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The Personal Politics of Same-Sex Marriage

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Research on attitudes toward gay people and same-sex marriage finds that individuals who know a gay person in their immediate personal network are not only more likely to view gay people positively but also support same-sex marriage. Here we examine whether this result extends to an individual's stance toward specific ballot measures regarding same-sex marriage across different social and political climates ranging from the conservative South to the liberal Pacific Northwest. Using survey data collected in three states that considered banning or approving same-sex marriage during the 2012 election cycle, we analyze the hypothesis that a personal relationship with a gay person affects an individual's vote choice on a ballot measure with actual policy consequences. In the end, we find mixed results across the three states. Our results suggest the importance of state-level variation in the social climate that may temper the effect of contact.

Keywords: LGBT, Direct Democracy, Same-Sex Marriage, Gay Marriage, Ballot Measures, Contact Theory, Mixed Support for Contact Hypothesis, Referendums, Referenda, United States, Comparative State Policy, Social Policy, Moral Policy, National Level, Subnational Level, Endogeneity, North Carolina, Minnesota, Washington State.

Related Articles:
Barth, Jay, and Janine Parry. 2009. "2 > 1 + 1? The Impact of Contact with Gay and Lesbian Couples on Attitudes about Gays/Lesbians and Gay Related Policies." *Politics & Policy* 37 (1): 31-50. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2007.00160.x/abstract
Bramlett, Brittany. 2012. "The Cross-Pressures of Religion and Contact with Gays and Lesbians, and Their Impact on Same-Sex Marriage Opinion." *Politics & Policy* 40 (1): 13-42. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2011.00337.x/abstract

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Related Media:

Cotner, Ben, and Ryan White. "The Case against Eight." *HBO Documentary.* http://thecaseagainst8.com/

NCSL.org. 2015. "Same-Sex Marriage Laws." http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/same-sex-marriage-laws.aspx

Estudios sobre las actitudes hacia personas homosexuales y matrimonios del mismo sexo han encontrado que los individuos que conocen a una persona homosexual en su red social inmediata no solo son más propensos a ver a las personas homosexuales de forma positiva, también son más propensos a apoyar el matrimonio entre personas del mismo sexo. En este estudio examinamos si este resultando también se extiende a la opinión de los individuos a propuestas de política específicamente enfocadas en matrimonios del mismo sexo, y a través de diferentes contextos políticos y sociales, que van desde el espectro conservador del sur de los Estados Unidos hasta una costa noroeste más liberal. Usando información de encuestas recolectadas en tres estados que sometieron a voto la prohibición o aprobación de matrimonios entre personas del mismo sexo durante el periodo de elecciones intermedias de 2012, hipotetizamos que una relación personal con individuo homosexual tiene un efecto en su voto a una propuesta de ley con implicaciones de política pública. Se encontraron resultados mixtos en los tres estados. Nuestros resultados sugieren la importancia de variaciones en el contexto social a través de los estados que puedan influenciar el efecto de contacto a través de una relación personal.

Perhaps no other social issue has dominated the political landscape in recent years as much as same-sex marriage.[1] The battle between advocates and opponents occurs on many fronts, ranging from public demonstrations, messages from the pulpit, debates within state legislatures and the U.S. Congress, arguments inside federal courtrooms, and even speeches from the White House. While there is little doubt of its saliency, the fast-paced evolution of same-sex marriage in the United States is also noteworthy. Over the last decade or so, changes to individual state laws and judicial decisions have increased the number of states currently issuing same-sex marriage licenses to 32 states. Public opinion, similar to the law, has also shifted drastically over this time, although

[1]We are mindful that advocates and researchers sometimes use different terms, such as "marriage equality" or "gay marriage." Our goal, however, is to remain consistent with previous scholarly work on this topic. Likewise, we use terms like "gays and lesbians" or a "gay individual." For example, our key question to measure contact is very common among public opinion surveys: "Do you have any friends or relatives or coworkers who have told you, personally, that they are gay or lesbian?"

the pace of change varies across states (see e.g., Gelman, Lax, and Phillips 2010; Lax and Phillips 2009).

Several factors may influence an individual's opinion on same-sex marriage. Ideology is perhaps the strongest predictor of attitudes: in general, conservatives are less likely to support gay marriage when compared with liberals. In addition, cues from religious (see e.g., Bramlett 2012) and political elites (see e.g., Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz 2014) help individuals form opinions on this issue. Other research finds that, under the right circumstances, contact with a gay person can have an impact on attitudes (see e.g., Barth, Overby, and Huffmon 2008; Barth and Parry 2009; Bramlett 2012; Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz 2014; Garner 2013; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Skipworth, Garner, and Dettrey 2010).

At base, we aim to estimate whether contact with a gay person has an impact beyond shaping attitudes. That is, does contact with a gay person affect an individual's policy choices? We use contact theory (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) as a vehicle for estimating whether the effects of contact with a gay person can reach beyond influencing attitudes and impact votes concerning same-sex marriage. Specifically, we examine data from three unique surveys that asked potential voters about their opinions on referendums—which are electoral choices that have direct and often immediate policy consequences—that appeared on the ballots in North Carolina, Minnesota, and Washington during the 2012 election cycle. Rather than rely on a nationally representative sample of opinions toward same-sex marriage, we investigate the role of contact at the state level and in the environment where much of the battle over this issue has taken place.[2] With the political and social climate varying across states, scholars should not assume that changes at the national level translate to subnational units. Whether contact has a uniform effect on voting intentions across states is an empirical question that the current scholarship has failed to address. In addition to asking about real policy decisions, our research differs from previous studies in our approach to addressing a well-known problem of endogeneity—the distribution of individuals who know a gay person is not random. To address this endogeneity, we use matching to create two groups that are as similar as possible across a common set of covariates. By constructing these equivalent groups, we can compare voting intentions of individuals who know someone who is gay and individuals who do not know someone who is gay—or, borrowing the language of experiments, the first group would be our "treatment" group and the second our "control" group (although, of course, we do not have random assignment here).

