

Same-Sex Marriage and Other Moral Taboos: Cultural Acceptances, Change in American Public Opinion and the Evidence from the Opinion Polls

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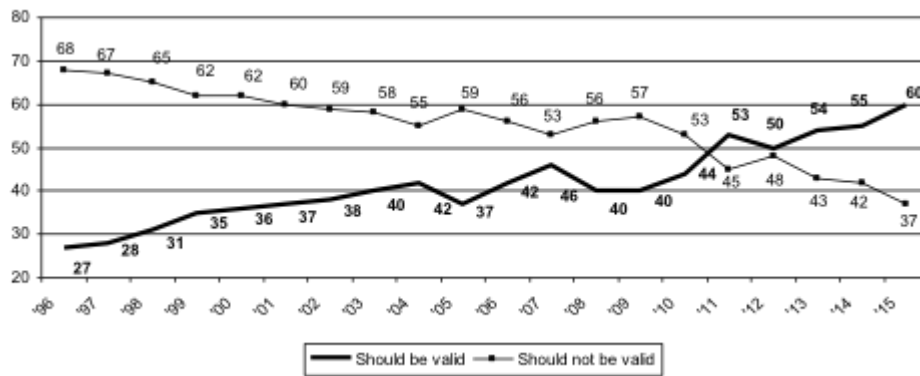
Marco Morini

- 1 In June 2015, with a 5-4 decision in the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states are required under the 14th Amendment to issue marriage licenses to people of the same sex and to recognize those marriages from other states. The Supreme Court, declaring that same-sex couples have a constitutional right to get married, ruled on the practice which was already legal in the majority of states, and provided the most significant nationwide expansion of civil rights in the U.S. since the 1960s.

2

Figure 1 shows the trend of the approval of gay marriage among Americans. It is clearly visible how in less than twenty years the proportions almost completely reversed and, at the beginning of the 2010s, the number of people who approve same-sex marriage became predominant. Commonly, these highs in support for gay and lesbian rights are considered proof of the shifting moral attitudes of Americans and it is widely believed that young people are more liberal than adults when it comes to social norms (Blow).

Figure 1



Do you think that marriages between same-sex couples should or should not be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages? Source: Gallup (2015). Data in %.

- 3 While acknowledging that the largest shifts in cultural attitudes have been those relating to gay and lesbian issues, do all other trends point in the same direction? (Research Question 1). Is it true that the younger generations are more liberal than older ones and represent the major supporters of homosexual rights? (RQ2). What is the general perception on moral issues? (RQ3). Our hypothesis is that nowadays gay and lesbian issues are no longer considered moral taboos (H1) and when Americans are asked about moral values they are thinking of things other than just the norms surrounding sexual behavior and gay and lesbian issues (H2).

4

This article employs data coming from the most influential American polling organizations such as Gallup and the Pew Research Centre and it is divided into three sections. The first section analyzes the evolution of gay and lesbian rights and same-sex marriage in American public opinion and reflects on how *Obergefell v. Hodges* might not have been as epochal a Court decision as has been thought. The second section describes how the Supreme Court sentence, state-level decisions and the public opinion trends are just the outcome of a grassroots coordinated campaign which began more than a decade ago and that was able to conquer the majority of Americans. The third part concerns American public opinion trends related to moral issues, examining if it is true that U.S. citizens are moving leftward. It investigates if the positive attitudes towards same-sex marriage have the same trend across all generations and it deals with two apparently counter-intuitive findings: the majority of Americans who believe that the moral conditions of the country are getting worse and the same majority who think that most Americans are against same-sex marriage.

1. The Supreme Court decision, the opinion polls and the public perception on gay and lesbian rights in the U.S.

5

The *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision was defined as a big step forward for both social and civil rights. The Supreme Court sentence was described as “courageous” (Ball),

“historic” (Liptak 1) and had a worldwide echo, becoming a virtuous example for those countries where LGBT relationships are not yet legally recognized. Several of the media made comparisons with some of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions, the ones that literally changed American society. From *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) on racial segregation, to *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) on interracial marriage, till *Roe v. Wade* (1973) on abortion. There have also been speculations about a possible renewed judicial activism of the Court (Kryzanek 171).

6

Actually, these comparisons with the past are partially misleading due to the simple fact that *Obergefell v. Hodges* was consistent with the American public's opinion on the issue. The support among Americans for gay marriage has increased over time, from 27 per cent in 1996, to 58 per cent in 2015, and a consistent majority has favoured it since 2011. For instance, the path to the legality of interracial marriage significantly differed from same-sex marriage, because at that time the Supreme Court led public opinion by legalizing something that Americans largely disapproved. Concerning the 1967 Supreme Court decision, the Gallup poll found that only one in five Americans (20 per cent) approved of such marriages. It took three more decades to reach a majority of support (Newport). Approval of same-sex marriage ascended significantly faster, and enjoyed majority support several years before the Court's decision.

7

In 1973, when the Supreme Court ruled *Roe v. Wade* on the issue of abortion, disallowing many state and federal restrictions, public opinion was divided on the topic (Smith and Son 2). Moreover, between 1975 and 2012, Gallup asked the same identical question on the legality of abortion more than fifty times. In 1975, 21 per cent said abortion should be legal under all circumstances, 54 per cent “legal only under certain circumstances,” and 22 per cent “illegal in all circumstances” (Bowman and Sims 3). Interestingly, support for the legalization of abortion moved up notably between 1972 and 1973, following the Supreme Court's *Roe vs. Wade* decision in January 1973 (Smith and Son 2).

