

Support for right to deny service to same-sex couples is fueled not only by religion: study

December 20 2017



The first national survey of public attitudes on allowing businesses to deny service to same-sex couples reveals that Americans who support service refusal do so regardless of whether the denial is for religious or nonreligious reasons. Credit: Carla Schaffer/ AAAS

Americans are evenly divided on whether a business should be able to deny service to same-sex couples, according to a study by Indiana University Bloomington sociologists. It is the first national survey to use

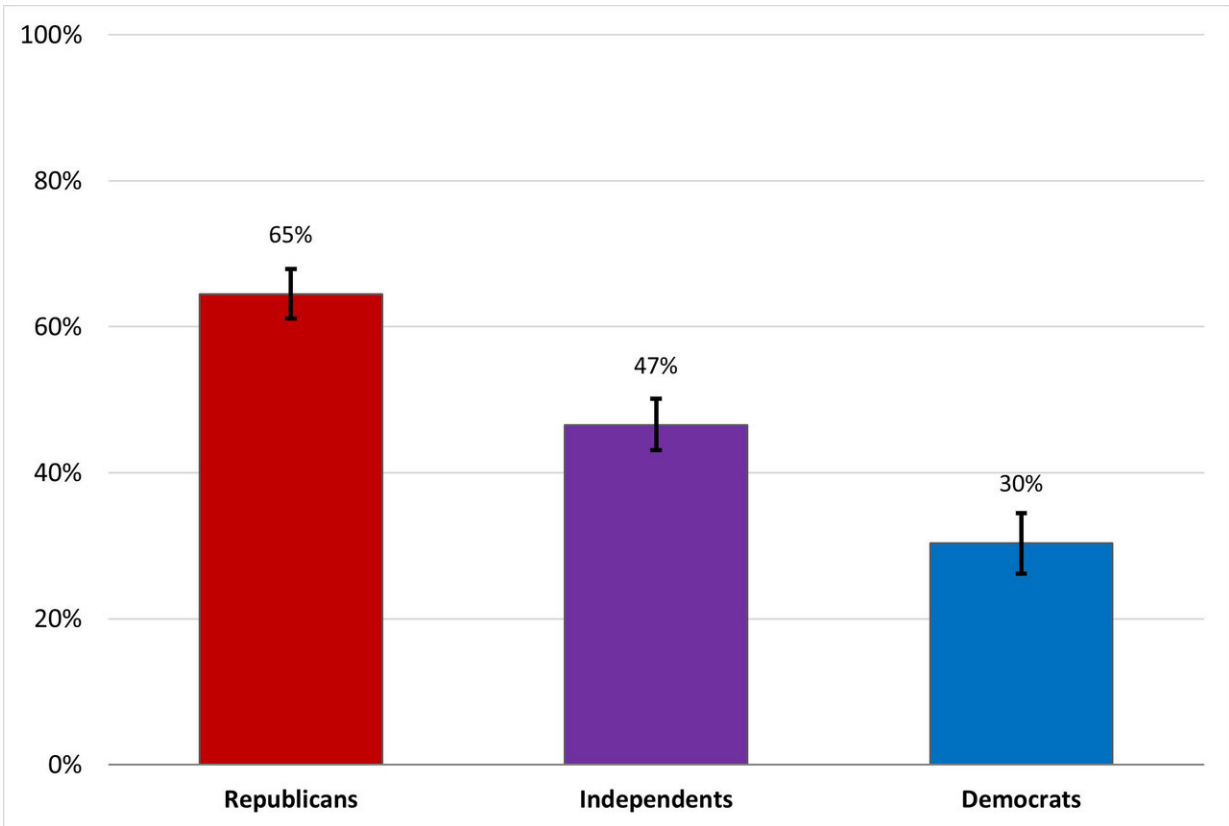
an experimental approach to examine views on refusing service to sexual minorities.

But people who support denying [service](#) don't necessarily see it as a matter of [religious freedom](#), the study finds. They are as likely to support a business that denies service for reasons unrelated to religion as one that does so because of religious beliefs.

"The finding challenges the idea that denial of service to same-sex couples is all about religious freedom," said Brian Powell, the James H. Rudy Professor of Sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences and the lead author of the study. "People may oppose [same-sex marriage](#) because of their beliefs, but their views about denial of service have nothing to do with whether the denial is for religious reasons.

In other findings:

- There was surprisingly strong support for the idea that businesses should be able to deny services to interracial couples, even though laws prohibit racial discrimination. Researchers asked about interracial couples to compare with findings for [same-sex couples](#).
- Respondents made a clear distinction between self-employed individuals and corporations. They were twice as likely to say a self-employed person could deny service as they were to support a business chain whose owners objected to serving same-sex or interracial couples.