Our findings offer mixed support for contact theory. When looking at the direct impact of contact with a gay individual on vote intentions on ballot

[2]While the involvement of federal courts continues to increase, the question was in the hands of voters in several states in 2012; therefore, we argue it is most appropriate to investigate the role of contact at the state level.

measures, we find that contact results in voters having a higher likelihood of casting a pro-gay rights ballot in just one of our three cases: North Carolina. While each of our three cases showed a positive effect of contact on support for same-sex marriage, both Minnesota's and Washington's results failed to reach standard levels of significance. In the discussion, we expand on some possible explanations for these inconsistencies.

Contact Theory and Gay Rights

The roots of contact theory begin with Allport's (1954) curiosity about the interactions between disparate groups that took place during World War II. He examines whether contact between racial and ethnic groups has an impact on the opinions they have of one another. Based on his observations, Allport identifies four necessary conditions to achieve optimum intergroup prejudice-reducing contact: (1) Equal group status within the contact situation, (2) common goals, (3) intergroup cooperation, and (4) support from authority. The presence of these conditions helped integrate platoons within the Army, as interactions between races during World War II reduced prejudice between white and black soldiers.

Existing research applies Allport's theory far beyond his original work on race and integration. In general, scholars focus on how contact with an "out-group," or otherwise marginalized or stigmatized group, can influence opinions of the "in-group."[3] Such "out-groups" include senior citizens (Caspi 1984; Drew 1988), individuals with physical and mental illness (see e.g., Anderson 1995; Desforges *et al.* 1991), and individuals who have a stigmatized disease such as AIDS (Werth and Lord 1992).

Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) examine hundreds of studies and conclude that intergroup contact has a positive impact by reducing prejudice. They find Allport's conditions are often interrelated and urge scholars to reconsider his conditions as facilitating factors rather than necessary conditions. Pettigrew (1998, 2008) argues that an ideal contact occurs when there is an opportunity for friendship to develop, which often requires repeated interactions.

More recently, scholars have used contact theory to study how interactions with gay individuals affect general attitudes toward gay and lesbian people as well as related policies. For example, frequent and intimate contact with a gay individual leads to a more positive view of gay people as a group (Herek and Capitanio 1996; Herek and Glunt 1993). Lee (2001) finds that individuals who endure out-group contact experience decreases in prejudice as the result of an uncertainty reduction mechanism. This process increases knowledge of the out-group, which allows for the formation of new, positive attitudes around this updated information (see also Hodson 2011).

[3]See Pettigrew (1998, 2008) and Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) for comprehensive reviews of this line of research.

In addition to contact decreasing the uncertainty individuals have toward gays and lesbians, other research shows that contact can have an impact on policy attitudes, such as views toward same-sex marriage. Olson, Cadge, and Harrison (2006) find that contact increases support for same-sex marriage for followers of all religious traditions, save evangelical Protestants. Given that advocacy groups often place emphasis on gay families when communicating with the public, Barth and Parry (2009) compare the effects of contact with gay individuals versus gay couples and find notable differences. They also examine support for openly gay individuals serving in the armed forces and adoption rights for same-sex couples. In each case, contact increases policy support. Contrary to what Allport may predict, however, Harrison and Michelson (2012) find that the strategy of personalization can actually have negative consequences for advocacy efforts like volunteerism and fundraising.

Focusing on the role of elite cues, Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz (2014, 554) find when working together, "social contact and partisan cues explain significantly more about public opinion about policies targeting out-groups than each does alone." Their work underscores the political nature of these attitudes:

> The vast majority of strong Republicans know a member of the gay community; however, this interaction does not affect the manner in which they come to view gay marriage policy. No matter how closely Republicans know a member of the gay community, their position on gay marriage does not change. Unlike Democrats, who become more opposed, Republicans remain supportive of constitutionally banning same sex marriage. (567)

They also highlight the importance that support from a cue-giver—for example, a partisan elite or other opinion leader—has in shaping the attitudes of the mass public, as Allport (1954) predicts.

Scholars know that the cultural environment has a substantial impact on attitudes on gay marriage. For example, in analyzing data across numerous countries, Adamczck and Pitt (2009) note the role a nation's cultural context has on attitudes toward gay individuals and related policies. In addition to moral and religious views, attitudes toward gay individuals, and gender roles influencing opinions on same-sex marriage, others find that people are supportive when a high number of same-sex couples reside in a local area (Gaines and Garand 2010). Flores (2014) shows that as the population density of gay individuals increase in a legislative district, support for granting rights to same-sex couples increases.

Theory and Hypothesis

Contact with a member of an out-group often has a positive impact on attitudes toward that group, an effect that compounds when contact involves family members or a close friend. A number of conditioning factors may mitigate the effects of contact, such as the presence of resistant stereotypes, partisan

and ideological predispositions or cues from elites, and even cross-pressures brought about by religious beliefs and messages from the pulpit (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988). Of course, within each subset of conditional factors, there is significant variation across individuals.