8

Immediately following the *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, Gallup asked Americans if they approved or disapproved of the Supreme Court ruling that racial segregation in all public schools is illegal—meaning that all children, no matter what their race, must be allowed to go to the same schools. The initial results from a poll held on 21-26 May 1954, found that 55 per cent of Americans approved of the decision, and 40 per cent disapproved. The results remained essentially unchanged in two additional polls conducted in 1954 (Gallup and Newport 200). Because there are no available opinion polls that were conducted before the *Brown v. Board of Education* sentence, it is arguable that the sentence itself had an effect on the first Gallup poll on the topic. Furthermore, that survey concerned the nationwide public opinion and it is probable that in the southern states, where racial segregation was still in force, citizens' perception was different.

9

A long-term view of the trend on gay marriage illustrates how support for it was steady and incremental. In this sense, the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision was less historic than has been portrayed by the media, being perfectly in line with the public opinion's perceptions on the issue.

10

Probably, part of the media excitement around the decision came because of the recurring 5-4 division of the Court itself on the issue. In the four landmark decisions advancing gay rights in the last two decades: *Romer v. Evans*, *Lawrence v. Texas*, *United States v. Windsor*, and *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Court has always been divided and in the last two sentences it was always Justice Anthony Kennedy who cast the crucial fifth vote, invalidating portions of the Defense of Marriage Act in *Windsor*, and in *Obergefell* striking down state rules barring same sex marriage. The Court is inevitably influenced by the world around it. As social mores have evolved, so have the justices' beliefs, on issues ranging from abortion to segregation: "What the Constitution is understood to encompass has changed over time in ways that are dramatic, sweeping, and often permanent. Although these changes are reflected in judicial decisions, they are rarely initiated there" (Friedman 367). What changed, in other words, was not the Constitution, it was the country. And what changed the country was a social movement. *Obergefell v. Hodges* was the product of the decades of activism that made the idea of gay marriage seem plausible and right (Ball). In just about a decade, public opinion on same-sex marriage has radically turned, now accepting something that was previously harshly ostracized. Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton may serve as an example: in Summer 2015, she celebrated the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision on her social media accounts. But in 2004, when she was Senator of New York, in a passionate statement she defended the inviolability of marriage as a union between a man and a woman (Biddle). Earlier on, when she was the U.S. First Lady, she supported her husband's decision to sign the "Defense of Marriage Act," a set of rules that defined marriage as a strictly heterosexual institution. Hillary Clinton has obviously been accused of duplicity and deception, probably also because that was not the only case in which she apparently changed her mind (Schulman).

11

However, such a case cannot be compared with her vote in favor of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and her subsequent U-turn on the issue (Burgan 31). And it does not matter much whether this was a genuine change of mind or a political calculus. Hillary Clinton's re-positioning on LGBT rights simply reflects the evolution of the political *zeitgeist*. In the United States of 2004, there were things that could not be said without moving out of the mainstream, of the socially acceptable. In the United States of 2016, the situation has completely reversed: if those same things are not said, people can even be barred from civil debate, at least from that of the Democratic Party.

12

According to Gallup, in 2004, half of Americans still believed that gay or lesbian relationships between consenting adults should not be legal. A proportion that was the same in the 1970s and that grew even larger in the 1980s. Nowadays, 68 percent of Americans agree that homosexuality should be legal, while 28 out of 100 claim it should not. Moreover, in 2003-2004, 44 percent of the people believed that being gay or lesbian was due to factors such as upbringing and environment, while only 38 percent thought that it was something that a person was born with. Since then, the trend has taken a clear development and in 2015, 51 percent of the people agreed on the fact that being gay or lesbian is something a person is born with, while 30 percent believe that is due to upbringing and environment. Also here, the break with the past is astonishing: in 1977, the ratio was 56-13 in favor of upbringing and environment. In 2015, gay and lesbian

relations are considered morally acceptable by 63 percent of Americans. It was 48 percent in 2008 and 40 percent in 2001. Legal rights for homosexual couples to adopt a child are nowadays favoured 63-35, while as recently as 2007 the majority of Americans were against it (Gallup.com).

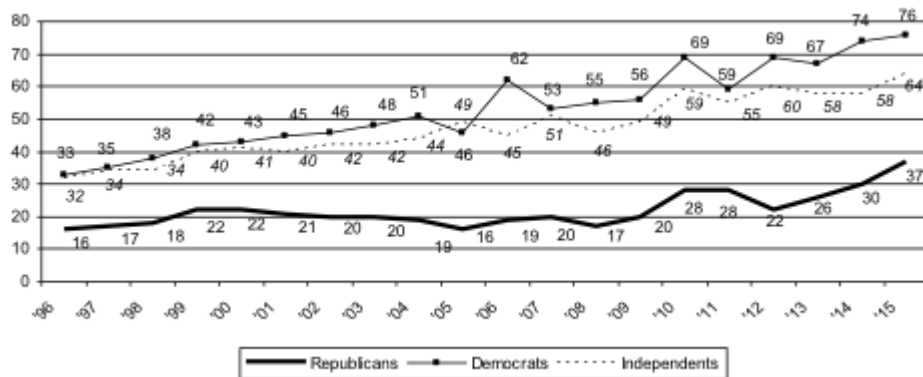
13

In the early 2000s, it was still considered suicidal for a Democratic politician to openly support gay marriage. Now the debate seems largely over, and left-wing politicians are even pushing for antidiscrimination laws that cover transgender people. The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law found that between two-thirds and three-quarters of Americans now support barring discrimination against transgender people. It also found a dramatic rise in recent years in the percentage of Americans who consider anti-transgender discrimination a “major problem” (Beinart).

