure 1.3 shows the trend on responses to four related questions first asked in the 1970s. Many more questions concerned equal employment, though few go back as far in time as those displayed. Plotted here also is the third GSS question from the free speech battery, about allowing a “homosexual” to teach in a college. The other questions plotted are from Gallup, an organization that regularly polls the public on important topics relating to government policy and performance. These questions involve allowing gays to teach in elementary schools and to serve openly in the US Armed Forces, as well as a general question asking about support for nondiscrimination laws in employment practices on the basis of sexual orientation.

Figure 1.3. Trends in Support for Employment Nondiscrimination and Various Forms of Equal Employment Opportunities for Lesbians and Gays. 
Taken together, the trends reveal a more-or-less even liberalization in support of employment protections from the 1970s onward. The amount of change is fairly consistent across question and decade, although rising support for nondiscrimination may have leveled off in the mid-2000s. Support for allowing gays in the military did decline rapidly in 1992 and 1993. This was at the same time that conservatives in Congress mobilized against a potential executive order by President Bill Clinton allowing lesbians and gays to serve openly, discussed in more detail in chapter 5. That said, support quickly rebounded by 1996.

One thing to note is that support for various forms of employment protections have been consistently high—over 50 percent in the 1970s and between 70 and 80 percent in the 2000s. The one exception in the figure is support for allowing gay elementary school teachers. Support for nondiscrimination in terms of gay doctors, gay salespeople, and gay members of the president’s cabinet generally matches the high level of support for nondiscrimination laws in general. Over time only support for gay clergy members has been closer to the generally lower levels of support for gay elementary school teachers.

Legality of Homosexuality

Naturally, the public’s stance toward the legality or illegality of homosexuality is important for the lives of lesbians and gays. If laws banning homosexuality are in place, lesbians and gays are—quite literally—criminals. In the past, the existence of such laws has been a major justification for government discrimination in other areas of life. The Washington Post, Gallup, and CBS (in conjunction with the New York Times) have polled the public regularly on whether or not they believe homosexual activity should be legal or illegal since the late 1970s. Figure 1.4 displays opinion trends on the legality of homosexuality.

One caveat is in order when it comes to the Gallup Poll’s question on this topic. In the early 1980s, when Gallup began asking the public about views on the legality of homosexuality, it first asked about support for employment protections for gays or some specific gay right. Egan, Persily, and Wallsten discovered that when such questions preceded the question on the legality of homosexuality, support for legality increased
by about 12 percent. When it comes to tracking change in opinions, question wording effects like these are problematic. Gallup stopped asking these leading questions on other gay rights policies immediately after the 1986 Bowers vs. Harwick Supreme Court decision, which found that state laws banning sodomy, including bans on heterosexual sodomy, were constitutional. This question-order effect on the Gallup Poll may have falsely led to the conclusion that Bowers had decreased support for the legality of homosexuality.22 For the purposes of the trend lines in figure 1.4, I omit polls in years when the legality question was preceded by another gay rights question.

With these responses on the Gallup Poll omitted, the three polling firms that asked the public their support for laws banning homosexuality tell a consistent story. In the 1980s, just 30–40 percent of the public believed that homosexuality should be legal. This changed rapidly in the 1990s. By 2000, legality of homosexuality had majority support. This was just in time for the Supreme Court to reconsider its Bowers ruling in 2003, when the court explicitly overturned Bowers in its Lawrence vs. Texas decision. There was a decline in support for legality after
Lawrence, but that likely had more to do with Massachusetts legalizing same-sex marriage than with Lawrence.\textsuperscript{23} Since then, support for legality has increased to over 60 percent.

**Same-Sex Marriage and Adoption Rights**

Since Massachusetts first legalized same-sex marriage in 2003, support for marriage equality for lesbian and gay couples has received more press attention and polling than any other gay rights issue.\textsuperscript{24} In marked contrast, the right of gay and lesbian couples to adopt children receives only sparse news coverage.\textsuperscript{25} In figure 1.5, the trends on questions asked by *Newsweek* and Pew, another prominent polling organization, involving support for same-sex marriage are displayed alongside questions asked by Gallup and Pew involving support for the adoption rights of same-sex couples. The *Newsweek* question is unique, in that it was first regularly asked in the 1990s, when same-sex marriage was largely off the radar of the other polling firms.

During the 1990s, support for same-sex marriage appears to have been largely flat. That is, while it may have increased slightly during this decade, the question was asked so infrequently that it is hard to tell. Unlike other issues described earlier, few lesbians or gays (or LGBTQ activists) paid any attention to marriage equality in the 1990s.