Early work focuses on the consequences of contact on attitudes toward gay and lesbian individuals (see e.g., Herek and Capitanio 1996), while more recent work measures the impact of contact on attitudes toward specific policies (see e.g., Barth and Parry 2009; Bramlett 2012). We expect, as others have argued (Bramlett 2012; Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz 2014), that contact with gay and lesbian people may not always translate into changes in attitudes due to ideological predispositions. *We argue that there is a significant difference between responding to survey questions about attitudes on public policies and actual vote intentions on ballot measures that have immediate policy consequences.* Indeed, most research examines how contact influences attitudes toward gays and lesbians, but there is a dearth of research analyzing how these interactions translate into real voting decisions on ballot measures.[4] Our surveys measure opinions on votes concerning same-sex marriage in three different states just prior to Election Day. We draw attention to this distinction for two compelling reasons.

First, unlike questions that use scales or thermometer ratings to gauge attitudes, individuals have a binary choice when casting a vote on a ballot measure. While contact may lead to some movement on a thermometer rating or a scale, the change in attitudes may not be significant enough to affect votes on an initiative or referendum. Consider a statewide measure that would approve a constitutional amendment barring same-sex marriage (similar to the vote on North Carolina's Amendment 1 in 2012). A "yes" or "no" vote could have multiple interpretations. A "yes" may mean opposition to same-sex marriage because a voter believes same-sex marriage is immoral, or, perhaps, she simply prefers domestic partnerships and wishes to remove marriage as an option for same-sex couples. A "no" vote might signify someone supportive of same-sex marriage, or even someone who may be opposed to same-sex marriage, although the voter does not believe a constitutional amendment is necessary (indeed, it may have been outlawed already, as was the case in North Carolina). While such an array of opinions that lead to observationally equivalent outcomes precludes us from interpreting votes as a measure of attitudes toward gays and lesbians in general, the measure itself captures policy preference. Previous research has largely ignored whether contact with an out-group member has direct policy implications, which is surprising given that voters have been the ultimate authority concerning many states' policies toward same-sex marriage.

[4]For exceptions, see Barth, Overby, and Huffmon (2008) and Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz (2012).

Second, just as political culture varies greatly by state (see e.g., Elazar 1966), so does public opinion (see e.g., Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1994). Focusing on a number of gay rights issues, researchers find great variation in policy opinion and responsiveness across states (Haider-Markel and Kaufman 2006). Given these disparities, we expect that the effect of contact with a gay person may not be universal across the country. Indeed, the very definition of conservative and liberal varies depending the state—that is, conservative may have a different meaning in Alabama compared with Hawaii. Some states and cities are more hospitable to gays and lesbians (see e.g., Breen 2014; Margolin 2015), which affects (and is affected by) the people who choose to reside in a state.

In some areas of the country, differences between "in-group" and "out-groups" may be very salient, while in other areas these differences may be insignificant. For instance, we suspect that an individual who reveals he or she is a gay person is likely to have a larger impact in a more conservative context (e.g., the South) when compared with a more liberal context (e.g., the Pacific Northwest). We argue that the baseline cultural norm will matter a great deal when evaluating what the relative impact of contact with an "out-group" will be. If the prevailing cultural norm is one of intolerance for gay individuals, we expect contact will have a greater impact. By contrast, if the prevailing cultural norm is that of acceptance for gay individuals, we predict that contact will have a relatively small impact.

Using survey data from three different states where voters had the opportunity to vote on ballot measures regarding same-sex marriage in 2012, we analyze the role of contact in several different institutional settings and social climates. Using a variety of sources, there are clear differences in the climate across our three states that lead us to expect the impact of contact will vary. Using a strategy to disaggregate dozens of national surveys over a ten-year span, Lax and Phillips (2009) estimate public opinion at the state level on issues related to gay rights. Across all eight issues in their data, Massachusetts ranks as the most liberal state while Utah ranks as the most conservative. Table 1 presents their estimates for the three states in our analysis. Washington is the most liberal state we studied (tied for ninth most liberal), North Carolina is the most conservative we studied (tied for 40th), and Minnesota lies in between (tied for 19th).

In their annual reports, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) highlights the vast differences between states on gay rights issues. Focusing on the report from 2011 (the year prior to when our surveys were in the field), there were significant differences in the laws between the states we analyze (Human Rights Campaign 2011). At that time, only Washington had a statewide law that granted spousal rights to same-sex couples, although all three states had laws in place restricting marriage to one man and one woman. Washington and Minnesota had laws against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as laws regarding hate crimes; North Carolina had

Table 1. Public Opinion on Gay Rights Issues, by State[a]

	Second-Parent Adoption	Hate Crimes	Health Benefits	Housing	Jobs	Marriage	Sodomy	Civil Unions	Mean Opinion	National Rank[a]
MN	47	74	60	78	64	42	49	51	58	T19
NC	36	68	58	74	60	31	34	40	50	T40
WA	51	76	61	79	65	49	56	57	62	T9

Notes: [a]Lax and Phillips (2009) provide estimate using 41 national polls from 1999-2008. [b]Massachusetts is ranked first as the most liberal state toward these issues (Mean Opinion = 68), while Utah is ranked the most conservative (Mean Opinion = 38).

neither of these laws in place. In terms of parenting laws, Washington provided the option of second-parent adoption, while it was only possible in certain jurisdictions in Minnesota. Again, North Carolina law did not address this issue. Finally, all three states did have laws intended to prevent harassment and bullying. HRC reports in 2011, legislators in Washington introduced seven "good" bills and three "bad" bills, legislators in Minnesota introduced 14 "good" bills and eight "bad," and legislators in North Carolina introduced four "good bills" and three "bad bills." In terms of passage, North Carolina and Minnesota each passed one "bad" bill, while Washington's legislature passed three "good" bills (Human Rights Campaign 2011). While our study only includes three states, the variation between them is largely representative of the different pace of legislative activity across the country.