14

Public attitudes towards gay and lesbian rights represent one of the quickest evolutions in the history of American moral values. The politics of the issue have shifted very fast and gay marriage has widely become the status quo. Just two decades ago, only 27 per cent of Americans backed gay marriage, while 68 per cent opposed it. By 2005, the percentage in favour had increased by 10 points to 37 per cent, and by 2010 it had reached 44 per cent (Gallup.com). Though same-sex marriage continues to be politically divisive, Figure 2 shows that the support for its legal status has reached new highs among Americans of all political affiliations.

Figure 2



Support for Same-sex Marriage, by Party affiliation. % Should be valid. Source: Gallup (2015). Question asks: do you think marriages between same-sex couples should or should not be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages?

- 15 Democratic Party voters (74 per cent) are most likely to support same-sex marriage, followed by independents (62 per cent). Republicans (30 per cent) remain least likely to support it, with a majority (67 per cent) still opposed. Young Americans (18-29) are the ones favouring gay marriage the most. Majorities of those aged 30 to 49 (62 per cent) and 50 to 64 (52 per cent) also believe same-sex marriages should be valid.

16

Analyzing Figure 2 from a long-range perspective, it comes clearly visible that the Democrats' support towards gay marriage has increased more than in any other political group—by 43 points since 1996. And that was precisely the year in which Democratic President Bill Clinton signed into law the Defense of Marriage Act, which

barred federal recognition of state-granted gay marriages. Since then, the Democratic Party has experienced a complete turn on the issue, and its members have become champions of marriage equality at the state level. Another crucial year was 2004: when Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage, the Democrats' support was the first to reach majority level. Although Republicans have always been predominantly against the legalization of same-sex marriage, since 1996 their support has increased by 21 points. Between 1996 and 2009, no more than 20 per cent of Republicans believed same-sex marriages should be legally valid. Since then, support has ranged from 22 per cent to 31 per cent, leading up to the 2015 peak of 37 per cent.

17

Observers might argue that on this topic the party divide between Republicans and Democrats is a reflection of the basic electorate characteristics, depending mostly on the age groups that compose each party. Several surveys have indicated that Americans who are 18-29 are significantly more likely to vote for Democrats, whilst older Americans predominantly lean for the Republican Party (Newport, *Party Identification*). And while in 2015 the majorities of each age group under 65 support marriage equality, those aged 65+ are still more likely to be against it. What is important for current politics is also that 26 per cent of Americans agree on the idea to vote for a candidate solely based on her/his stance on same-sex marriage; 43 per cent say it is just one of several important factors, and another 26 per cent believe it is not a major issue influencing how they vote. Notably, the around a quarter of voters who believe a political candidate must share her/his views on same-sex marriage is up from just 16 per cent in significant electoral years such as 2004 and 2008. 21 per cent of same-sex marriage supporters also say that a candidate's opinion on the topic can make or break whether that politician receives their vote. On the other hand, for the Americans who oppose same-sex marriage, the percentage rockets to 37 per cent. Arguably, both supporters and opponents are more likely to say the issue is a defining factor than in the past (Newport *Shift Left*).

2. A political campaign that transformed U.S. public opinion

18

The story of the gay movements and the long struggle of LGBT communities in the U.S. has been told many times. Boies and Olson wrote a fascinating account of the five-year battle to win the right for gays to marry, from Proposition 8 in California to its defeat before the highest court decision in 2015 (6). Hirshman provided one of the most comprehensive analyses of the fight for addressing gay and lesbian rights, and Faderman's recent book updated the same topic by adding the Obergefell v. Hodges decision. Several scientific articles have also extensively addressed the topic, repeating how astonishing the progress made on gay and lesbian rights has been. Therefore, despite its predictability, this section aims to state that the fight for gay marriage was, above all, a political campaign—a decades-long effort to win over the American public and, in turn, the Court.

19

The crucial shift in public opinion was possible thanks to a co-ordinated nationwide political campaign which was able to position gay and lesbian rights as a civil rights issue, making it more difficult for others to oppose the changes. The strategy also

included high profile individuals who publicly disclosed that they are gay or lesbian. Additionally, the entertainment industry helped in making particular efforts to show gay and lesbian characters as more mainstream in their productions. What it achieved was remarkable: not just a Supreme Court decision but a revolution in the way America sees homosexuals.

20

In 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case of a same-sex couple who sued the State of Minnesota, rejecting it with a single sentence: “‘The appeal is dismissed for want of a substantial federal question.’ The idea that people of the same sex might have a constitutional right to get married, the sentence suggested, was too absurd even to consider” (Moscowitz 102). In the 1970s, sodomy was a crime in nearly every state, LGBT people were often persecuted and barred from public and private employment, and homosexuality was classified as a mental illness. In 1975, the U.S. Civil Service Commission’s decision to no longer ban homosexuals from holding federal jobs was considered a significant victory. As recently as 1990, when three homosexual couples in Hawaii were refused marriage licenses, no national gay-rights group would help them file a lawsuit (Ball 1).

