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Community Context, Personal Contact, and Support for an Anti-Gay Rights Referendum

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Using data from an unusual survey, we gauge factors influencing support for a state anti-gay rights referendum. After controlling for other powerful predictors of attitudes, we find personal contact (especially relevant and voluntary contact) has an important impact on public support, although community context does not. These findings support an integrated notion of interactions with "out" groups, grounded in social categorization theory, that sees community context and interpersonal contact as concentric circles, moving from abstract, detached forms of contact to more pronounced, personal forms. However, even among those with substantial interpersonal contact, support for the referendum was still widespread.

Keywords: *gay rights; contact hypothesis; same-sex marriages*

While the legal status of gays and lesbians remains hotly contested, there is considerable evidence that Americans are increasingly comfortable with homosexuality (Wilcox and Norrande 2002). Various explanations have been offered for this shift in public opinion, most prominently the venerable contact hypothesis (Allport 1954), which posits that contact between different groups is erosive of prejudice. Both experiments and surveys have shown that personal contact with gays and lesbians tends to have an ameliorative effect on attitudes toward homosexuals. Recently, we (Overby and Barth 2002) have also demonstrated that context matters; citizens living in areas with higher gay populations demonstrate warmer attitudes toward homosexuals.

Although the findings from the gay interpersonal contact literature are very much in line with the similar literature on race, the same is not true for our contextual findings. In a review of the literature on interracial personal contact, Forbes (1997) found that some 90 percent of studies reported positive effects. In contrast, the literature on racial context is much more mixed. A long line of literature dating back to Key (1949) has found that whites who live in close proximity to blacks tend to have a more negative disposition to them. The impact of context on attitudes

toward other ethnic and racial minorities, particularly Asians and Latinos, is more ambiguous, although most studies have found either null or modestly negative effects (Stein, Post, and Rinden 2000).

In this article, we explore more deeply the relative impacts of personal contact and community context in terms of attitudes toward gays and lesbians, grounding this examination in social categorization theory. In doing so, we make use of an unusual survey of public opinion regarding a 2006 referendum in South Carolina to enshrine a ban on same-sex marriages in the state constitution. Unlike previous studies, these data provide us with measures both of personal

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contact of various sorts and of the community context in which respondents live. Our findings generally support the contact hypothesis but—contra our previous work—find little evidence of a contextual effect. Our data also include unusually specific information regarding types and extent of interpersonal contact, which permits us to examine whether particular forms of contact are relevant to attitudes on this specific policy matter. In accordance with social categorization theory's consistent finding that interpersonal contact is considerably more relevant in shaping attitudes about an "out-group," voluntary, ongoing interactions with gays and lesbians are the most potent types of contact in shaping attitudes. Finally, our data permit us to extend the literature on public attitudes toward gays and lesbians in one other important way as we examine these feelings in the context of a particular policy dispute over gay marriage, rather than in the generic framework of most previous empirical studies.

Previous Research on Contact and Contexts

The contact hypothesis asserts simple assumptions and a simple conclusion: negative affect toward minority groups is based on ignorance; isolation feeds ignorance; therefore, contact will have positive effects. As Stein, Post, and Rinden (2000, 288) put it, contact "offers an opportunity to maximize the probability that shared values and beliefs will be demonstrated and perceived and will therefore provide the basis for interpersonal attraction between in-group and out-group members." Early studies, focusing on black-white interaction, yielded very encouraging results (Stouffer et al. 1949; Deutch and Collins 1951). While some have argued that contact is effective only under certain supportive conditions (Devine 1995), recent surveys of the relevant literatures have concluded that so long as it is not hostile, contact per se, even under less than ideal circumstances, "will reduce prejudicial attitudes and policy positions irrespective of the setting or nature of the contact" (Stein, Post, and Rinden 2000, 289).