While we are not able to home in on the specific explanations that could explain why contact has an effect on policy choice, we are able to examine whether contact, in general, has a positive impact on support for same-sex marriage by examining the following hypothesis, which we expect may differ across states: *Contact with a gay or lesbian person will lead to greater support for same-sex marriage.*

Data

We collected survey data from three states with same-sex marriage referendums on the ballot in 2012. While the three states are only a small portion of the country, our research focuses on the front line of several battles over same-sex marriage. North Carolina's Amendment 1 appeared on the May 8, 2012 primary ballot as a legislatively referred constitutional amendment. On the ballot, voters received the following prompt: "Constitutional amendment to provide that marriage between one man and one woman is the only domestic legal union that shall be valid or recognized in this State." Using the same text two days before the election, a survey of likely primary voters found that 55 percent of respondents would support the referendum. Interestingly, when respondents

learned that Amendment 1 banned both same-sex marriage and civil unions, support dropped to 39 percent and the percent "unsure" jumped from 6 percent to 16 percent (Public Policy Polling [PPP] North Carolina—May 6, 2012).[5] In the end, the measure passed easily, receiving 61 percent of the vote. It is worth noting that while President Barack Obama had announced his opposition to the measure in advance of the election, he did not officially endorse same-sex marriage until the day after Amendment 1 passed.

Minnesota's Amendment 1 appeared on the November 6, 2012, general election ballot. The proposal was a legislatively referred constitutional amendment that proposed to ban same-sex marriage in the state's constitution. Leading up to Election Day, a survey of likely voters reported that most individuals had already made up their minds (97 percent), and 45 percent of respondents planned to support the amendment (PPP Minnesota—November 3, 2012).[6] On the ballot, voters saw the following text: "Shall the Minnesota Constitution be amended to provide that only a union of one man and one woman shall be valid or recognized as a marriage in Minnesota?" Notably, the Minnesota State Legislature specifically omitted a ban on civil unions. The measure failed, receiving 47.4 percent of the vote.

Washington's Referendum 74 appeared on the November 6, 2012, general election ballot. Unlike Minnesota and North Carolina, Referendum 74 was a veto referendum (also known as a popular referendum). A veto referendum is a process by which citizens can petition the legislature to put to a popular vote a law that the legislature has passed. With Referendum 74, the Washington State Legislature had passed legislation to modify the state's statutes regarding marriage to include same-sex couples. After passing the legislation, groups opposed to same-sex marriage gathered signatures to force the legislation to appear on the ballot for voters to decide. On the ballot, voters received the following text:

> The legislature passed Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 6239 concerning marriage for same-sex couples, modified domestic-partnership law, and religious freedom, and voters have filed a sufficient referendum petition on this bill. This bill would allow same-sex couples to marry, preserve domestic partnerships only for seniors, and preserve the right of clergy or religious organizations to refuse to perform, recognize, or accommodate any marriage ceremony.

[5]We present survey data from each state leading up to the election as a benchmark for public opinion. While each state had a number of polls leading up to the election, we present the results from PPP as this firm had polls that were close to Election Day in each state. Additionally, similar to our research, PPP used the specific text voters would see on the ballot. The results from PPP are consistent with other statewide polls that addressed this issue. For complete poll results from the North Carolina, visit: http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/2011/PPP_Release_NC_506.pdf

[6]For complete poll results from Minnesota, visit: http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/2011/PPP_Release_MN_1103.pdf

A vote to approve the legislation would therefore be a vote to legalize same-sex marriage, while a vote to reject would be a vote against legalizing same-sex marriage. The measure passed with 53.7 percent of the vote, representing the first time (along with Maine and Maryland) that a state had legalized same-sex marriage via the popular vote. The result was not surprising given that survey research predicted the measure would pass (PPP Washington—November 3, 2012).[7]

For all three surveys, we hired Marketing Systems Group (MSG) to provide a sample from their online panel. As is the case with all opt-in panels, MSG recruits respondents in a potential pool of survey subjects and then offers subsets of the entire panel opportunities to complete specific surveys based on certain parameters. Notably, MSG's sample predominantly receives offers to complete marketing surveys, rather than political surveys. While the quality of responses is always a concern, research shows that online surveys can actually produce *more accurate responses* on sensitive topics that may suffer from issues of social desirability bias (Chang and Krosnick 2009, 2010).

While this research method does not constitute a random sample of the population, we argue there are three factors that help mitigate potential concerns over sample quality. First, we limit the sample to subjects who could actually vote on the measures under study. In Minnesota and Washington, the sample consists of registered voters; in North Carolina, the sample is eligible voters. Second, our research design is not predictive in nature. Rather, we focus on dissecting the effects of contact with gay and lesbian individuals. Accordingly, we are concerned with establishing stronger internal validity over the ability to generalize our results to the entire population of voters. Third, our surveys do represent three different regions of the country. In a mobile society where some people "vote with their feet," there is value in assessing the impact of contact in the South, the Midwest, and in the Pacific Northwest.

For each survey, we collected responses about a week before Election Day.[8] For North Carolina's Amendment 1, we gathered survey responses from April 27, 2012 to May 3, 2012. We received responses from 1,066 individuals, with a cooperation rate of 6 percent (a response rate that is typical for online opt-in panels). For Minnesota and Washington, we collected survey responses from October 31 to November 5, 2012. We received 1,250 responses from Minnesota and we received 1,285 responses from Washington; each had a cooperation rate of 7 percent. We provide the comparison of prematching demographics in our samples to the relevant U.S. Census statistics in Appendix A.