21

In an LGBT world where the reference models were just a few, the first important “coming out” on TV came only in 1997. During an episode of the successful “Ellen” sitcom, played by Ellen DeGeneres, the protagonist announces that she is a lesbian. Exactly what the actress had done in real life, in Oprah Winfrey’s show a few weeks earlier. More than 42 million viewers watched Ellen’s coming out episode on TV and the debate that followed was enormous. However, the ABC network decided to insert the Parental Advisory logo in all the following episodes of the sitcom, although DeGeneres dissented. Amid opposing pressures, and in spite of its success and awards, Ellen’s series resisted just one more season. Then it got cancelled.

22

The first significant victories came in the early 2000s. Again, it was thanks to the Supreme Court that some of the first historic targets were achieved. In 1996, in *Romer v. Evans*, Justices ruled against a Colorado law which denied gay people the right to be protected against discriminations. It was the first Supreme Court case to address the rights of homosexuals since *Bowers v. Hardwick* in 1986, when the Court had held that laws criminalizing sodomy were constitutional. The Court ruled in a 6–3 decision that a state constitutional amendment in Colorado preventing protected status based upon homosexuality or bisexuality did not satisfy the Equal Protection Clause. In 2003, in *Lawrence v. Texas*, the Court struck down the sodomy law in Texas and, by extension, invalidated sodomy laws in 13 other states, making same-sex sexual activity legal in every U.S. state and territory. The Court, with a five-justice majority, overturned its previous ruling on the same issue in the 1986 case *Bowers v. Hardwick*, where it upheld a challenged Georgia statute and did not find a constitutional protection of sexual privacy.

23

The gay marriage “season” opened at the beginning of the 2000s. After the Netherlands in 2001 and Belgium in 2003, in the U.S. it was Massachusetts to be the first U.S. state to legalize same-sex marriage. On 17 May 2004, when Marcia Hams and Susan Shepherd, engaged for 27 years and with a son of 24, said “Yes” in Cambridge City Hall, their pictures became famous worldwide. The decision in Massachusetts held up, thanks

to a powerful, years-long lobbying effort led by a group called MassEquality, which fought against the state legislature's attempts to amend the local constitution. Soon after, Vermont too legalized civil unions but more losses followed in court—in New York, Maryland, Washington, Arizona, and Indiana.

24

In 2004, in a spectacular grassroots campaign to boost evangelical turnout for incumbent President George W. Bush, 11 states proposed constitutional amendments to ban gay marriage, and they all won. Top Democratic politicians blamed gay marriage for John Kerry's loss in the presidential election, and some gay-rights leaders publicly wondered if the push for marriage should be abandoned (Cahill 98). More came in the 2006 and 2012 referendums: bans against gay-marriage were put up before voters in 30 states and won every single time. As Molly Ball puts it:

'In June 2005, representatives of 10 advocacy groups met in New Jersey and drafted a document, 'Winning Marriage: What We Need to Do,' that proposed a timetable of 15 to 25 years. At the time, that seemed optimistic. One of the top goals set out in the document seemed achievable: winning a vote in California in 2008. But when Proposition 8, as the state's referendum to ban gay marriage was known, went up for a vote, it passed, and shocked the advocates of gay marriage. If gay marriage couldn't win a vote in liberal California—in the same election that powered Barack Obama to a historic victory—could it win anywhere? Part of the problem, movement leaders knew, was the lack of a well-organized political campaign. Multiple groups were trying multiple approaches with no centralized strategy, fundraising, or message. To figure out what needed to change, eight organizations, led by Freedom to Marry, formed a secret collaboration that they called the Marriage Research Consortium. They pooled their resources and held a monthly teleconference to share polling, insights, and ideas in real time. It was an unprecedented level of cooperation, by groups that were often rivals for money or credit. All of the polls and focus groups yielded a major revelation. The message gay-marriage campaigners had been using—an appeal to reason that enumerated the benefits of marriage that were being denied to gay people—wasn't persuasive at all. Straight voters saw gay people as wanting something different than their idea of what marriage was about, which was love and commitment. 'One of the questions in that first California poll was, 'Do you think gay couples are trying to join marriage or change it?'' recalled Lanae Erickson Hatalsky, director of social policy for the centrist Democratic group Third Way, one of the leaders of the research consortium. 'The correlation between people who said 'change' and people who voted against us was almost exact,' she added. 'We had to convince people that gay couples were trying to join this institution.' Making others see and empathize with this fundamental normality, it turned out, was the key to convincing them that gays deserved to marry, too. Movement leaders started presenting their cause differently—in ads, in op-eds, in press releases, in conversation. An ad from one of 2004's losing campaigns had featured a judge with law books talking about hospital visitation; the new ads featured straight people talking about their gay relatives: the mother or sister or grandfather of a gay person, talking about their loved one's commitment to a partner. When gay people were featured, 'it was old-lady lesbians who we found were the best messengers,' Erickson Hatalsky said. 'Nobody thought about sex when they saw them.' (*The Marriage Plot*)

- 25 Ball's contribution has been added in full here because it clearly describes and shows the relevance and the characteristics of a national co-ordinated strategy, which it was able to state sub-topics, actions and targets. The campaign was keen to be "inclusive" and not "exclusive" and to portray gay and lesbian people as normal citizens wishing to join the "social community." It was a campaign of "normalization," which worked on people's perceptions, not of transformation/liberalization of social mores.