Recently, work in several disciplines has extended the contact hypothesis to cover sexual orientation as well. Using convenience samples of student respondents, researchers such as Gentry (1987), D'Augelli and Rose (1990), and Matchinsky and Iverson (1996) have found evidence that interpersonal contact with gay family, friends, or acquaintances leads to warmer affective feelings toward gays as a group, "dispel[ling] unwarranted stereotypes and opinions that may . . . contribute to . . . discomfort" (Gentry 1987, 204).

Experimental studies, usually also using student participants, have yielded similar results. Lance (1987), for instance, found "a general reduction in . . . discomfort with homosexuals" following "exposure to and interaction with homosexuals." These results have been largely confirmed by studies using large, random national samples of survey respondents. Both Herek and Glunt (1993) and Herek and Capitanio (1996) conclude that self-reported personal contact with homosexuals is associated with significantly more positive attitudes toward both gay men and lesbians (see Lewis 2006).

While interpersonal contact has generally been found to have an ameliorative effect on attitudes toward minorities, the literature on contextual effects is more pessimistic when it comes to most social groups in the American context. Dating at least back to Key's "black belt hypothesis" (1949), students of racial politics have found considerable evidence in favor of a racial threat dynamic, in which geographic proximity to large black populations leads whites to manifest greater antipathy toward blacks, both in the South and elsewhere (among others, see Blalock 1957; Giles 1977; Giles and Evans 1985, 1986; Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989; Giles and Buckner 1993; Giles and Hertz 1994; Glaser 1994; Baybeck 2006). These studies have generally shown that interracial context leads whites to display more hostile attitudes toward blacks, to vote for more politically conservative (and racially divisive) candidates, and to voice greater support for racially divisive policies and symbols (but see Carsey 1995; Voss 1996; Voss and Miller 2001). While the most negative contextual effects have been observed for black-white racial relationships, there is also evidence that context has generally negative (Tolbert and Hero 2001; Hood and Morris 1997; Tolbert and Grummel 2003) or null (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Frensdreis and Tatalovich 1997) effects for white attitudes toward Latinos and Asians, as well.

In contrast, and as mentioned above, our recent work (Overby and Barth 2002) found that community context does have an independent and significant effect on attitudes toward gays and lesbians. After controlling for a variety of other factors, we concluded that respondents' feeling-thermometer ratings of homosexuals are positively related to estimates of the size of the gay population in their "local community." Does community context really work differently in the case of homosexuals than it does with racial and ethnic minorities? Before answering that question definitively, it is worth considering two limitations of our previous study. First, it relies on survey

data from 1996. While a decade may not seem like a long time, in terms of public opinion regarding gays and lesbians, it is. As Brewer (2003, 1208) has demonstrated, "public attitudes about homosexuality changed dramatically over the course of the 1990s," and there is ample reason to believe that such trends have continued into the current decade. Second, because of concerns over endogeneity, we did not include measures of direct interpersonal contact in the analysis; indeed, our community context variable was conceived as a surrogate measure of contact, at least insofar as it measures opportunities for interaction. It is unclear how context would fare in a multivariate model that also included good measures of interpersonal contact.

Clearly, a context in which members of a particular social group are present and contact with the members of that group are related phenomena. The complete absence of group members from one's social context makes it impossible to have contact with them. However, while a preponderance of members of a social group in a community context certainly presents greater opportunity for interpersonal contact with those group members, it certainly does not ensure that such contact will occur.

The literature discussed above has tended either to examine community context and interpersonal contact as completely independent phenomena or has assumed that they are one in the same. Both are theoretically problematic. Borrowing from social categorization theory, we argue, instead, that it is best to see them as related phenomena, specifically as a series of concentric circles. The presence of gays and lesbians in the community context operates as an outermost ring of this "circle of contact," providing opportunities for the more intensive types of interaction toward the middle of the circle.