![Figure 1.5: Trends in Support for Same-Sex Marriage and Adoption Rights.](source: Bowman and Fostor, "Attitudes about Homosexuality and Gay Marriage"; Bowman, Rugg, and Marsico, "Polls on Attitudes on Homosexuality and Gay Marriage."
Nearly all LGBTQ legal activists were more concerned with legal challenges to anti-sodomy statutes, *Bowers*, and other anti-gay laws. Political activists focused their attention on Don’t-Ask-Don’t-Tell (DADT), hate-crimes legislation, and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). It makes sense, in this context, that with few LGBTQ activists advocating for marriage equality, few members of the public would move in favor of it.

Since 2003, not only has this inattention ended, but marriage equality has become a central focus of movement activity and advocacy. Furthermore, reports of the public becoming more and more supportive of same-sex marriage have dominated the national news. When Barack Obama endorsed marriage equality in 2012, a majority of the public began to support marriage equality for the first time, as shown in the figure.

While this positive movement has been impressive, the rise in support for gay adoption has been of an equal magnitude since the early 1990s. From 1994 to 2002, Pew shows an increase of over 15 percent in public support for adoption rights. Support moved over 50 percent at the very same time that marriage equality began to be backed by a majority. Adoption rights may have received greater media attention than marriage equality in the 1990s, but that press attention has been nowhere near the amount that marriage equality has received in recent years. Yet support for same-sex couples adopting children has increased just as much.

**Support for Gay and Lesbian Children**

Disapproval of lesbian and gay children is an unspoken crisis. The Williams Institute has estimated that 40 percent of homeless youth are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Not every lesbian or gay child with disapproving parents runs away. However, those who stay in homes with disapproving parents are often left both psychologically isolated and saddled with increased levels of stress during their teenage years.

The *Los Angeles Times* and Pew have periodically asked members of the public how they would react if their child told them he or she is gay (see table 1.1). Recent positive changes in responses to this question are
even more unprecedented than change in marriage equality support or change in the legality of homosexuality. In the mid-1980s, over 60 percent of individuals said they would be “Very Upset” if their child confided in them that she or he is gay. In 2013, Pew found only 19 percent still taking this same position—a 40 percent reduction in negativity directed at having gay children. Only 9 percent stated that they would be “Not Very Upset” or “Not Upset at All” in the early 1980s. By 2013, a majority of the public, 55 percent, told Pew they would “Not [be] Upset.” This represents a radical transformation of the very nature of the lesbian and gay experience in America.

Acceptability, Approval, and Affective Feelings

For my last set of trends, I wish to show how the public’s immediate reactions to lesbians, gays, and their relationships have changed. In figure 1.6, I have plotted responses to a question on the GSS that asks respondents if they approve of same-sex relations. Respondents can pick from one of four categories to express their reactions to these relationships: “Always Wrong,” “Almost Always Wrong,” “Sometimes Wrong,” and “Not Wrong at All.” The percentage of respondents who picked “Not Wrong at All” between the early 1970s and the early 2010s is plotted in figure 1.6.

It turns out that people feel very confident about the direction of their response to the same-sex relations question. Very few respondents ever pick the two middle categories: “Almost Always Wrong” or “Sometimes

| Table 1.1. Parents’ Reported Emotional Reactions If Their Child Said He or She Is Lesbian or Gay (1983–2014) |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Very Upset                                       | 61%                                              | 63%                                              | 34%                                              | 29%                                              | 19%                                              |
| Somewhat Upset                                   | 27%                                              | 27%                                              | 38%                                              | 33%                                              | 21%                                              |
| Not Very Upset                                   | 4%                                                | 4%                                                | 9%                                               | 13%                                              | 55%                                              |
| Not Upset at All                                 | 5%                                                | 4%                                                | 15%                                              | 20%                                              | 5%                                                |
| Don’t Know/Refused                               | 4%                                                | 5%                                                | 4%                                               | 5%                                              | 5%                                                |
| N                                                | 1521                                             | 1147                                             | 2071                                             | 1336                                             | 740                                              |
| Polling Firm                                     | LA Times                                         | LA Times                                         | LA Times                                         | LA Times                                         | Pew                                              |
Wrong.” This means that nearly everyone picks either “Not Wrong at All” or “Always Wrong.”

Displayed alongside the GSS trend are responses to a Gallup Poll question: “Do you feel that homosexuality should be considered an acceptable alternative lifestyle or not?” “Acceptability” tends to be higher than actual “approval” (the GSS question), as shown in figure 1.6.