[7]For complete poll results from Washington, visit: http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/2011/PPP_Release_WA_1103.pdf

[8]In North Carolina, the ballot measure appeared during the primary election, while the measures in Washington and Minnesota were on the general election ballot. Certainly, the electorate is very different between primary and general elections. As with other variables that could influence the propensity to know a gay person, our matching strategy balances these variables between those who do know and those who do not know someone who is gay.

On each of the surveys, we asked respondents questions about their political affiliation, demographics, and vote choice on the same-sex ballot measure in their state. Specifically, we asked respondents to report: (1) vote choice on ballot measure, (2) ideology, (3) party identification, (4) age, (5) income, (6) education, (7) gender, and (8) a battery of political knowledge questions. A full description of each question we used on our survey is available in Appendix B.

Research Design

We assume that the propensity to know a gay individual personally is not randomly distributed among the population and is a concern that our model should address. In other words, gay individuals are more likely to reveal their sexual identity to some members of society over others. For example, we expect that individuals with a politically liberal disposition will be more likely to have a gay person reveal their sexual orientation to them when compared with a person who has a conservative disposition. Similarly, we presume that younger individuals are more likely to know a gay person when compared with older individuals given the generational difference in attitudes toward gay and lesbian individuals. There are, of course, many more examples of potential imbalances that would only serve to highlight the fact that knowing a gay individual is not entirely random. Scholars studying the effect of contact are aware of this problem and design their research to address this issue. For example, Overby and Barth (2002) propose a measure to account for the opportunities for contact in the local community, while Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) code whether participants had a choice in the intergroup contact situation. We offer our own prescription to address endogeneity.

Here, we employ a post-test-only nonequivalent-groups design using survey data we collected in three states that were considering same-sex marriage ballot measures during 2012. In particular, we examine whether personally knowing someone who is gay has an effect on an individual's assessment of the legality of same-sex marriage. We argue that any research design that purports to examine the effect of contact on attitudes toward gay and lesbian people or vote intentions should account for endogeneity that arises from the fact that contact with these groups is often nonrandom. In our design, the treatment group consists of individuals who know a gay or lesbian individual personally, which we assess by asking: "*Do you have any friends or relatives or coworkers who have told you, personally, that they are gay or lesbian?"* The control group contains individuals who report they do not personally know anyone who is gay. Because we anticipate an imbalance between the two groups with regard to their propensity to know a gay individual, we implement a design that makes these propensities equivalent.

We use matching to create equivalent groups to analyze. In essence, matching selects respondents in the treatment group and the control group who are most similar to each other based on the parameters included in the matching algorithm.[9] In our design, we use the genetic matching algorithm GenMatch (Diamond and Sekhon 2013) that is a part of the MatchIt package in R (Ho *et al.* 2007). The algorithm uses the researcher's specified parameters to establish covariate balance between the treatment and control groups. As a result, we also construct two groups that have equivalent or near-equivalent propensities to receive the treatment (knowing someone who is gay). While the control group still does not personally know someone who is gay, their propensity to know someone who is gay is the same as someone who is in the treatment group.

In our case, we use a set of common predictors of political behavior—party identification, ideology, age, education, income, political knowledge, and gender—in our genetic matching algorithm. Thus our treatment and control group are as similar as possible based on these seven parameters after matching (we discuss this in depth in the Results section). After matching, we calculate a difference in proportions test for each state in our study to capture the main effect of knowing a gay person. As we outline in our hypothesis based on contact theory, we expect that the effect of knowing a gay person will lead to an increase in support for same-sex marriage. In Minnesota and North Carolina, we predict this effect to be negative, as each measure was a proposed constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. For Washington, the effect will be positive, as a vote for Referendum 74 was a vote to legalize same-sex marriage.

Results

First, we present the results of our matching algorithm for each of our three samples. For North Carolina, Table 2 shows that the propensity to know a gay person is not equivalent across the treatment and control group. The matching algorithm discarded several members of the control group and increased the relative weight for several members that remain in the control group. The balance improved substantially across all matching parameters. As a result, the treatment and control group are nearly identical in terms of their propensity to know a gay individual; however, only members of the treatment group actually know someone who is gay.

[9]A multivariate analysis (e.g., logit model) with a number of control variables is an alternative strategy to assess the role of contact on vote intentions. Given that we do not believe the propensity to know someone who is gay is distributed normally across the population, we believe matching is a better alternative (for more discussion on this, see Sekhon 2009). As we explain below, in balancing the two groups (those that do and do not know someone who is gay), the matching algorithm accounts for common predictors of political behavior. In the end, the two groups have similar propensities to know a gay person; the only difference between groups is that one group actually knows a gay person.

Table 2. Genetic Matching Balance Improvement Results, North Carolina Sample

	Mean Difference Pre	Mean Difference Post	Percent Improvement
Distance (Propensity)	.08	.00	98.3
Democrat	.08	.00	96.0
Republican	−.16	.00	100.0
Liberal	.07	.00	100.0
Conservative	−.15	.00	100.0
Age	−3.04	.12	96.2
Education	.28	.00	99.5
Income	.21	.05	76.9
Political Knowledge	.02	.00	77.5
Gender	.15	.00	100.0

Table 3. Genetic Matching Balance Improvement Results, Minnesota Sample

	Mean Difference Pre	Mean Difference Post	Percent Improvement
Distance (Propensity)	.04	.00	97.9
Democrat	.01	.00	100.0
Republican	−.03	−.01	72.6
Liberal	.10	.00	100.0
Conservative	−.04	.00	96.9
Age	−3.60	−.26	92.7
Education	.38	.01	98.6
Income	.05	.04	19.9
Political Knowledge	.01	−.01	35.2
Gender	.09	.00	100.0

Table 3 presents the improvement in balance by comparing the differences in mean scores across the matching parameters before and after matching for the Minnesota survey. As expected, respondents who personally know a gay individual have a naturally higher propensity to be in the treatment group, and, as a result, the genetic matching algorithm identifies respondents in the control group to remove from the analysis and applied weights to the remaining members of the control group.[10] In most cases, matching results in a significant improvement in balance. Importantly, the difference in propensity to know a

[10]With genetic matching, the method preserves all cases of the treatment and then balances the control group to the treatment group. The logic behind this method is that each case of the treatment is valuable and worth examining. Therefore, the algorithm discards no treatment cases and instead constructs a control group that has the same-propensity to receive the treatment (by discarding control cases).