26

The gay and lesbian rights cause entered the White House with President Barack Obama. On 22 December 2010, he signed the law which overturned the “don’t ask, don’t tell” that forbade openly gay people to serve in the Army, approved in 1993 under Bill Clinton’s presidency. And in his second presidential run, in 2012, Obama became the first U.S. President to openly support same-sex marriage. In 2012, after 31 straight losses for gay marriage in state referendums, the Freedom to Marry movement launched a centralized, message-tested and coordinated campaign in four states—Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, and Washington. On Election Day, gay-marriage prevailed in all four states.

27

The ballot victories were a major turning point, because they defeated the above-mentioned powerful talking point of gay marriage opponents, that whenever it was put to a vote, the people were against same-sex marriage, even in the most liberal places. In 2013, the Supreme Court ruled out portions of the Defense of Marriage Act in a case brought by Edie Windsor, who was taxed for her late same-sex partner’s estate because the federal government did not recognize their Canadian marriage (Ball). That decision brought a domino effect. State courts built on that sentence to strike down local gay-marriage bans, one after another. On Twitter, the hashtag #marriageEquality became viral and was used also by Obama, who tweeted “love is love.” Public support for gay marriage crossed the majority threshold in 2011 and has skyrocketed ever since. By the time the Supreme Court took up the final case, gays and lesbians could already marry in 36 states.

3. Age trends, gay marriage versus other moral issues, and the deterioration of morality in American public opinion

28

The great progress that has taken place on gay and lesbian issues made the media believe that Americans continue to move leftward on key moral issues, that people are now more accepting of a number of moral issues and that all changes have been in a more liberal direction (Waldman). This perception appears to be confirmed by the opinion polls. Table 1 seems clear: moral acceptability of many moral issues is now at a record-high level.

Table 1

<i>Moral issue</i>	2001 (%)	2015 (%)	Change (%)
Divorce	59	71	+12
Sex between an unmarried man and woman	53	68	+15
Gambling	63	67	+4

Medical research using stem cells obtained from human embryos	52	64	+12
Gay or lesbian relations	40	63	+23
Having a baby outside of marriage	45	61	+16
Buying and wearing clothing made of animal fur	60	61	+1
Death penalty	63	60	-3
Medical testing on animals	65	56	-9
Doctor-assisted suicide	49	56	+7
Abortion	42	45	+3
Cloning animals	31	34	+3
Suicide	13	19	+6
Polygamy	7	16	+9
Cloning humans	7	15	+8
Married men and women having an affair	7	8	+1

Moral acceptability: Changes over time. Source: Gallup (2015). % morally acceptable.

29

Table 1 acknowledges the fact that in the past 15 years there are only two issues that Americans have become less likely to consider as morally acceptable: medical testing on animals and the death penalty. But the decreased acceptance of these practices actually moves them in the same, more liberal direction. Polygamy and cloning humans have also seen significant increases in moral acceptability, again towards more liberal views. Besides the several liberal trends, it can be seen that only six issues remain considered morally unacceptable: abortion, cloning animals, suicide, polygamy, cloning humans and married men and women having an affair (Dugan).

30

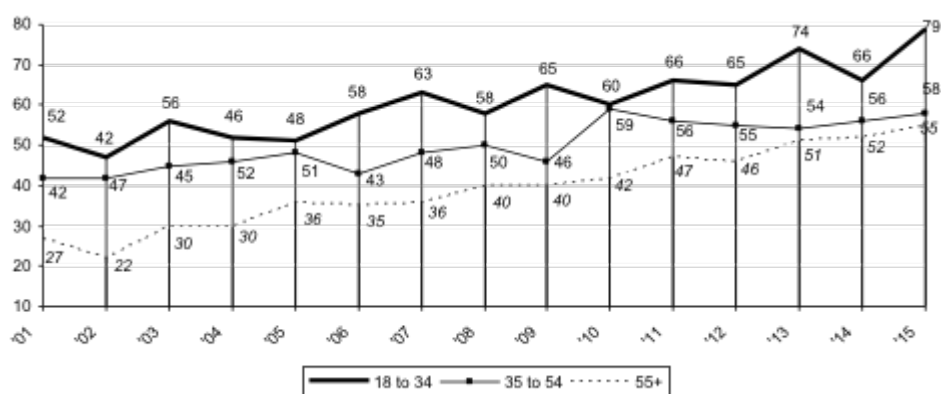
The idea that the U.S. are moving leftward is partially confuted by other metrics. For instance, a solid majority (60 per cent) continue to support the death penalty. Thirty-seven percent oppose it, slightly higher than in recent years, in part because in 2015, only 3 per cent of Americans say they have no opinion on the topic. The low point for support in death penalty, 42 per cent, came in the 1960s, with support reaching its peak in the mid-1990s and generally declining since that point (Dugan, *Solid Majority*). The long-dividing topic of abortion clearly shows how there is a difference between what Americans think should be legal and what they think is moral. When asked directly about the legality of abortion, 55 per cent of U.S. adults say it should be legal in all or most cases, compared with 40 per cent who say it should be illegal all or most of the time (Riffkin). In both cases, these figures have remained relatively stable for at least two

decades. However, Table 1 shows that abortion is considered morally acceptable by only 45 per cent of Americans, and, according to Pew statistics, about half of Americans (49 per cent) say that having an abortion is morally wrong, while 15% think it is morally acceptable and 23 per cent say it is not a moral issue (Lipka).