The last trend in figure 1.6 is the average response on the American National Election Study’s (ANES) feeling thermometer of lesbians and gays. Sponsored by the National Science Foundation, the ANES is a well-known poll that asks respondents their views on political issues nearly every two years.29 In every presidential election year and most midterm election years, the ANES surveys a representative sample of American voters on their political attitudes and engagement with politics. The ANES also periodically conducts panel studies that resurvey the same respondents in order to track how their attitudes change in
response to events. Their feeling thermometer question opens with the following prompt:

We'd like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. We'll show the name of a person and we'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 the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the 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 the person. If we come to a person whose name you don't recognize, you don't need to rate that person.30

To drive the point home, respondents are often shown a picture of an actual thermometer with 0 at cold and 100 at warm. After being asked about their immediate reactions to a number of political figures, like the president or vice president, the respondents are then asked to rate various social groups including “Lesbians and Gays, that is Homosexuals.” In figure 1.6, I plot the average ratings of “Lesbians and Gays” since 1984.

The feeling thermometer of the ANES is unique in that it is the best regularly taken measure of people’s automatic reactions toward lesbians and gays. Typically, people do not think much about the group in question before picking a response because they must rate some thirty or so social groups and political figures using the thermometer in rapid succession. The feeling thermometer is thus very close to a measure of what people automatically feel, positive or negative, toward the group being rated.

The trends on the GSS’s approval of same-sex relations, Gallup’s acceptability of homosexuality, and the ANES’s feeling thermometer of lesbians and gays are fairly consistent. They show no significant changes until the early 1990s. In the 1990s, all these questions start to trend upward toward greater approval and positivity in a rather consistent fashion. Around the year 2000, the upward trajectory of these trends starts to flatten. In 2003, the Gallup trend in acceptability fluctuates as same-sex marriage first makes the news. When same-sex marriage support began
to rise around the end of the 2000s, acceptability and approval started to increase again. The average feeling thermometer score stayed in place.\textsuperscript{31}

What does this change in the feeling thermometer actually mean? It is so abstract, it may be hard to wrap our minds around the significance of this change. Because automatic emotional feelings toward lesbians and gays are so central to the public’s views on lesbian and gay rights,
and because responses to social groups come so effortlessly to most people, it is necessary to gather more information to determine just what the warming of public reactions shown in figure 1.6 means. Figure 1.7 should help provide some context. It displays the average ratings of several other distinct groups in the mid-1980s and in 2012. In general, emotional reactions to various groups on the feeling thermometer appear to fit into roughly three categories: (1) groups that the public may find threatening (rated below 40 degrees); (2) groups that a vast majority of the public like (rated above 60 degrees); and (3) groups that are disliked by some large segments of the public and liked by other large segments of the public (rated between 40 and 60 degrees). Groups that are heavily active in politics tend to fit into this last “polarizing” group. For better context, I also include in figure 1.7 a few groups in the “threatening” category that are rated only in a single time period.

In the 1980s, gays and lesbians clearly fit into the bottom “threatening” group. Their average rating was similar to that of “black militants” and “illegal aliens.” However, by 2012 lesbians and gays had transitioned into the “polarizing” group. In fact, they had become one of the better liked groups in that category. With an average rating over 47 degrees, lesbians and gays were better liked than “liberals” and only slightly less popular than “conservatives.” In 2012, they surpassed the average rating of “Christian fundamentalists,” the group most often associated with opposition to lesbian and gay rights. Although the relative position of the cluster of “threatening” groups in 2012—“illegal immigrants,” “Muslims,” and “Atheists”—had also improved as compared to similar groups in the 1980s, their improvement was much more limited as compared to public reactions toward lesbians and gays.

As demonstrated by figure 7.1, the public largely had automatic strong negative feelings toward lesbians and gays in the 1980s. That these negative feelings have dissipated in only two decades is nothing less than staggering. Nothing like that has occurred with any other group. In a broader sense, these reactions encapsulate something much more significant for public opinion than any of the other attitudes mentioned earlier.

Why is this the case? It is because these automatic emotional reactions—the subconscious feelings that spring to mind when a certain group of people is suddenly mentioned—go on to color and shape the experiences of individuals vis-à-vis that group.
When someone learns that a colleague, friend, or family member is lesbian or gay, such emotions spring to mind before any conscious thoughts or memories are mentally accessed. If the instantaneous reaction that a person has when “gay” or “lesbian” is mentioned in conversation is positive, then that positive reaction increases the possibility that the person will enjoy interacting with lesbian and gay friends, working with lesbian and gay colleagues, or encountering lesbian and gay themes on television. A positive emotional reaction is also likely to increase the chance that a judge would rule in favor of lesbians and gays in a judicial decision, that a politician would endorse gay rights when running for office, or that a survey respondent would support lesbian and gay rights when asked. If these reactions are negative, the automatic feelings of dislike will likely have the opposite effect, making it more difficult to ultimately feel positive about encounters with lesbians and gays in ways that would allow for social change.