Table 4. Genetic Matching Balance Improvement Results, Washington Sample

	Mean Difference Pre	Mean Difference Post	Percent Improvement
Distance (Propensity)	.06	.00	98.3
Democrat	.13	−.01	91.4
Republican	−.13	.00	99.0
Liberal	.20	.00	100.0
Conservative	−.10	.00	97.6
Age	−1.24	−.11	91.1
Education	.20	−.06	71.9
Income	.14	.04	69.4
Political Knowledge	.02	.01	68.8
Gender	.11	.00	100.0

gay person is essentially zero after matching. As a result of this strategy, the data that remain allow us to examine the impact of contact on vote intentions.

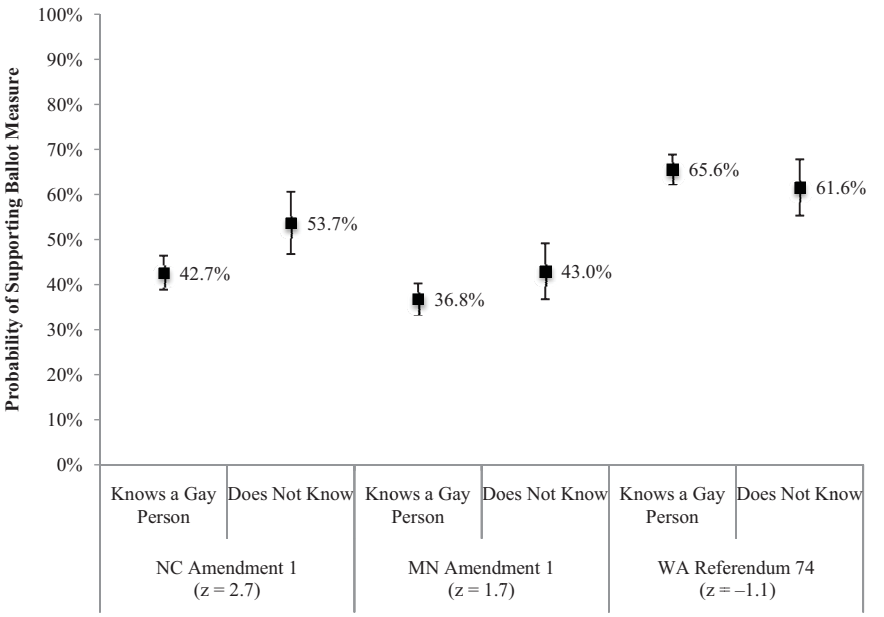
The matching results for Washington are available in Table 4. As was the case in North Carolina and Minnesota, the genetic matching algorithm dropped several control cases and subsequently increased the weight for several control cases. Overall, again, matching leads to a substantial improvement in balance. Indeed, the mean difference in distance (propensity to receive the treatment) is essentially zero. This finding echoes the fact that we see significant balance improvements across all matching parameters.

Overall, the matching results from all three surveys show substantial improvement in balance across each matching parameter and, importantly, in the propensity to know a gay person. In fact, the matching results show that individuals who know a gay individual personally are likely to be different from people who do not personally know a gay individual. Further, such an imbalance not only justifies our use of matching but also amplifies our argument that research on contact theory needs to consider these imbalances. As we mention above, endogeneity of the treatment is a large potential confound—one that we do not claim to solve entirely. While other studies have attempted to resolve this concern (see e.g., Barth and Parry 2009; Overby and Barth 2002; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), we argue that our method—while imperfect—is preferable and can establish better covariate and propensity balance between the treatment and control groups.

We turn now to consider some descriptive statistics for each state. In our matched North Carolina sample, 45.2 percent supported the measure.[11] In terms of partisanship, 33.2 percent of Democrats, 40.3 percent of

[11]Our sample is substantially more liberal than a representative sample. As a result, voters in support of same-sex marriage are higher. As we note in the text, this is less of a concern as we focus on establishing stronger internal validity over generalizability.

Figure 1.
Support for Same-Sex Marriage Ballot Measures (Difference in Proportions Tests)



Independents, and 65.8 percent of Republicans supported the measure (with a correlation coefficient, *r*, of .25). Similarly, 18.9 percent of liberals, 41 percent of moderates, and 76.9 percent of conservatives supported the amendment ($r = .43$). The differences between knowing a gay person (42.7 percent support) and not knowing a gay individual (53.7 percent support) was substantial ($r = -.09$).

We see similar results in Minnesota, where 38.3 percent of our matched sample voted for Amendment 1. Breaking down these results by party, we find that 16.2 percent of Democrats, 35.8 percent of Independents, and 72.6 percent of Republicans voted for the measure ($r = .46$). For ideology, 6 percent of liberals, 30.6 percent of moderates, and 80.9 percent of conservatives voted for the amendment, highlighting the political nature of the vote ($r = .59$). When we examine vote choice by knowing a gay person or not, we find there is a small difference: 36.8 percent of people who report knowing a gay or lesbian voted for the measure and 43 percent of those who did not report knowing a gay individual supported the measure ($r = -.06$).