31

Several op-eds and researches are saying that America is moving left, especially among millennials, often defined as 'liberal millennials' (Winograd and Hais 54). However, the shift toward more liberal attitudes on gay and lesbian relations has occurred across the age spectrum, not just among young people.

Figure 3



Perceived moral acceptability of gay and lesbian relations, by age. % morally acceptable. Source: Gallup (2015). Trend based on annual Gallup and Beliefs poll, conducted each May.

- 32 It is possible that the current landslide young majority which favours gay and lesbian relations has misled some commentators. In fact, while Figure 3 clearly confirms this trend, it also shows that the shift over the past 14 years in moral acceptability of gay and lesbian relations among Americans aged 55 and older is 28 percentage points (27 per cent to 55 per cent), and the shift among 18- to 34-year-olds has been 27 points, almost exactly the same. As explained by Frank Newport in his commentary to the Gallup survey:

This could be age creep to some degree, as each year a segment of those in the younger age group moves into an older age group. But if this was totally age creep, we would have seen the 55+ group holding steady as the young group aged first into the 35- to 54-year-olds group. But we didn't see that. Older Americans have been changing their attitudes just as fast as younger Americans. (*Five Things*)

- 33 So, at least as far as gay and lesbian relationships are concerned, the move leftward has been the same for all age groups.

34

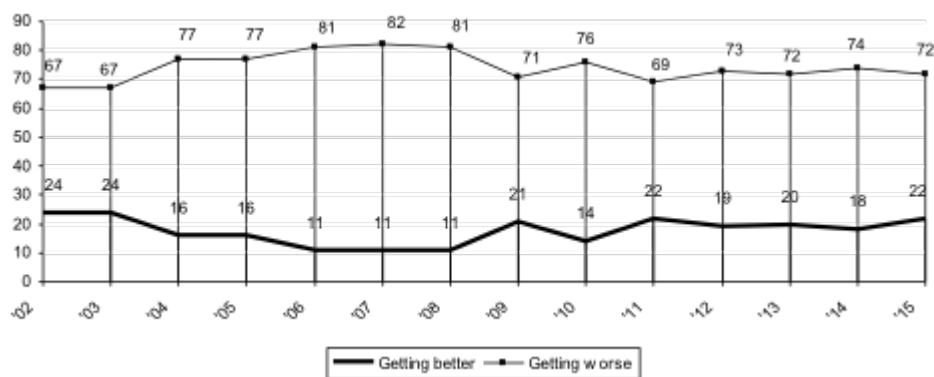
Another point that should be addressed is that Americans have not shifted their views on all moral issues over time. As shown in Table 1, the notable exception is the American public's views on married men and women having an affair, which did not change much in the period 2000-2015. This particular behavior remains essentially a cultural taboo, in the sense that it is viewed as morally unacceptable to more than 90 per cent of the public, even though other behaviors related to sex and procreation have shifted. The case is interesting because one of the explanations for why the public's acceptance of other issues has been rising is the fact that "there is de facto evidence that the behaviors are occurring in the real world, and the public may come to the point

where they feel it is appropriate to go ahead and accept the inevitable” (*Five Things*). But there is certainly evidence that extramarital affairs happen, both among public figures and “normal” people. However, the widespread existence of these behaviors has not changed the norms surrounding them. Married men and women having an affair are still sanctioned in a moral sense by the public.

35

Another metric that seems to point in another direction is the 72 per cent of Americans who say that the state of moral values is getting worse in the country rather than better. And almost as many rate the state of moral values in the U.S. as poor or only fair. These attitudes have remained very stable, despite the leftward shift in Americans' positions on specific moral issues and how they label themselves (*Five Things*). So, Americans are shifting leftward on moral issues, but not on their views of the state of moral values in the country. Why the change in one area and not in the other?

Figure 4



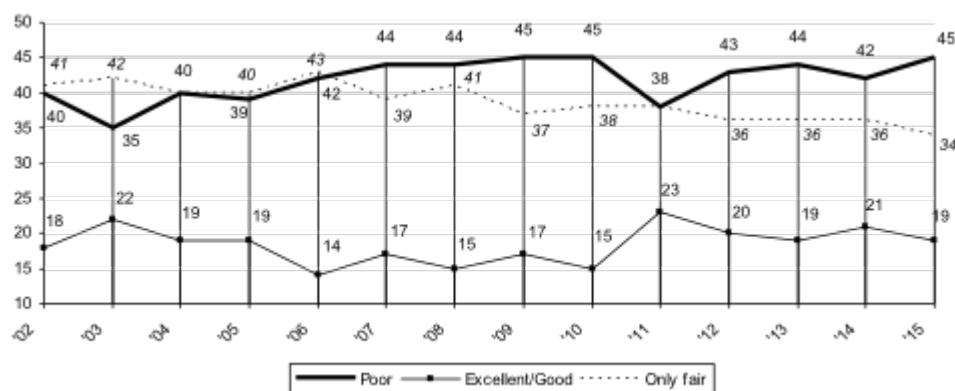
Americans' outlook on state of moral values in the United States. Source: Gallup (2015). Wording: "Right now, do you think that the state of moral values in the country as a whole is getting better or is getting worse?"