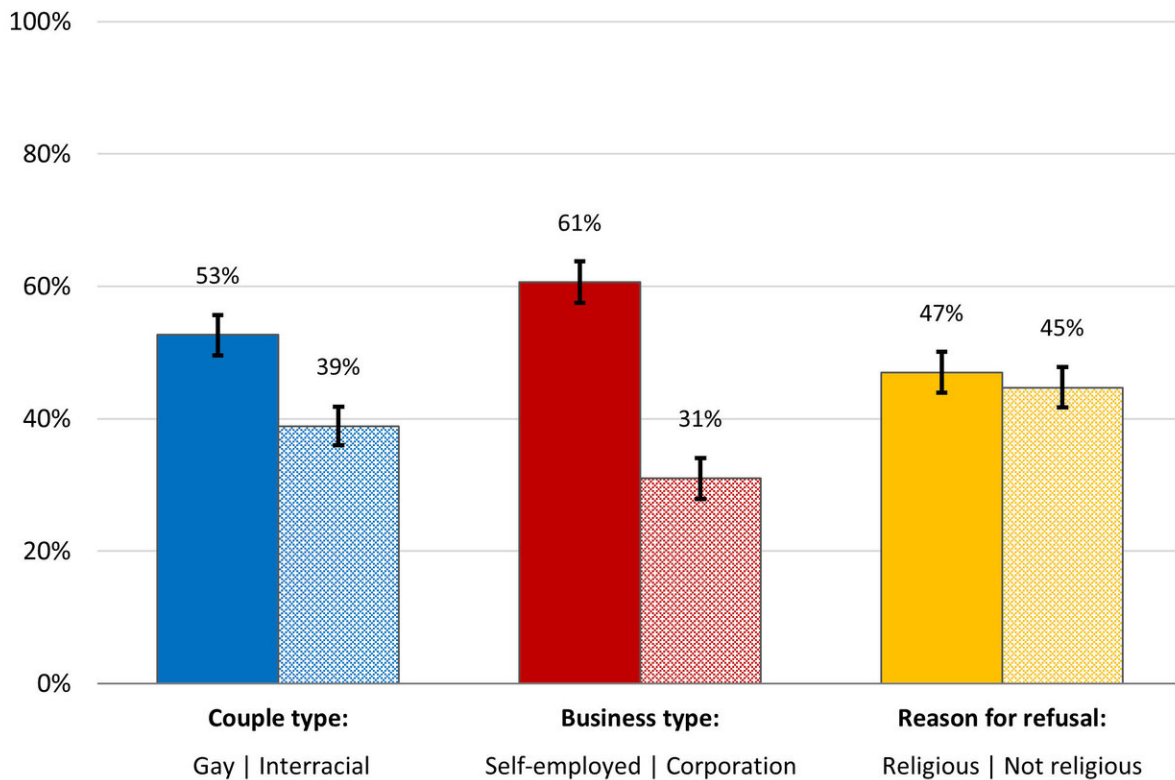


Percent of Republicans, Independents and Democrats who support business service refusal to gay and interracial couples. Credit: Brian Powell, Indiana University

The study is published in *Science Advances*, a publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Co-authors are Landon Schnabel, a doctoral student in sociology; and Lauren Apgar, a recent Ph.D. graduate in sociology.

A representative sample of over 2,000 people were asked to respond to vignettes in which a photographer refused to take wedding pictures. In random versions of the vignette, the photographer was self-employed or worked for a chain business, the couple was same-sex or interracial, and the reason for denying service was religious or nonreligious.

Powell said it was striking that two in five respondents supported denying service to an interracial couple. Over half said a self-employed photographer should be able to refuse service to an interracial couple, while fewer than one-fourth said a corporation should be allowed to do so.