Social categorization theory grew out of social identity theory (Tajfel 1974) in that it explains the process through which group identifications develop. The theory sees categorization of the world into social groups as an efficient cognitive device for dealing with complexity (Turner 1982). In addition, categorization can have the additional benefit of protecting individual self-esteem through elevating the positive attributes of one's own group, and in some circumstances, of denigrating the connected "out-group." Marques, Yzerbyt, and Rijsman (1988) have found that the presence of only one out-group member is sufficient to increase an individual's focus on his or her in-group membership. Because interaction with members of the "out" group who are present in the broader community context can be quite superficial,

there is the possibility that negative attitudes might result since stereotypes about the group, quite possibly negative in nature, will be what in-group members rely on in processing information about the out-group. In addition, a sense of being overwhelmed by large numbers of individuals in the out-group might produce agitation on the part of an in-group member (i.e., feeling "threatened" in Key's terminology).

Brewer and Miller (1984) argue that a shift from superficial categorizations—which are inherently "depersonalized"—toward personal interaction with members of the "out-group" can transform the intergroup dynamic and reduce prejudice. However, to activate such "personalization," the interaction should be consequential and ideally go beyond a single case, which makes it more difficult to rationalize away humanizing attributes as atypical (Hamburger 1994). Thus, relatively casual interaction with a gay coworker might personalize gays as a group but might not be enough to alter preconceived notions about the group. Deep and ongoing relationships with a number of friends and/or family members would be more likely to ameliorate negative views.

While our previous findings regarding community context are important in that they separate sexual orientation from race and ethnicity, we hypothesize that any benefit from significant numbers of gays and lesbians in one's community will wash away once we account for true interpersonal contact. Moreover, we suggest that not all contact will have the same impact, but that more intimate and more varied forms should have a greater impact in positively shaping attitudes about gays and lesbians.

South Carolina Constitutional Referendum

We examine the relative impacts of interpersonal contact and community context on attitudes toward homosexuality using data on a 2006 referendum to amend the state constitution in South Carolina to prohibit same-sex marriages (SSMs). Although SSMs had been made illegal by a 1996 legislative statute, so-called "defense of marriage" advocates desired to see the ban enshrined in the state constitution, where it would be more difficult to challenge in the courts or alter in subsequent legislative sessions. In this matter, South Carolina was like a majority of American states, twenty-eight of which have held public referenda aimed at restricting same-sex marriage rights. While Arizona's 2006 effort was rejected by the voters and South Dakota's 2006 referendum passed only

52 to 48 percent, most have been decidedly lopsided, with the conservative side's carrying two-thirds or more of the vote. In South Carolina, the amendment carried handily, 78 to 22 percent.

The campaign surrounding the referendum saw both sides acknowledging the impact that personal contact could have on the vote. One group opposing the measure, the Alliance for Full Acceptance, paid for billboards with the message, "Someone you know, someone you love . . . is gay. They need your help in November." In contrast, Oran Smith, executive director of the Palmetto Family Council, responded that "[while] we all have friends who are gay and lesbian . . . it's our belief that only opposite genders should be afforded the privileges associated with the term 'marriage'" (S.C. Gay Rights Group Starts Billboard Campaign 2006).¹

While we recognize the dangers inherent in generalizing from a single state, we would note several reasons for doing so in the current instance. First, a number of important exploratory studies, including those in the racial/ethnic relations (for example, Voss and Miller 2001; Stein, Post, and Rinden 2000) and gay politics (Craig et al. 2005) literatures, use single-state sampling frames. Second, focusing on an actual policy question essentially requires a single-state focus, since such matters are addressed by state, not national, referenda. Third, politically, South Carolina is hardly a modal state; indeed, its population consistently ranks as one of the most politically conservative in the Union (Wright, Erikson, and McIver 1985). But as the forces of evangelical Christianity and social conservatism have surged out of the South, radically changing the national political landscape, an examination of SSM acceptance in the state where it has been most strongly repudiated may offer insights applicable to other regions as well. In short, what we find in the Palmetto State, we are likely to find elsewhere as well.