- 36 Figure 4 shows that Americans have remained very pessimistic for the last 15 years. American public opinion was slightly more optimistic about the direction of the country's morals in 2002, when 67 per cent of the interviewees said it was getting worse. However, there has always been a strong negative feeling; pessimism peaked between 2006 and 2008, when more than four in five Americans thought the state of moral values was declining.

37

Across most demographic groups, clear majorities of Americans have consistently said the country's morals are deteriorating. Figure 5 is even clearer: 45 per cent of Americans think that the current state of moral values in the U.S. is “poor,” with 34 per cent saying it is “only fair” and 19 per cent rating the state of moral values as either “excellent” or “good.” The percentage who say the state of moral values is currently poor is up slightly from 42 per cent in 2014, and is at the same record-level high from 2009 and 2010 (McCarthy).

Figure 5



Americans' outlook on state of moral values in the United States. Source: Our elaboration on Gallup (2015). Wording: "How would you rate the overall state of moral values in this country today – as excellent, good, fair or poor?"

- 38 Americans' views of the state of moral values haven't changed much over the past 13 years. Despite significant shifts in Americans' views on same-sex marriage and other moral issues, Americans are about as likely as they were in 2002 to think that moral values in the U.S. are poor and to say they are evolving for the worse. The outcome could appear as paradoxical: many American citizens are thinking that the overall moral tone of their society is in bad shape and evolving worse, and, at the same time, they increasingly consider formerly taboo behaviors as morally acceptable (*Five Things*).

39

This remarkable phenomenon can be explained by the fact that Americans are not answering these questions in the way the opinion polls' results would suggest. According to the 2010 and 2012 open-ended questions that Gallup asked about moral values, people's views about the declining state of moral affairs largely reflect a belief that there is a deteriorating collective moral character. That is, their views have less to do with the greater acceptance of same-sex marriage or extra-marital affairs or other moral issues—as expressed in Table 1—and more to do with matters of basic civility and respect for each other.

40

In part, this can be explained by understanding that when Americans are asked about moral values ("How would you rate the overall state of moral values in this country today—as excellent, good, only fair or poor?" and "Right now, do you think the state of moral values in the country as a whole is getting better or getting worse?") they are thinking about things other than just the norms surrounding sexual behavior and reproduction issues. Table 2 provides a clear overview of this ostensible contradiction. In 2012, when Gallup asked Americans to specify what was wrong with moral values in the country, 18 percent responded by mentioning the lack of consideration of others and compassion, 10 per cent talked of lack of respect and tolerance. Other significant portions of the population substantiate their concerns mentioning greed, dishonesty and selfishness, in addition to things such as the change in family structure, lack of religion. Notably, only a few mentioned abortion, sexual behaviors and gay and lesbian marriage (Brown).

Table 2

Issue	% mentioning
Consideration of others/Compassion	18
Caring/Tolerance/Respect	10
Lack of family structure/Divorce/Kids' upbringing	10
Lack of faith/Religion	7
Lack of morals	7
Sense of entitlement/Government dependency	5
Greed/Selfishness	5
Poor leadership/Poor guidance	4
Media/TV/Internet	4
Dishonesty/Integrity/Deception	4
Sexuality/Teen pregnancy/Promiscuity	4
Abortion/Don't value life	3
Personal accountability/responsibility	3
Homosexuality/Gay marriage	3
Lack of money/High cost of living/Poverty	2
Racism/Discrimination	2
Crime/Violence	2
Lack of education	2
Drugs/Alcohol	1
Jobs	1
Economy	1
Pro-choice on abortion/Women's rights	1
Healthcare	*
Other	5

None/nothing	6
Everything	1
No opinion	11

In your view, what is the most important problem with the state of moral values in the country today?
Source: Gallup (2015). Poll conducted on 3-6 May 2012. *less than 1%.

- 41 Does this mean that these moral taboos are not as such anymore? Is it another confirmation of Americans moving left on moral issues? There is no certain answer to that. It might also be a consistent misunderstanding between pollsters and citizens or a research bias. Surely, Table 1 does not reflect Figure 5. It is Table 2 that needs to be considered, and the moral issues which are usually considered by pollsters and discussed at a political level are clearly not those that form the people's perception about the moral values of the country. When Americans are asked about moral values they mention issues and behaviors which have more to do with daily life and less with controversial issues that have a political and social impact.

42

There is also one last statistic that might apparently go against the general perception of "Americans becoming more liberal": 53 per cent of Americans still believe that most Americans oppose same-sex marriage (Table 3).

Table 3

	In favour of (%)	Opposed to (%)	No opinion (%)
2015 May 6-10	42	53	6
2013 May 2-7	30	63	7
2012 Nov 26-29	30	61	9

Do you think most Americans are in favour of same-sex marriage or opposed to same-sex marriage?
Source: Gallup (2015).

- 43 In other words, as shown in Table 3, perceptions differ from personal beliefs. Surely, the media environment plays a role in this and people also do not always respond honestly. It can also mean that interpersonal relations and discussions with friends generate different perceptions in people.

44

The point is crucial because people usually make up their minds before they define the facts. As Walter Lippmann writes in his seminal work on stereotypes and the distortions of the communication sphere: "We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception" (6).

