

Public Attitudes about Homosexuality and Gay Rights across Time and Countries



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Executive Summaryⁱ

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This study looks at the responses to 2,000 individual survey questions about the attitudes of the public toward lesbian and gay people and their rights across time and countries.

1. Global Trends show increasing acceptance of gay people.

Support for homosexuality has increased globally. One survey pegs the average increase globally at .2 percentage points each year while another survey puts it .9 percentage points each year. Looking at progress country-by-country, the most favorable survey says that 90% of countries have become more accepting over the past 20 years.

2. Statistical predictors of attitudes toward gay rights.

This report identified several factors that explained attitudes toward lesbian and gay people and their rights. The explanatory factors included both characteristics about the *individuals* who were surveyed and characteristics about the *countries* in which these individuals resided.

The significant factors about countries are:

National laws on same-sex couples. Residents of countries that have a national policy recognizing marriage or some rights for same-sex couples were on average two to three times more likely to consider homosexuality as “not wrong at all” when compared to residents of countries that have no legal recognition for same-sex couples.

Religious tradition and number of adherents. There are no differences among countries of different Christian faiths (e.g., Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and other Christian countries, measured by religious tradition and number of adherents). Residents of countries of different Christian faiths are not more or less likely to accept homosexuality when comparing on Christian faith to another. When asked whether homosexuality is wrong, residents of Buddhist countries are on average ten times less likely to consider homosexuality as “not wrong at all” when compared to residents of Protestant Christian countries.

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Size of economy. The size of a country's economy positively relates to their acceptance of lesbian and gay people. Residents of countries whose economies that are in the top quartile are on average twelve times more likely to be supportive of homosexuality than residents of countries whose economies are in the bottom quartile.

The significant factors about individuals are:

Gender. Women are one and a half times more likely to be accepting of lesbian and gay people than men.

Age. In 98% of the countries, those under 30 are more likely to say that same-gender sex is not wrong at all compared to those age 65 and older. The average gap in supportiveness between these age groups is 23.4%. The study indicates that acceptance of homosexuality does not decrease as a person ages. In fact, the study finds substantial support for the notion that as younger generations age, their support will increase the overall level of support in their country.

Education. The study finds that individuals who have an educational attainment that is beyond secondary school are about two times more likely to be accepting of lesbian and gay people than individuals who have not attained a secondary school education.

3. Regional Trends on opinion about gay people.

Latin America.

Acceptance of homosexuality ranges from a high of 34% in Uruguay to a low of 2% in Ecuador. On the legal recognition for marriages for same-sex couples, Uruguay has the highest level of support at 57% while Guatemala has the lowest level of support at 12%. Overall, however, the attitudes in Latin America have become more accepting. Countries in Latin America are more likely to be ranked in the top third or middle third of all countries in their level of acceptance of lesbian and gay people. At most, 67% of Latin American countries have become more accepting over the past 7 years. The level of acceptance has increased an average of 0.4 percentage points per year.

Africa.

Acceptance ranges from a high of 38 % in South Africa to a low of 2% in Ghana. Countries in Africa are more likely to be ranked in the bottom third of all countries in their level of acceptance of lesbian and gay people. Only 20% of the countries in Africa are in the middle third of all countries in their level of acceptance of lesbian and gay people.

Europe.

There have been significantly more efforts to gather data in Europe than in any other region. This study, which relies on data from five studies over six years, indicates a wide variation of

opinion in Europe. Overall, however, the attitudes in Europe have become more accepting. At most, 91% of European countries have become more accepting over the past 20 years. The level of acceptance has increased and average of 0.9 percentage points per year.

Public support of gay people to “live their lives freely” has increased in 67% of the countries in Europe. Netherlands has the highest level of support at 93% while Russia has the lowest level of support at 25%. Not objecting to a lesbian or gay neighbor increased in 91% of European countries. The highest level of acceptance is in Iceland where 87% would not object to gay or lesbian neighbors, and the lowest level of acceptance is in Azerbaijan where 9% would not object to gay or lesbian neighbors.

Comfort with a lesbian or gay man holding the highest elected political position was mixed. It grew in only 18% of countries but on the average has decreased 1.6 percentage points per year.

The proportion of people with lesbian or gay friends increased in 89% of European countries, going up 1.4 percentage points each year.

Public perception regarding whether lesbians and gay men face discrimination is dropping. Each year, there is a .65 percentage point reduction in reporting that discrimination against lesbian and gay people is widespread.

Much of the wide variation in Europe is due to the difference between the rates of acceptance in former Communist countries and European countries that do not have a Communist history.

4. Further global research is needed.

There have been relatively few efforts to measure public opinion about lesbian and gay people and issues on a global scale, and no attempts to measure public opinion about transgender people. The four largest surveys asked the following questions in multiple countries:

- (i) “On this list are various groups of people. Could you please mention any that you would not like to have as neighbors? Homosexuals.”
- (ii) “And what about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex, is it always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, not wrong at all, or you can’t choose?”
- (iii) “Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between. Homosexuality”
- (iv) “Do you personally believe that homosexuality is morally acceptable, morally unacceptable, or is it not a moral issue?”

ⁱ Andrew R. Flores and Andrew Park of the Williams Institute authored the executive summary