Data

Our data come from a telephone survey of adults in South Carolina undertaken between October 1 and 23, 2006, in the weeks leading up to the November 7 referendum. The survey was conducted by Winthrop University's Social and Behavioral Research Laboratory and included a total of eighty-five questions that covered a wide variety of issues in addition to attitudes on the SSM referendum. Our dependent variable is based on respondent attitudes toward the

SSM referendum: "This November, the citizens of South Carolina will be voting on a referendum to change the state constitution to read: 'A marriage between one man and one woman is the only lawful domestic union that shall be valid or recognized in this state.' Would you favor or oppose this referendum?" Those who favored the referendum ($n = 435$, 72.99 percent) were coded 1, those opposed ($n = 141$, 23.66 percent) were coded 3, and those who volunteered that they did not know or who refused to provide an answer ($n = 20$, 3.36 percent) were coded 2.

Our community context measure is generated from a question worded "What percentage of people living in your local community would you say are gay or lesbian?" Roughly a quarter of respondents ($n = 189$, 23.92 percent) either would not or could not provide an answer, a figure considerably lower than the 43 percent nonresponse rate in our earlier, national survey (Overby and Barth 2002).² Among those providing an estimate, the mean response was 9.99 percent, and the modal response was 10 percent (offered by 21.72 percent of respondents; 0 and 5 were the next most common responses, offered by 12.9 and 12.67 percent, respectively); approximately three-quarters believe their local communities have gay populations of 10 percent or less, while roughly one-quarter place the estimate above 10 percent, with approximately 5 percent placing the estimate at 25 percent or higher.

We use several measures of interpersonal contact with gays and lesbians. First, respondents were asked, "Do you have any coworkers, acquaintances, close friends, or relatives whom you know to be gay or lesbian?" Fully 56.3 percent of respondents answered this question in the affirmative, compared to 41.85 percent in the negative and 1.85 percent who would not or could not give an answer.³ To capture the various types of relationships that might have differing personalizing effects, those respondents who answered this question *yes* were then queried to indicate more precisely if their contact with gays and lesbians was with coworkers (22.15 percent), acquaintances (41.95 percent), close friends (27.18 percent), or relatives (22.15 percent). Respondents who indicated that they had contact with homosexuals were further asked if they "personally [knew] any gay or lesbians couples that [had] been together for more than one year." In fact, 36.74 percent of our respondents acknowledged that they knew such same-sex couples. From these responses, to capture the importance of having interaction with a variety of individuals from the "out-group," we constructed a five-category scale by summing affirmative answers, ranging from 0 for

those who report no contact with gays and lesbians (44.46 percent of our sample) to 5 for those who report contact among all five categories (3.69 percent of our sample).

Previous studies have expressed considerable concern over possible endogeneity in the relationship between contact with homosexuals and attitudes toward homosexuality (Herek and Glunt 1993; Overby and Barth 2002). According to this argument, sexual orientation may not be immediately obvious and may have to be “disclosed.” Since such disclosure may be selective (Wells and Kline 1987), it is possible that pre-existing warm affect toward homosexuals drives contact rather than vice versa. We think there are numerous reasons to have less concern about endogeneity in the current project, reasons sufficient to justify treating contact as exogenous. First, unlike previous research that used question wording directly related to disclosure (e.g., Herek and Glunt [1993] asked respondents, “Have any of your female or male friends, relatives, or close acquaintances *let you know* that they were homosexual?”), our wording is designed to tap into the various ways that people come to conclusions about the sexual orientation of others. The notion that humans have what is sometimes called “gaydar” is widespread enough to warrant an entry in Wikipedia and is supported by research findings in a number of disciplines, including genetics, linguistics, and psychology (see, among others, Smyth, Jacobs, and Rogers 2003; Martins et al. 2005). While there may be no “gay gene,” there is mounting evidence of physical “markers” associated with homosexuality, ranging from “handedness” to digital ratios to direction of hair whorls (see, e.g., Klar 2004; Manning, Churchill, and Peters 2007). Second, as public attitudes have generally become more tolerant during the past decade, it is reasonable to assume that selective disclosure is significantly less of an issue than it once was. There is indirect evidence of this in the number of survey respondents who report contact with gays and lesbians. Using data from a 1988 survey, Herek and Glunt (1993) found that 34.7 percent of their respondents had contact with gays; similarly, Herek and Capitanio’s (1996) 1990–91 sample included 31.3 percent who acknowledged gay contact. In contrast, by 2006, a clear majority of South Carolinians report having gay friends, acquaintances, coworkers, or family members.⁴ Third, we have even greater faith in the exogeneity of our measures of interpersonal contact, since a number of them involve essentially “involuntary” relationships, including family members and