Washington echoes the results of the other two states, providing a modicum of convergent validity to our surveys. Among our matched sample, 64.7 percent cast a vote in favor of Referendum 74. Support for the measure came from 88 percent of Democrats, 63.2 percent of Independents, and 29.3 percent of Republicans ($r = -.52$). Turning to ideology, 94 percent of liberals, 67 percent of

moderates, and 17.9 percent of conservatives supported the referendum ($r = -.6$). There was also a small difference between knowing a gay person (65.6 percent support) and not knowing a gay person (61.6 percent support; $r = -.04$).

As a result of the matching algorithm, we have two groups in each state with similar propensities to know someone who is gay. All members of the treatment group report that a gay or lesbian person has told them about their sexuality, while members of the control group have not had this experience; however, both groups now have a near-identical average propensity to know a gay person. In Figure 1, we show the proportion of the control and treatment groups who support the ballot measure in each state. We also report confidence intervals and provide the z-statistics for each difference in proportion test. For North Carolina, 42.7 percent of individuals who knew a gay person supported Amendment 1. For those reporting they did not know a gay person, support for Amendment 1 increased to 53.7 percent, an increase of 11 percentage points. This increase was significant beyond the 95 percent confidence level ($z = 2.7$).

We see a similar pattern in Minnesota. Individuals who report knowing a gay individual support Amendment 1 just 36.8 percent of the time. Individuals who do not know a gay person supported the amendment 43 percent of the time. This 6.2-percentage point difference falls short of significance at the 95 percent threshold ($z = 1.7$). In other words, knowing a gay individual led to an increase in opposition to banning same-sex marriage, but this difference was not statistically significant.

Washington, unlike North Carolina and Minnesota, was actively considering adopting—rather than outlawing—same-sex marriage. Again, we find that contact with a gay person has a noticeable impact. Individuals who report knowing a gay individual supported the referendum 65.6 percent of the time. Not knowing a gay individual personally led to a four-percentage point decline in support for same-sex marriage (61.6 percent). This decline was not significant at the 95 percent confidence level ($z = -1.1$). Indeed, this result suggests that citizens of Washington largely supported adopting same-sex marriage, where contact had a minimal difference on vote intentions

In all three cases, contact with a gay individual affected voting intentions in the hypothesized direction. In North Carolina, contact led to a significant decline in support for a constitutional amendment to outlaw same-sex marriage. For Minnesota, this decline fell short of the 95 percent confidence level, but amounted to a 6.2 percent decrease in support for the ban. In Washington, where the measure was a veto referendum, contact with a gay person had a small effect on increasing support for same-sex marriage on the ballot (four percentage points), but this effect was not statistically significant.

Discussion

Using three unique surveys, we examined the effect of personally knowing a gay individual (i.e., contact) on votes concerning same-sex marriage ballot

measures in North Carolina, Minnesota, and Washington during 2012. We found mixed support for the hypothesis that contact will lead to higher support for same-sex marriage. In North Carolina, contact had a statistically significant effect on reported vote choice. For Minnesota, the effect fell just short of the 95 percent threshold ($z = 1.7$), although the directional nature of our hypothesis perhaps discounts the fact that the result did not quite reach this threshold. Washington's results fell far short of being significant. While our mixed results do not especially support contact theory, we argue that they do not necessarily disconfirm contact theory either. Using our theoretical approach as a foundation, we endeavor now to explore why we have observed such mixed findings.

While our results vary across our three cases, we did not expect to find uniform contact effects. We suspect that the value of intergroup contact changes over time. As stereotypes and predispositions erode and inequality between groups begins to diminish, the impact of contact decreases. Indeed, as many individuals experience positive contact, these experiences aggregate into a more noticeable net effect. Eventually, the divide between the in-group and out-group begins to blur, and intergroup contact starts to lose its impact. For example, while contact between different races may have been a significant indictor of more positive racial attitudes in the past, we suspect that the value of contact diminishes as groups gain equal status. In the context of same-sex marriage, the impact of contact with a gay person may have been greater ten years ago than it is today, as gay rights have advanced in many states over the past decade. Similar to our own research, scholars tend to study these phenomena at a single point in time, which likely limits the ability to understand the dynamics involved in this process.

In sum, our research suggests there are three broad stages of intergroup contact. At first, the potential benefit of contact cannot overcome the vast inequalities between groups. Second, as groups find themselves in conducive circumstances, interactions with members of the out-group become beneficial. Eventually, the cycle moves to a final stage—reaching a critical mass or tipping point of sorts—where intergroup differences are small enough that many participants fail to realize they are engaging with someone different from themselves. Here, contact may no longer have an appreciable impact on attitudes.

We suspect this process varies across space based on the social context in which the interactions take place. In one area of the county, the impact of contact may be far less pronounced, while in another area, contact might still produce statistically discernable consequences. While our data provide only a snapshot of the impact of contact in 2012, we know the climate toward gay marriage has varied in the past, and this continues today. The Human Rights Campaign (2014) calculates a "State Equality Index" which shows the varying level of progress toward equality across the nation on a 4-point scale. In their latest report, they label Washington as "Working toward Innovative Equality"

(the highest level of equality) and Minnesota as "Solidifying Equality" (second level), while North Carolina is a "High Priority to Achieve Basic Equality" (lowest level of equality).