All of these emotional reactions are very important. When lesbian and gay activists say that social change has occurred—that a positive and meaningful change in the way Americans react to lesbians and gays has happened—they are not necessarily referring to the polling of some policy or abstract right. Rather, they are referring in a deeper sense to the emotional changes they have seen in those with whom they share their lives. The basic, knee-jerk negativity that lesbians and gays experienced as late as the early 1990s—the “hostile spirit” referred to by Donald Webster Cory in the epigraph to this chapter—has dissipated across major parts of the country. That it not to say that resistance to lesbian and gay people is not strong in some areas and among some people. It most certainly is. But this negativity is no longer an ever-present reality for many lesbians and gays. Its absence is real social change.

A Theory of Affective Liberalization

It is around this dissipation of negative reactions to lesbians and gays that I build a theory of the larger causes of attitude change on gay rights. I will explore the full development of the theory in chapter 2, but a short summary will provide a clearer picture of the argument that this book advances regarding both the cause of this dissipation of negative feelings
and the cause of the more distinctive features of public opinion change on gay issues: increasing mass exposure to lesbian and gay people. This brief summary will also make clear how this new theory fills in gaps left by prior research.

The Centrality of Automatic Affective Reactions for Gay Rights Support

The first component of the theory of affective liberalization is that change in people’s emotional reactions to lesbians and gays has had a major role in swaying the public to favor (or oppose) specific gay rights policies. Many studies on the bases of support for lesbian and gay rights have found that these reactions are indeed a dominant factor. What may have been missing in the prior research, however, is an emphasis on just how central these feelings are for support of gay rights as compared to other considerations or predispositions.

The importance of automatic affective feelings (or implicit attitudes) that people hold toward various groups and political figures has recently become a major focus of the political psychology literature. Specifically, Lodge and Taber, building on dual process theories of decision-making in the work of Kahneman and Tversky, report a plethora of findings conclusively demonstrating that affective reactions emerge nearly instantaneously when individuals are led by some stimulus to think about a particular group or person. Once recalled, these reactions then ease the remembering of affectively congruent considerations from memory. For instance, if someone has a strong negative reaction to George W. Bush, she is more likely to remember specific things about Bush that she does not like. If she were then asked to choose between George W. Bush and another candidate in an election, these recalled negative memories would affect candidate choice over and above any negative effect of the initial emotional reaction, thereby essentially multiplying the ultimate effect of these reactions on decision-making.

While the social science literature on lesbian and gay rights has found this linkage between affective reactions and gay rights support, Lodge and Taber’s work suggests a much greater role for these reactions in individuals’ support for specific group-based rights of lesbians and gays than
previously thought. Because affective reactions are a major predictor of attitudes toward all gay rights, we would expect that if something could warm these affective reactions, then support for the entire constellation of lesbian and gay–related rights—legality of homosexuality, support for employment protections, support for gay adoptions, and so on—would rise without the public ever needing to be exposed to discussions involving the merits of these specific policies. It should be noted that just such a rise in support across all gay rights was directly observed in the public opinion trends described earlier.

The Relationship between Exposure to Lesbians and Gays and Automatic Affective Reactions

Given the likely importance of affective reactions toward lesbians and gays, it is worth asking the question: Just what could have caused such reactions to warm so greatly? This is the more novel and important component of the theory. Based on research in social psychology, there is strong reason to suspect that what has warmed these affective reactions to lesbians and gays is the marked increase in exposure—in the United States and elsewhere—to lesbians and gays themselves. This exposure has come in two major forms: interpersonal contact with lesbians and gays and portrayals of lesbians and gays in popular culture. As I describe in chapter 6, trends in interpersonal and mediated contact with lesbians and gays show dramatic increases in the 1990s. Not only that, but both trends almost exactly match the changes seen in support for gay rights just described.

According to the theory of affective liberalization, what has ultimately led to the distinctive features of opinion change on lesbian and gay rights is the sharp rise in the number of lesbians and gays willing to share their lives with others. Also important is the increased willingness of those who control the media to allow representations of lesbians, gays, and viewpoints in support of their rights in media. By warming affective reactions, increasing exposure to lesbians and gays led to the rapid increase in support for gay rights in the 1990s. Insofar as affective reactions are a central consideration for support of all gay rights policies, the theory of affective liberalization explains why we have seen across-the-board increases in support for all lesbian and gay rights,
even on those gay rights issues that receive little press coverage and among individuals who are generally inattentive to news coverage.\textsuperscript{39}

\textit{Youth Liberalism and the Origin of Cohort Effects}

The relationship between affective feelings and gay rights support also leads directly to a theory of one of the most puzzling aspects of attitude change on gay rights from the perspective of the public opinion literature: youth liberalism with regard to homosexuality. Affective reactions have been found to stabilize, or become harder to change, the more individuals learn about a group or person.\textsuperscript{40} Similarly, the more information we gain about a group or person, the harder it is to reverse the positivity or negativity of the reaction. For instance, if a liberal has a negative reaction to Bill O’Reilly or Rush Limbaugh, that emotional reaction would be difficult to change, even in the highly unlikely event that he was to repudiate all of his prior political positions, call for massive increases in education and social spending to combat income inequality, and then endorse legal abortion and same-sex marriage. A liberal would still automatically feel a twinge of negativity when seeing images of O’Reilly or Limbaugh on television. An instantaneous negative emotional reaction to the sight of O’Reilly or Limbaugh based on past exposure and experiences would have been stabilized.