Conclusions

45

In the early 2000s, under several points of view, the United States appeared as a puritan country that was a century behind Europe. The President was a conservative warmonger, the Congress authorized the controversial invasion of Iraq, and in January 2002 the Guantanamo Bay detention camp opened up. The death penalty was in force in the majority of states, racial divisions and discrimination against homosexuals were the norm. In terms of civil rights and moral taboos, the idea was that Europeans were modern and progressive while Americans were bigotted and stuck on their peculiar ideological traditions. In the early 2000s, Europe seems to be left-wing and the U.S. right-wing. It seemed bizarre, for instance, that gay and lesbian marriage was considered as an off-limits topic even for the Democrats, while it was already legal in Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain. Marijuana was illegal everywhere, racial tensions were high and publicly funded healthcare was perceived as something impossible to be established in the U.S.

46

In just a little over a decade, gay men and lesbians can marry in all 50 U.S. states, support for the legalization of marijuana has been increasing and 23 U.S. states have already legalized its recreational or medical use. An African-American President has been elected twice and he has been able to approve a healthcare reform that seemed implausible only ten years earlier. Public support for the death penalty is at its historical minimum and in the last ten years nine U.S. states have suspended or cancelled executions. In March 2016, Barack Obama was the first U.S. President to visit Cuba in 88 years.

47

These are not just social and political victories, they are signs of the evolution of the *zeitgeist*. Politics has reflected society and the mainstream has changed. We do not know if Paul Beinart is right when he wrote that the next Democratic president is going to be more liberal than Obama and the next Republican president will be more liberal than George W. Bush. Only time will tell. And it is true that racial relations are still a major issue and that the Obama's healthcare reform is far from a 'social-democratic' model of welfare. However, less than fifteen years later, under several perspectives, America looks like a completely different country.

48

We demonstrated by means of statistics and analysis that Americans are becoming more liberal on social issues. The biggest leftward shift since 2000 has been in attitudes toward gay and lesbian relations, from only a minority of Americans finding it morally acceptable to a clear majority finding it acceptable. So, the answer to RQ1 is fully positive, with the only notable exception of extra-marital affairs.

49

As explained in section 1, the landmark *Hobergefell v. Hodges* decision simply integrated itself in a process of liberalization of attitudes towards gay marriage that in Summer 2015 was already underway, given that the opinion polls showed that a solid majority of Americans favoured same-sex marriage. Thus, the 2015 Supreme Court's sentence partially differs from other landmark decisions of the past, which anticipated

the trends of public opinion. The Court sentenced in favour of something that was already positively expressed by the citizens, by the social and political *zeitgeist*. It was a 5-4 decision, as in other historical cases, but perhaps less courageous than it could have appeared at first glance.

50

Section 2 showed how the rapid change in the public opinion perceptions was the outcome of a planned and coordinated strategy which led the gay and lesbian movement to achieve all the recent political victories that came after a long series of scorching losses. The third section focused on the fact that the forces pushing a higher acceptability of gay and lesbian relations are operating on the entire American culture and across the whole age spectrum, not just on young people. So, findings for RQ2 are that, in absolute terms, people aged 18-29 are the most supportive of gay marriage. But in relative terms, the 2002-2015 trend of acceptance of gay marriage was the same for all generations.

51

To sum up, the United States are living a generalized liberalization of attitudes toward moral issues. However, in such an apparently clear spectrum, there are a few trends that seem to point in the opposite direction and these require a more in-depth coverage. Why do the majority of Americans believe that the moral tone of the nation is worsening? Americans believe that moral issues include sentiments such as generosity, tolerance and respect. Thus, it is the perception of the country and of each individual's daily life—and not the single provisions on social and civil rights—that determines the idea of morality and citizenry. Then, the last data shown is particularly significant: most Americans believe that the majority of U.S. citizens are against gay and lesbian marriage. This trend says a lot about people's perception: from self-conviction to media influence, from interpersonal discussions to lying on questions of moral issues. In this sense the answer to RQ3 is an evident clash between people's attitudes towards the vast majority of moral issues and their perception of the moral values of the country and of other people's perception.

52

All in all, the opinion polls speak clearly: Americans are becoming more liberal on moral issues. H1 is thus confirmed: after an astonishingly rapid shift, gay and lesbian issues are no longer considered as moral taboos. On the other hand, U.S. citizens believe the country's morality is getting worse. But, as demonstrated in section 3, that is precisely because when Americans are asked about moral values they are thinking of things other than just the norms surrounding sexual behavior, gay and lesbian issues, abortion, suicide, or gambling (H2 confirmed).

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ABSTRACTS

This article analyzes the evolution of gay and lesbian rights and same-sex marriage in American public opinion. It describes how *Obergefell v. Hodges*, state-level decisions and the public opinion trends can be considered as the outcome of a grassroots coordinated campaign which began more than a decade ago and was able to conquer the majority of Americans. It also focuses on the American public opinion trends related to moral issues, examining if it is true that U.S. citizens are moving leftward. The research shows that the shift toward more liberal attitudes on a number of social values and issues has occurred across the age spectrum, not just among young people, and that when Americans are asked about moral values they are thinking of things other than just the norms surrounding sexual behavior and reproduction issues. Thus, when Americans are largely saying that the overall moral tone of their culture is in bad shape and getting worse, they are only marginally thinking of former taboos such as gay and lesbian marriage and sexual behaviors in general.

INDEX

Keywords: civil rights, gay and lesbian studies, public opinion studies, U.S. politics, U.S. society

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