coworkers. Similarly, we believe that knowledge of stable gay couples is also not susceptible to issues of selective disclosure, since such relationships are difficult to keep entirely “invisible” (Barth and Parry 2007).⁵

We also include a variety of control variables that have been shown or may plausibly be expected to affect attitudes toward homosexuals and homosexuality. These include gender (with men coded 0, women 1), sexual orientation (self-identified heterosexuals coded 1, self-identified homosexuals 3, and those who could not or would not provide a response 2), household income, education, race (self-identified Caucasians coded 1, non-Caucasians coded 2), party identification (coded on a standard 7-point scale), age, political ideology (coded on a standard 5-point scale), political efficacy (based on a 5-point scale derived from agreement with the statement “Public officials don’t care much about what people like me think”), overall satisfaction with “quality of life” in South Carolina, a measure of general political engagement (“How often would you say that you follow what is going on in government and public affairs?”), religiosity (as measured by church attendance, on an 8-point scale from *weekly* to *never*), and religious fundamentalism (as measured by agreement with the statement “the Bible is the literal word of God and without error”).

Findings

We begin with some bivariate analyses, examining the relationship between selected demographic and behavioral characteristics and support for the South Carolina SSM amendment. Summaries are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Given the popularity of the amendment, it is not surprising to see high levels of support for the measure across most of the variables we examine. Indeed, across most values of most variables, there is at least majority support, often rising to the level of two-thirds or more. Still, there are patterns in both the demographic and attitudinal measures, most of them intuitive. Women are slightly less supportive of the measure than are men; the young (especially those in the 18- to 21-year-old cohort) are significantly less supportive than their elders; and the better educated are less supportive than those with limited formal education. Republicans are monotonically more favorably disposed to the SSM marriage ban than are Democrats, although among Democrats, the strength

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics and Support for
Anti-Gay Marriage Proposal

	Percentage Supporting
Gender	
Male	74.15
Female	72.27
Race	
White	73.26
Nonwhite	72.00
Age	
<21	62.07
21–30	73.44
31–54	72.00
55–65	71.55
>65	78.12
Education	
<High school	86.00
High school or GED	78.95
Some college	69.44
Two-year college degree	71.43
Bachelor's degree	71.63
Postgraduate education	63.95
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	74.31
Homosexual	16.67
Don't know/refused	64.44
Community context	
<10% gay	80.33
10% or more gay	67.90

of partisan attachment runs counter to expectations, perhaps an indication of the strange and not fully resolved partisan realignment in the South; similarly, conservatives are much more in favor of the measure than are self-identified liberals. Those who believe the Bible to be infallible and those who attend church at least weekly were overwhelmingly in favor, while those who doubt the literal truth of the Bible and who attend church only once a year or less supported the measure at just over 50-percent levels. Not surprisingly, self-identified gays and lesbians were significantly less supportive of the ban than heterosexuals.

Among our variables of primary interest, we find preliminary evidence of both a contextual and interpersonal contact effect, although the latter appears stronger. Among those respondents who were below average in terms of their estimation of the gay population size in their communities, support for the ban was significantly higher than among those above, although even those in the latter group supported the measure by a more than two-to-one margin. Contact shows roughly the same relationship; those who

Table 2
Attitudinal/Experiential Characteristics and
Support for Anti-Gay Marriage Proposal

