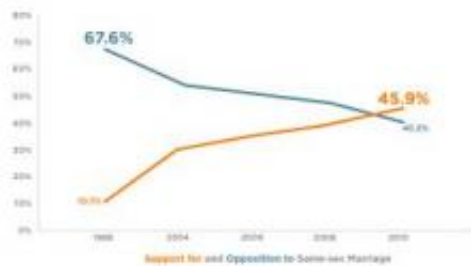


Americans move dramatically toward acceptance of homosexuality

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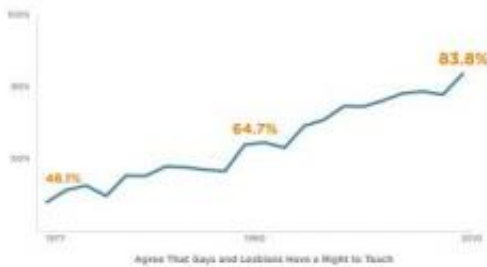
A plurality of Americans now support marriage of people of the same sex, a major change in the last few years. Credit: University of Chicago

Although sharply divided, public attitudes toward gays and lesbians are rapidly changing to reflect greater acceptance, with younger generations leading the way, research by NORC at the University of Chicago shows.

In addition to a plurality who now approve of same-sex marriage, Americans overwhelmingly support basic civil liberties and freedom of expression for gays and lesbians, in contrast to sharp division on such issues in the 1970s. Taken together, the results show a clear "trend toward greater tolerance regarding homosexuality," said Tom W. Smith, director of the [General Social Survey](#) at NORC and author of the NORC report, "[Public Attitudes](#) toward Homosexuality."

The rise in support for same-sex marriage has been especially dramatic over the last two decades. It went from 11 percent approval in 1988 to 46 percent in 2010, compared to 40 percent who were opposed, producing a narrow plurality in favor for the first time. The report is based on findings of the latest General Social Survey, conducted in 2010 with a cross sample of more than 2,000 people.

"There is a large generation [gap](#) on the issue [of same-sex marriage]," Smith said. While 64 percent of those under 30 back same-sex marriage, only 27 percent of those 70 and older support it.



During the past three decades, Americans have become increasingly tolerant of gays and lesbians being allowed to teach. Credit: University of Chicago

Acceptance of homosexuality in general also reflects the generational difference in opinion. In 2010, 26 percent of the people surveyed who were under 30 said they felt same-sex behavior is "always wrong," while 63 percent of the people aged 70 and older held that opinion.

As a result of the generational division, public attitudes are sharply divided on the issue. Although 44 percent of the people surveyed felt

that [sexual relations](#) between two adults of the same sex is always wrong, another 41 percent thought such relations were "not wrong at all."

"Just 11 percent were in the middle, saying it was either 'almost always wrong' or 'wrong only sometimes.' [Public opinion](#) is thus highly polarized on this issue, with few people sharing the middle ground," Smith said.

The GSS, which has been conducted biennially for 40 years, showed a marked increase in support of many [civil liberties](#) for gays and lesbians. Support for a gay person's right to speak before a public audience increased from 62 percent in 1972 to 86 percent in 2010; support for allowing gays and lesbians to teach at colleges or universities rose from 48 percent in 1973 to 84 percent in 2010; and approval for having a library keep a book that favors homosexuality rose from 54 percent in 1973 to 78 percent in 2010.

The change toward acceptance of homosexuality began in the late 1980s after years of remaining relatively constant. In 1973, 70 percent of people felt same-sex relations are "always wrong," and in 1987, 75 percent held that view. By 2000, however, that number dropped to 54 percent and by 2010 was down to 43.5 percent.

Provided by University of Chicago

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