To date, no research has found the cause of increasing youth liberalism with respect to gay rights. Some studies have theorized that younger people may be more likely to personally know lesbians and gays and that this may lead to more positive attitudes.\textsuperscript{41} But the theoretical explanations tend to end there. Studies that have included year of birth as a predictor of gay rights support and controlling for reported contact with lesbians and gays have still found year of birth to have an independent effect.\textsuperscript{42} Thus, there has to be something else also causing youth liberalism vis-a-vis homosexuality. Some have theorized that young people maybe more “open” to new attitudes also,\textsuperscript{43} but just why this is the case is seldom explained. Indeed, those who make such a claim never ask why younger people are expected to be more open on gay rights, when on nearly every other issue they adopt attitudes similar to those of their parents.\textsuperscript{44}

The central role of affective reactions is directly related to cohort effects on attitudes involving gay rights. Put simply, the first bits of
information that a person encounters involving lesbians or gays forms an initial affective reaction for the next time that person encounters lesbians or gays. In earlier time periods, this initial information on homosexuality would likely have involved negative stereotypes of homosexuals as “weird,” “deviant,” or “perverted.” Some may have also formed a negative impression due to stereotypes transmitted through news media. These stereotypes proliferated from Senator McCarthy’s “Lavender Scare” in the late 1940s to the early AIDS crisis in the 1980s (see chapter 3).

Thus, effects of exposure to lesbians and gays differ for younger and older people. Past exposure to negative information on homosexuality causes older people to have a negative instantaneous reaction when they meet lesbians and gays and first learn their sexual orientation. Any liberalizing effect of this exposure must then fight against these negative initial reactions for attitude change to occur. Though not insurmountable, the negative emotional reaction stacks the deck against attitude change for older individuals.

For the millennial generation, however, the first exposure to lesbians and gays that likely occurs is when a person either meets lesbians or gays themselves or sees them portrayed on television. Thus, for younger people, meeting a lesbian or gay person (or seeing one on television) forms a new (likely) positive reaction for subsequent encounters. In addition to the chance that this initial exposure will have a direct positive effect on gay rights support, it also positively colors future encounters and makes subsequent exposure more likely to result in more pro-gay attitudes. This significantly increases the effectiveness of exposure to lesbians and gays on gay rights attitudes for younger people. Thus, we should see very strong year of birth effects in public opinion on gay rights as compared to nearly every other political issue.

In summary, the theory of affective liberalization posits the following:

1. Interpersonal and mediated exposure to lesbians and gays directly affects the automatic affective reactions people have toward lesbians and gays.
2. Automatic affective reactions then directly affect support for all (or nearly all) specific gay rights policies on surveys.
3. As automatic affective reactions are less stable in younger people, this leads to stronger exposure effects on automatic affective reac-
tions for younger individuals. Ultimately, this results in cohort effects in lesbian and gay rights support in the presence of swift increases in exposure.

One additional feature rounds out the model:

4. Political attention to a specific gay rights policy, transmitted through news, is important in changing attitudes, but mostly only on that specific policy, or on policies the public may closely associate with the specific policy.

The linkage between affective feelings and support for specific gay-rights policies like employment protections or same-sex marriage is key. According to the theory, as these automatic affective feelings warm, support for all gay rights policies should increase as a result. Thus, increased exposure to lesbians and gays is the driving force of rising support for lesbian and gay rights. Accordingly, the major reason for the rapid increase in support for gay rights is that gays and lesbians came out rapidly in the 1990s—both interpersonally and culturally. In chapter 6, I present conclusive evidence that this occurred.