Given the unique climate of each state, it is perhaps unsurprising that contact with a gay person was not statistically significant in the state with relatively liberal attitudes toward gay marriage (Washington). Using the perspective of issue evolution (Carmines and Stimson 1989), states with more liberal attitudes are further along in this evolution process than states that are more conservative. We find that contact has a significant impact on support for same-sex marriage in North Carolina, which is relatively conservative on the eight issues that Lax and Phillips (2009) analyze. Over the next ten years, these results may change: As a state becomes more liberal on these issues, the impact of contact should diminish. Our mixed results on the impact of contact on voting intentions on ballot measures across three states are not necessarily at odds with the work of other scholars. As we have noted, attitudes toward gays and lesbians or related policies are distinct from voting on ballot measures. Contact may indeed alter opinions, but it may not always translate to votes.

While our new survey data and research design offer many advantages over existing data, we also are aware of several limitations.[12] In his reformulation of intergroup contact theory, Pettigrew (1998) emphasizes the importance of time in allowing a friendship to develop with a member of an out-group. While our question touches on this issue, we cannot disaggregate between the types of close relationships (e.g., friend vs. family). Previous experiences accompany the participants as they make initial contact, and the context of the situation may include several essential or facilitating factors for positive effects from the interaction. Although we do not have data on the details on how our subjects found out someone close to them was gay, we do believe this point underscores the importance of considering the general climate of the interaction (here, we consider different states).

Given the important role of religion in conditioning the impact of contact (Bramlett 2012), it is also unfortunate that we do not have a measure of religious preference and religiosity in our surveys. In addition, while our survey instrument touches on the "closeness" of contact, we cannot differentiate between whether the contact was with a co-worker, friend, or family member (Bramlett 2012; Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz 2014; Herek and Capitanio 1996).

While further research is necessary, our results suggest the importance of spatial and temporal variation in tempering the positive effect of contact.

[12]The data we analyze in this article come from surveys we designed without this specific project in mind. Unfortunately, we do not have all the data we would like to have to understand the full extent of contact on voting intentions. Nonetheless, the evidence we marshal does point to the importance of ideology and the social climate in tempering the positive effects of contact.

Although we only study three states, given the state-level public opinion data on gay rights issues (Lax and Phillips 2009), we believe the variation in the political and social climate across the states in our sample is at least somewhat representative of what happens in other states across the country. Few doubt that the country as a whole has become more liberal on many gay rights issues, and this trend seems likely to continue. While national opinion polls serve as a barometer of this progress, scholars should pay more attention to the state level, assuming that states will be the unit responsible for making these decisions (Gelman, Lax, and Phillips 2010). As these authors point out, across the country a majority of voters under 30 years old support same-sex marriage and this pattern holds in most states. As the composition of the electorate continues to evolve and older citizens depart the voting pool, the impact of contact may diminish.

While the limits of cross-sectional studies are well known, we think there are promising paths forward to explore the causal mechanisms that may explain the mixed results we found. For example, future research could use experimental methods to examine how interpersonal relationships affect an array of policies, including same-sex marriage. Additionally, lengthy interviews with individuals about how relationships affect policy positions may also unearth a deeper understanding of contact theory's causal mechanism. Even some innovative research tools such as functional magnetic resonance imaging could uncover how individuals integrate interpersonal relationships into their decision-making process.

Gay rights policy advocates may be discouraged by our finding that contact may not always have a direct impact on vote intentions. While interpreting our results, however, we should be careful not to comport changes in voting behavior with changes in attitudes. Rather, our mixed results may simply reflect the changing landscape of American politics into one that does not necessarily see gay and lesbian people as members of an out-group. In fact, reaching a point where contact no longer has an impact is perhaps *the goal* because participants fail to register intergroup differences.

Appendix A

North Carolina Demographics

	Survey	2011 Census Estimates
Age (Median)	39.9	37.7
Income (Median)	$25,001-$50,000	$45,570
% High School Graduates, Age > 25	97.9	83.6
% Female	76.6	51.3
% White (Not Hispanic)	80.2	65
% Black	12.6	22
% Latino/Hispanic	2.2	8.6
% Asian	2.2	2.3

Minnesota Demographics		
	Survey	2012 Census Estimates
Age (Median)	49	36.9
Income (Median)	$50,001-$75,000	$58,476
% High School Graduates, Age > 25	98.8	91.6
% Female	63.4	50.3
% White (Not Hispanic)	94	82.4
% Black	1.1	5.5
% Latino/Hispanic	.9	4.9
% Asian	2.2	4.4

Washington Demographics		
	Survey	2012 Census Estimates
Age (Median)	49	37.3
Income (Median)	$50,001-$75,000	$58,890
% High School Graduates, Age > 25	98.3	89.8
% Female	64.7	50.1
% White (Not Hispanic)	87.3	71.6
% Black	1.7	3.9
% Latino/Hispanic	2.1	11.7
% Asian	5.4	7.7

Appendix B—Survey Questions

Knows a Gay Person

Do you have any friends or relatives or coworkers who have told you, personally, that they are gay or lesbian? (Yes or No)

Ideology

There's a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Which of the following best describes your political ideology (Five Point Very Liberal to Very Conservative Scale)

Partisanship

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent? (Five Point Strong Republican to Strong Democrat Scale)

Age

In what year were you born?

Education

What is the highest level of education that you have completed? (Range from Did Not Finish High School (No GED) to Graduate Degree, 6 options)

Income
Which of the following income categories best depicts your household's annual income? (7 income brackets with Unsure and Decline to State options)

Gender
Are you male or female?

Political Knowledge
Percentage of correct answers to the following battery of questions:

- Who controls the U.S. House of Representatives
- Identification of John Boehner as Speaker of the House
- Identification of John Roberts as Chief Justice of the United States
- Supreme Court responsible for determining constitutionality of laws
- Identification of Harry Reid as Majority Leader of the Senate
- Vote percentage required to override a presidential veto
- Who controls the U.S. Senate (Minnesota and Washington only)

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