	Percentage Supporting
Partisanship	
Strong Democrat	62.99
Weak Democrat	52.94
Leaning Democrat	47.62
Independent	69.52
Leaning Republican	84.91
Weak Republican	83.52
Strong Republican	89.76
Ideology	
Very conservative	87.50
Conservative	85.58
Moderate	68.84
Liberal	46.15
Very liberal	39.29
Bible is literal word of God	
Yes	83.02
No	52.80
Church attendance	
Weekly	82.77
Yearly or never	53.62
Know any gays or lesbians	
Yes	66.87
No	81.12
Gay interpersonal contact	
0	80.37
1	86.89
2	74.74
3	66.67
4	53.33
5	27.27

acknowledged knowing any gays or lesbians indicated roughly two-thirds support for the amendment, while those with no interpersonal contact indicated more than 80 percent support. Level, frequency, and diversity of contact also appear to make a substantial difference; those scoring in the top two categories of our scale indicated bare majority support for and nearly three-quarters opposition to the measure, respectively.

To test the relative strengths of these relationships, we consider a multivariate, ordered logistic regression equation in Table 3.⁶ After controlling for other powerful predictors, interpersonal contact with gays and lesbians still exerts a substantial influence on attitudes toward the proposed constitutional amendment.⁷ *Ceteris paribus*, as we expected, greater and more diverse types of contact with gays and lesbians are associated with significantly lower levels of support for the proposal. Solving the equation by exponentiating the

coefficient for the contact variable yields a proportional odds ratio of 1.29, indicating that with a one-unit increase in contact, the odds of opposing the measure versus the combined support or “don’t know” categories are 1.29 times greater. To clarify the impact of contact, we calculated predicted probabilities for attitudes toward the SSM amendment for various levels of interpersonal contact, holding all other variables at their means. As the summaries shown in Table 4 reveal, for an otherwise typical respondent, shifting levels of interpersonal contact with gays along the scale from 0 (*none*) to 5 (*most intimate and varied contact with gays and lesbians*) increases the likelihood of opposing the amendment from less than 10 percent to almost 28 percent. As social categorization theory anticipates, there is no similar community context effect once we control for interpersonal contact.

Our data allow us to unpack interpersonal contact and to examine which types of contact have the greatest impact. Disaggregating the components of the contact scale used above, we reran the equation in Table 3 five times, replacing the scale variable with each of its components in turn. The results from these equations are summarized in Table 5, which presents only the coefficients and associated standard errors for the individual contact terms, although it is important to remember that these are the results generated after controlling for the other variables listed above. The last column shows the shift in probability to oppose the SSM amendment associated with movement from no contact of the particular type to contact of that type, all other variables set to their mean. Several aspects of these results warrant comment. First, all types of contact have positive effects on support for gay rights. Regardless of whether respondents reported contact with coworkers, acquaintances, close friends, relatives, or stable gay couples, such experiences are statistically significant in terms of their impact on attitudes toward the South Carolina constitutional amendment. Second, some forms of contact matter more than others. Having relatives who are gay and knowing gay coworkers have the most modest impacts ($p < .06$). Albeit potentially very important in one’s daily life, such contact is involuntary and has more limited impact than voluntary forms of interaction with gays and lesbians. Specifically, interaction with gay acquaintances is more robustly significant ($p < .025$), while having close gay friends and knowing homosexual couples in long-term relationships have the largest independent effects ($p < .001$), more than doubling the predicted probability of opposing the SSM amendment.

Table 3
Opposition to South Carolina Same-Sex Marriage Amendment (Ordered Logistic Regression Analysis)

Variable	
Gender	0.32 (0.27)
Sexual Orientation	0.95** (0.40)
Family Income	-0.09 (0.07)
Education	0.18* (0.10)
Race	-0.30 (0.33)
Partisan Identification	-0.31*** (0.07)
Political Ideology	-0.35*** (0.13)
Church Attendance	-0.25*** (0.06)
Religious Fundamentalism	-1.09*** (0.30)
External Political Efficacy	0.27** (0.11)
Dissatisfaction with life in South Carolina	-0.13 (0.18)
Political Disengagement	0.44*** (0.14)
Gay Community Context	-0.002 (0.01)
Gay Interpersonal Contact Scale	0.31*** (0.07)
Rho ₁	6.29 (1.37)
Rho ₂	6.60 (1.38)
N	495
LR χ^2	145 ($p < .0000$)
Pseudo- R^2	0.22

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, we have added to the growing literature on attitudes toward homosexuality by examining attitudes among South Carolinians toward a 2006 referendum that enshrined a ban on same-sex marriages in the state constitution. While reluctant to draw definitive conclusions from a single state on one issue, we think our findings offer important insights, several of which we highlight here.