A More Durable Shift in Attitudes

One prominent prediction of the theory is that attitude change, if mediated through affective reactions, will be more durable than other news-based mechanisms of attitude change. First, once people know lesbians and gays, it would be difficult to “unknow” them. This implies that in most situations, it would be difficult for some of the effects of exposure to be undone. However, the very nature of affective reactions means that attitudes that are based on exposure to lesbians and gays will stabilize over time. Therefore, even if gays and lesbians stop coming out and lesbians and gays are removed from television, the effects of prior contact will endure. Unlike change in attitudes caused by news attention, which may quickly decay as news attention fades, change in gay rights support brought about by a warming of affective reactions to lesbians and gays should be longer lasting, given that these affective reactions tend to lead to more durable attitudinal change.
When we think of social change in terms of lesbian and gay rights—its rapidity, its duration, its magnitude, and its concentration among the young—the theory of affective liberalization states that all of these features are, in fact, the downstream effects of increasing interpersonal contact and mediated contact with lesbians and gays. All of these features of attitude change are rarely found with regard to other issues regularly discussed in politics. Thus, while change in public opinion can be caused by political attention or elite messaging, what has produced the more distinctive features of change in attitudes on lesbian and gay issues is, in reality, the “coming out” of lesbians and gays, both interpersonally and culturally.

That said, it would be a mistake to minimize the importance of news attention given to lesbian and gay issues in changing attitudes on gay rights. Changes in the structure of support for gay rights caused by political attention to an issue are important and can occur fairly rapidly. However, the direct effects of these changes can be somewhat short-lived. Examples include those noted earlier concerning support for gays serving openly in the military in 1992 and 1993 and for the legality of homosexuality in 2003. However, in both of these specific cases, support quickly returned to an equilibrium level after press attention to the issue lessened and any information communicated by that press attention was forgotten by the public.

Political and news attention matters in terms of causing lasting opinion change, but in more indirect ways. As I argue in the coming chapters, hard news mattered in encouraging more and more lesbians and gays to come out of the closet. Although the empirical evidence is spotty, the timing of trends presented in this book suggests that media attention to AIDS from 1990 to 1992, Bill Clinton’s endorsement of gay rights in 1992, and the 1993 Don’t-Ask-Don’t-Tell (DADT) controversy may have had a large role in social change by helping to encourage lesbians and gays to come out en masse as described in chapter 6.

The one policy issue that may admittedly be an exception is same-sex marriage. This exception involves how closely it is related to affective feelings over time. In the 1990s, marriage equality was so outside the realm of possibility that even those with positive feelings toward lesbians and gays did not automatically support same-sex marriage. This included many LGBT activists.47
Since about 2008, same-sex marriage may have upset the causal order of affective feelings and support for specific gay-rights policies in a different way. Once marriage equality became a possibility starting in 2003, LGBT activists needed to connect the already existing increase in positivity toward lesbians and gays from the 1990s to same-sex marriage specifically in order to raise the level of support for the latter. They have likely done so through the large amount of attention they have brought to the issue in recent years. More recently, subsequent exposure to lesbian and gay couples may have also helped to accomplish this task.

There is some evidence for this hypothesis. In 2008, when California's Prop 8 initiative re-banned same-sex marriage after the California Supreme Court found the state's ban to be in violation of the state constitution, advertisements using so-called “equality” frames, which I will describe more fully in the next chapter, proved to be ineffective.48 However, advertisements showing real-life same-sex couples in love proved to be more effective in raising support for same-sex marriage during ballot measure campaigns in several states in 2012.49 These may have worked by subconsciously transferring positive affect created from previous exposure with lesbians and gays to support for same-sex marriage specifically.

So much attention has been given to the issue of marriage equality that many now think of it as being a proxy for support for lesbians and gays in general. Thus, support for same-sex marriage may have transformed in recent years into being a proxy for general approval of lesbians and gays (and perhaps affective feelings) rather than just another specific gay-rights policy. Considering that lesbians and gays are defined by their relationships, this does not seem like a very large stretch. This transformation would mark a complete reversal in the causal relationship of policy views on same-sex marriage and affective reactions and may account for the swift increases in support for same-sex marriage that have occurred since 2003.

The Ultimate Causes of Social Change

To an extent, the theory of affective liberalization by itself is somewhat inadequate if we want to know the complete story of why tolerance has triumphed in the United States and elsewhere. There is much more to
the story of what has caused social change. For instance, if the mass “coming out” of lesbians and gays across the country is the root cause of change in support for gay rights in the 1990s, then why did lesbians and gays suddenly feel comfortable coming out in this time period and not before? Furthermore, if change in politics and media encouraged lesbians and gays to come out, why did these institutions suddenly reorient themselves on lesbian and gay issues in those years? In addition, how can LGBT activists across the globe convince same-sex attracted people and gender minorities to “come out” and change attitudes in their parts of the world given preexisting stigmas? These questions are of huge importance in those parts of world where lesbians and gays are still legally and socially persecuted and in need of a clear path to follow to achieve social change in their own locales.

The historical sequence of social change in the United States may prove key on this point. There is evidence in the timing of various increases in support for gay rights that suggests the role of LGBT activists in pressuring national institutions to support these rights was the catalyst in unleashing the cascade of other changes that eventually reconstructed national opinion on homosexuality.