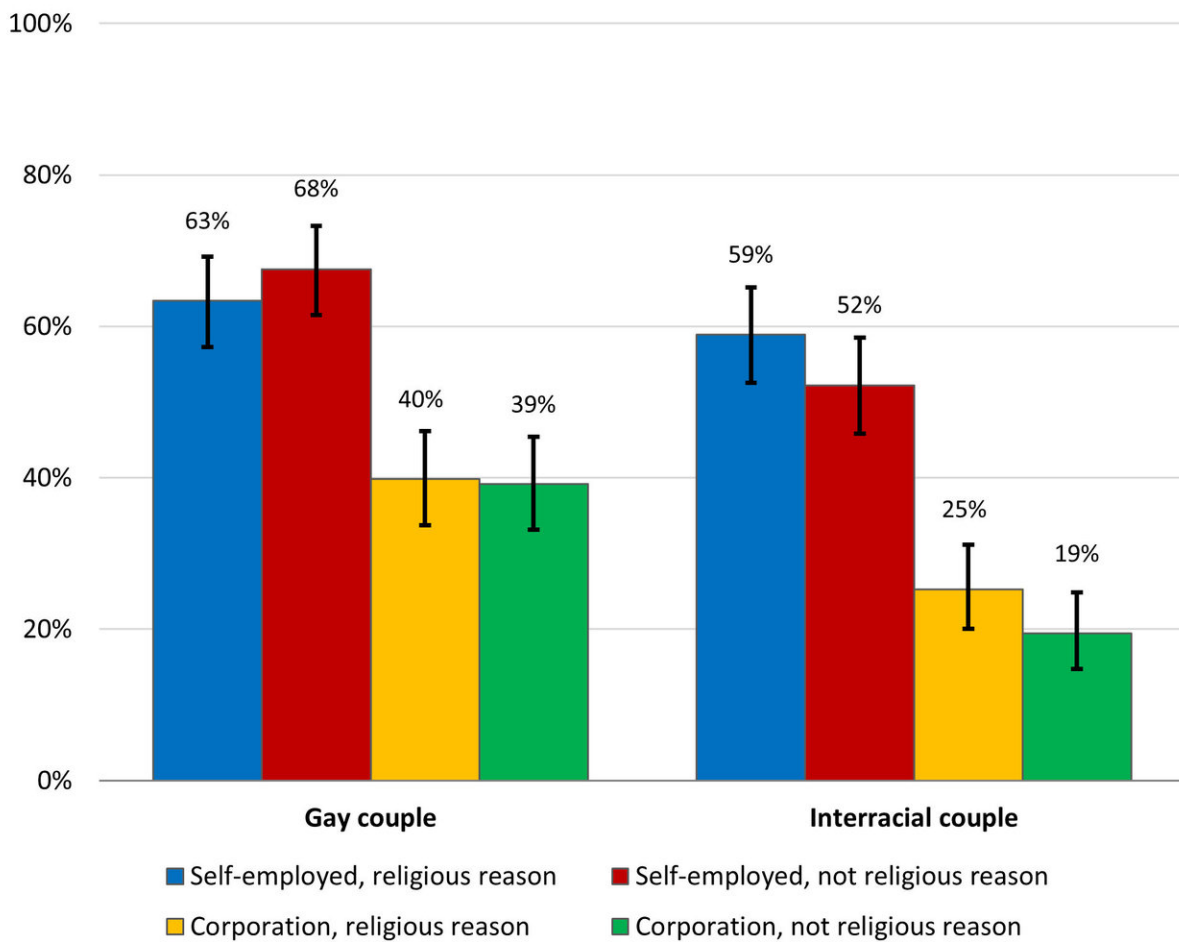


Percent of respondents who support business service refusal by experimental manipulations. Credit: Powell, Schnabel, Apgar, *Sci. Adv.* 2017;3: eaao5834

"Race is a protected category, and despite that, many people say you can deny service," Powell said.

Also, while 61 percent of respondents said a self-employed photographer could deny service to a same-sex couple or interracial couple, only 31 percent said a corporation could deny service. Powell said the result suggests public views are not aligned with the Supreme Court's 2014 Hobby Lobby decision, which said that closely held corporations had the same rights as individuals to deny their employees contraceptive insurance coverage because of the owners' religious objections.

"Americans don't believe that," he said. "They make a clear distinction between corporations and self-employed people."



Percent of respondents who support business service refusal by each experimental condition. Credit: Powell, Schnabel, Apgar, *Sci. Adv.* 2017;3:eao5834

In the study, respondents didn't favor religious reasons for denying service over other reasons. In open-ended questions, Powell said, many took a libertarian view that a self-employed individual should be able to deny service to anyone for any reason. In contrast, others viewed denial of service as discrimination and said businesses should serve everyone.

The study examines public views on the conflict between anti-discrimination laws and legal protections for speech and religion, a topic under debate by courts and legislatures. The Supreme Court heard recent arguments in a Colorado case in which a baker refused—on religious grounds—to make a wedding cake for a same-sex couple. The court is expected to rule by June 2018.

More information: B. Powell et al., "Denial of service to same-sex and interracial couples: Evidence from a national survey experiment," *Science Advances* (2017). DOI: [10.1126/sciadv.aao5834](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aao5834) , advances.sciencemag.org/content/3/12/eao5834

Provided by Indiana University

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