First, as the contact and social categorization literatures have stressed, interpersonal interaction matters. Even after controlling for a wide variety of demographic conditions and attitudinal predispositions, knowing gays and lesbians has a statistically significant and substantively important impact on support for the SSM proposal. However, we should not overstress the impact. As the figures in Table 4 show, even among otherwise average respondents with the highest levels of gay contact, support for the same-sex marriage ban still stood at nearly two-thirds. Contact makes a difference, but its effect is not definitive, particularly in social contexts in which strong antigay messages are also common.⁸

Second, again in keeping with the social-categorization theory literature, the type of contact

Table 4
Impact of Gay Interpersonal Contact

Level of Interpersonal Contact	Probability of Support for SSM Amendment	Probability of No Response on SSM Amendment Question	Probability of Opposition to SSM Amendment
0	87.20	3.06	9.74
1	84.07	3.70	12.23
2	80.35	4.41	15.24
3	76.01	5.15	18.83
4	71.05	5.90	23.05
5	65.54	6.58	27.88

Note: Cell entries are predicted probabilities based on various levels of interpersonal contact with gays and lesbians, setting all other variables in the ordered logistic regression model (taken from Table 3) equal to their mean value. SSM = same-sex marriage.

Table 5
Effects of Interpersonal Contact Type

Contact Level	Coefficient (Standard Error)	Significance Level	Probability of Opposition to Amendment
Coworkers	0.55 (.29)	$p < .06$	No contact = 12.68 Contact = 20.14
Acquaintances	0.59 (.26)	$p < .025$	No contact = 11.20 Contact = 18.56
Close friends	0.89 (.27)	$p < .001$	No contact = 11.08 Contact = 23.26
Relatives	.53 (.29)	$p < .061$	No contact = 12.66 Contact = 19.86
Couples	0.88 (.27)	$p < .001$	No contact = 10.39 Contact = 21.89

Note: Predicted probabilities are based on various types of interpersonal contact with gays and lesbians, setting all other variables in the ordered logistic regression model (taken from Table 3) equal to their mean value.

matters. Among our respondents, those who acknowledged having close personal friends who are homosexuals demonstrated more tolerance on attitudes toward the amendment, indicating that intimacy of contact has an effect. But we see a similarly large effect for those who know gay couples in stable relationships, indicating that there might be particularly relevant forms of contact that affect attitudes toward particular policy proposals.⁹ Workplace and familial contact have statistically more marginal effects, findings that are somewhat at odds with the racial/ethnic contact literatures. Dixon and Rosenbaum (2004), for instance, find no ameliorative effect of family contact—presumably one of the most intimate levels of contact—on the stereotypes that whites hold of blacks and Latinos, which makes our positive effects more noteworthy. Conversely, given that considerably more intergroup contact often occurs at the workplace than other venues (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1991) and that strong black–white coworker effects

have been observed by Dixon and Rosenbaum (2004), we were somewhat surprised that our data did not show a stronger workplace effect in the case of sexual orientation. Taken together, these findings suggest that while contact per se matters, the voluntary nature of the contact rather than (or at least in addition to) the intimacy of the contact conditions the effect.

Third, community context makes little difference in attitudes toward gay marriage once we control for more intense and consequential contact. Unlike our previous work, we find no appreciable ameliorative effect from living in communities with larger gay populations. While this could be interpreted in several different ways, it is consistent with some earlier findings that the most casual forms of contact do little to shape citizen attitudes toward minority groups. It is also consistent with a cultural explanation. Context per se has been found to have the largest—albeit negative—impact in black–white relations, where the

intergroup cultural gap is widest (Forbes 1997). The minimal finding here suggests that despite the much ballyhooed “culture wars,” the gap between straight and gay America is simply not large enough to trigger a contextual reaction (see Egan and Sherrill [2006] for intergroup similarities).