The historical evidence suggests that it was only at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, when AIDS dramatically swelled the ranks of LGBT activists, that American national institutions become responsive to the larger lesbian and gay community. These institutions included the news media and the national Democratic Party. As future chapters discuss, both were only intermittently responsive to lesbian and gay constituents prior to 1990, and even then, only in some of the nation’s largest cities. Only after these institutions reoriented themselves to support the lesbian and gay community at the national level, in response to intense lobbying by the anti-AIDS LGBT organization ACT-UP and other LGBT activists, did lesbians and gays across the country start to come out in large enough numbers to influence national opinion.

This is important, as the role of LGBT activists in encouraging change in the behavior of influential scientific, political, cultural, and economic elites is often left understated or omitted in some accounts of social change. Elites themselves are often given sole credit for their advocacy
of pro-gay positions. This creates an illusion that a widespread social movement, comprised of hundreds or thousands of politically active individuals, may not be necessary for social change to occur. This is not to say that non-LGBT elites, such as elected officials, political candidates, members of the entertainment industry, journalists, or judges, have not contributed to increasing tolerance of lesbians and gays. But more often than not, when looking at the context in which elites are making decisions to potentially support gay rights, we find that a major contributing factor is either the presence of LGBT activists persuading (or pressuring) elites to take pro-gay positions or contextual changes brought about by the existence of LGBT activists or other LGBT people.

For instance, without a tangible increase in the strength and organization of the LGBT movement during the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s, it seems unlikely that Bill Clinton and his 1992 campaign advisors would have perceived any benefits to taking a visible pro-gay position, given the considerable political risks associated with doing so. If Clinton had followed in the footsteps of Michael Dukakis and rejected appeals to support gay rights, coverage of gay rights issues in 1992 and 1993 would have been markedly reduced. This would have likely made lesbians and gays feel less comfortable in coming out. Some credit should be given to elites and other insiders, but one must not miss the backdrop upon which their decisions are forged.

Moreover, consider the de-medicalization of homosexuality by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1974, which is discussed in the final chapter of Zaller’s groundbreaking study, The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion. Zaller sees the APA’s de-medicalization of homosexuality as an example of scientists creating knowledge according to a supposedly neutral, or empirically objective (and likely scientific), method. In Zaller’s model of a society free from elite domination, scientific knowledge then forms the basis of activist, elite, and mass opinion. Zaller speaks specifically about the importance of the research conducted by Dr. Evelyn Hooker and others, who showed that there are no differences in the psychological adjustment of gays and non-gays. According to Zaller: “Hooker’s research proved the most influential [of this research, and] used standard scientific research techniques.” Later he talks about the effect of this research:
When homosexuality was considered by virtually all specialists and the press to be a disease, homosexuals largely accepted this mainstream norm by staying, as the phrase goes “in the closet.” . . . It was clear that in many cases, the mainstream norm against homosexuality was internalized. But then, offered by some psychiatric authorities a choice of considering themselves sick or merely to have an alternative sexual preference, homosexuals naturally allied themselves with the friendlier view.52

No doubt for many lesbians and gays, even ones who would later go on to become lesbian and gay rights activists, this was indeed the case. What Zaller misses, however, is the reason Hooker undertook this line of research in the first place, which he attributes to Hooker’s search for neutral and correct knowledge as a scientific elite. D’Emlio goes into more detail about the origin of Hooker’s research in Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities,53 where he details the activities of the Mattachine Society, an early group of gay and lesbian rights activists:

[The Mattachine Society] arranged a meeting with novelist and screenwriter Christopher Isherwood and with a research psychologist from UCLA, Dr. Evelyn Hooker. Both professed support for what the Mattachine Society leaders were attempting, although they declined to join the board of directors. . . . In 1953 Mattachine provided Hooker with a large pool of gay men for her study of the male homosexual personality. . . . In an interview with the author in Santa Monica on November 4, 1976, Hooker said that her gay friends, all of whom were living proof of the inadequacy of the medical literature on homosexuality, provided the motivation for her subsequent research on the topic.54

According to Hooker herself, the origin of her research was inspired by contact with gay men and facilitated by the lesbian and gay activists of the Mattachine Society. This is not to say that free scientific inquiry and the search for knowledge did not have a sizable role in the process. As Zaller states, Hooker’s career incentives did encourage her to produce and publish important scientific studies. At the same time, lesbian and gay activists created a context for Hooker to easily complete studies on the psychological adjustment of gay men rather than pursuing
other potential lines of research. Positive contact with gay men also pre-disposed her to move along that path. The incentives of elites and the resources of lesbians and gays in this case formed a mutually beneficial synergistic relationship. Without this positive contact and the resources provided by the Mattachine Society, it seems unlikely that it would have been in Hooker’s best interests to study the psychological adjustment of male homosexuals.