There is clearly still much we do not understand regarding public opinion about matters related to sexual orientation. For proponents of expanded civil rights for gays and lesbians, our findings suggest cautious optimism. Optimism in that contact with homosexuals is on the increase, and *ceteris paribus* and in line with other studies, familiarity with homosexuals does not breed contempt but rather has statistically important positive effects on citizen attitudes. Cautious in that contact is certainly no panacea for prejudice. At least in culturally traditional states such as South Carolina and at least where the policy at issue is one, such as marriage, that is loaded with culturally sensitive meaning, even the most extensive levels of contact do not lead the average citizen to the point of supporting marriage benefits for same-sex couples. We hope future research might fruitfully delve further into the dynamics of interpersonal contact with more finely grained questions about the nature, extent, and intimacy of interaction and their impact on other policy matters.

Notes

1. During the past decade, a number of advocacy groups have emphasized gay families as the “face” of gay America (Barth and Parry 2007), which has prompted much criticism within the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer) movement (see Harris 1997).

2. Nonresponses are more or less random. Dichotomizing the variable and regressing it against a range of demographic variables reveal that only gender and age are significant predictors of nonresponses, with female and older respondents less likely to provide an estimate. In the multivariate results presented below, we recalculated the context variable, setting missing values to the variable mean. We also analyzed our equations excluding missing data, which did not affect the significance or substantive interpretation of our variables of interest.

3. For comparison, similar surveys have reported that nearly two-thirds of Californians (“Greater Acceptance of Homosexual Relations” 2006) and 55 percent of Arkansans personally know gays and lesbians (Barth and Parry 2007).

4. As Gates (2006, 4) notes, the 30 percent growth rate in the number of self-identified same-sex couples in the United States—and 39 percent in South Carolina—between 2000 and 2005 far outstripped the 6 percent growth in population and is almost certainly driven by a greater willingness among homosexual couples “to report the nature of their relationship to the Census Bureau.”

5. Ultimately, causality is a theoretical issue, and we believe considering interpersonal contact exogenous to attitudes toward SSM is justifiable on the grounds discussed above. It has the

added benefit of obviating reliance on suboptimal estimation techniques for coping with endogenous regressors such as two-stage least squares (see Finkel and Muller [1998] on the difficulties of locating suitable instrumental variables) or structural equation models (SEM; see Bollen [1989] on identification difficulties in SEM).

6. In preliminary analysis, we also modeled the equations using a logit estimator and treating those respondents with no stated opinion as missing data, yielding results very similar to those reported here. Where appropriate, variables were recoded to make interpretation more intuitive and consistent with the direction of the dependent variable, where higher values indicate greater stated opposition to the SSM constitutional ban.

7. Most of our control variables perform as predicted, with sexual orientation, education, partisanship, ideology, church attendance, religious conservatism, and political efficacy all proving to be statistically significant and signed as predicted. Political engagement is also robustly significant, although not signed as anticipated, with the more politically disengaged demonstrating greater opposition to the amendment.

8. Indeed, in South Carolina, because of the religious foundation of opposition to expansion of marriage rights, a different type of social categorization is at work involving those who are committed in their Christian beliefs and those who are not. As others have discussed, in the contemporary era, the religious right and gay rights movements have been political foils for each other (Bull and Gallagher 1996).

9. Again, we would caution restraint in interpreting these effects. Even among respondents with close gay friends, 54 percent approved of the amendment, while among those who know gay couples in marriage-like relationships, almost 60 percent nevertheless favored the ban. We sound a much more cautionary tone than Egan and Sherrill’s (2006) conclusion that “if current trends hold, marriage bans would fail—or just barely pass—in many of the states that have yet to hold such referenda.”

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