At least temporarily, an elite—in this case Dr. Hooker—was encouraged to act in a pro-gay fashion that benefited both Hooker and the gay and lesbian movement. As this book shows, this pattern reoccurs at various points in time, when a myriad of elites find themselves in situations, often created by lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people, where they benefit directly by advancing lesbian and gay rights or taking some other pro-gay action. Thus, it would be an error to attribute change to the actions of various elites without first understanding how the contexts in which these elites make their decisions have first been affected by activist pressure. This book departs from previous work on elite-led opinion change by pointing out just how the shifting contexts that elites find themselves embedded in have been affected by activists.

A Brief Outline of This Book

Chapter 2 has two purposes. First I situated my theory of affective liberalization in the current political and social psychology literature and discuss how this theory readily explains the distinctive features of gay rights not explained by more popular academic theories of attitude change. I also outline some important empirical considerations that should be taken into account when searching for the root causes of attitudinal change across time. In the last section of this chapter, I briefly examine how affective reactions to lesbians and gays have changed since 1984. For those uninterested in the academic literature or theoretical development, this chapter can be skimmed over or omitted.

After situating the theory, I begin by tracing the political development of the LGBT movement in the United States. Part II of the book focuses on how the LGBT movement became effective at causing institutional change. Chapter 3 traces this historical development of the movement up until the AIDS crisis. In 1987 and 1988, government inaction in the face
of AIDS shifted the movement into high gear. The most notable event here is the formation of ACT-UP, whose members’ relentless activism appears to have caused the national media to pay sustained attention to lesbian and gay issues in the early 1990s. Chapter 4 focuses directly on the ever strengthening relationship between the Democratic Party and the LGBT movement in this period. It was not until the peak of AIDS activism that the LGBT movement became effective at persuading Democrats to support gay rights when they did not already have other constituency-based incentives to do so. The growing influence of the LGBT movement with the Democratic Party then provided a critical impetus for Bill Clinton to run on support for gay rights in 1992, which in turn brought about further news coverage of gay rights.

In part 3, which presents the primary tests of the theory of affective liberalization, the focus moves to the time period after the press and the Democrats became attentive to lesbian and gay issues, when the LGBT movement and gay rights became highly visible in national politics. Chapter 5 specifically examines the independent effects of both the 1992 election and the debate on gays in the military on public support for lesbian and gay rights. The chapter shows that these events contributed to polarizing the public on partisan and ideological grounds in ways consistent with the prior findings of theories of elite-led opinion change. However, the relatively small shifts in mass opinion seen in this time were consistent with elite-led shifts in attitudes observed on other political issues. This suggests that elite-led shifts in attitudes were not the primary cause of the distinctive attributes of change on lesbian and gay rights seen in the 1990s.

Chapter 6 includes the core empirical tests of affective liberalization, which focus directly on determining the origin of cohort effects on gay rights. First, this chapter traces the rise in mass exposure to lesbians and gays starting in the late 1980s. I find that increases in exposure provide a consistent explanation for the magnitude and rapidity of change in attitudes toward lesbian and gay rights and verify that this exposure is much more effective in changing the attitudes of younger individuals in ways that are consistent with affective liberalization.

Chapter 7 explains why liberals adopted supportive positions on gay rights much earlier than moderates or conservatives. Building on theories of politically motivated reasoning, I show that instead of having a
liberalizing effect, exposure to lesbians and gays tends to cause political polarization in attitudes involving gay rights among strong ideologues. This polarization helps explain why elected Democrats tended to endorse gay rights early and why Republican officials have remained largely opposed to gay rights to this day. This also explains why lesbian and gay rights legislation continues to meet heavy resistance in political arenas where Republicans hold a majority in spite of strong constituent support.

In part 4, I extend my analysis outside of the United States. Increases in tolerance for homosexuality have not just been an American phenomenon. Numerous countries across the globe have witnessed similar or greater changes in their reactions to homosexuality since the 1980s. In chapter 8, I use the cumulative World and European Values Surveys to see if the major factors behind changing views in the United States generalize to other national contexts. I find that nations with free and pervasive media systems—a prerequisite for LGBT visibility and exposure—appear to have undergone similar increases in tolerance of sexual minorities. Limited evidence also shows that the strategic contexts for LGBT activists, as set by a nation’s political system, may correspond with the size of the divide between left-leaning and right-leaning individuals vis-à-vis tolerance of homosexuality.

I conclude by outlining the importance of these findings for activists and the academic literature in chapter 9. Knowledge of the causes of attitude change in the American context can be leveraged by activists and others concerned with LGBT rights in order to encourage social change. Based on my findings, I also outline what the future has in store for LGBT rights in the United States—and in the rest of the world.