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

Abstract

In this paper we use data from an unusual public opinion survey to gauge factors influencing citizen support for a 2006 anti-gay rights referendum in South Carolina. Our data permit us to examine three important aspects of this support: 1) attitudes toward a particular policy initiative, rather than generic feelings toward homosexuals as a group; 2) the relative impacts of community context versus interpersonal contact; and 3) the effect of different types of personal contact. After controlling for other powerful predictors of attitudes, we find personal contact with gays and lesbians to have a statistically significant and substantively important impact on public support for the referendum, although community context does not. Furthermore, our findings suggest that particularly relevant and voluntary forms of contact have the largest effect. These findings provide support for an integrated theory of interactions with "out" groups, grounded in social categorization theory, that sees community context and interpersonal contact not as distinct phenomena but instead as different concentric circles moving from the most abstract, detached forms of contact (the presence of the "out-group" in the broader community) to the most pronounced (deep, ongoing friendships with members of the minority group). However, and importantly, even among those with substantial interpersonal contact with gays and lesbians, support for the referendum was still widespread.

While the legal status of gays and lesbians is one of the most hotly contested political matters in the United States, there is considerable evidence that Americans are increasingly comfortable with homosexuals and homosexuality (see, *e.g.*, Wilcox and Norrander 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. Any number of experiments and surveys have shown that personal contact with gays and lesbians tends to have an ameliorative effect on attitudes toward homosexuals. Recent work by Overby and Barth (2002) has also demonstrated that context matters, with citizens living in areas with higher perceived gay populations demonstrating warmer affective attitudes toward homosexuals.

Although the findings from the gay inter-personal contact literature are very much in line with the similar literature on race, the same is not true for the contextual findings of Overby and Barth (2002). In a review of the literature on inter-racial 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 V. O. 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 in the U. S., particularly Asians and Latinos, is more ambiguous, although most studies have found either null or modestly negative effects, not the positive impacts prophesized by the contact hypothesis (see, Stein, Post, and Rinden 2000 for a review).

In this paper 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 contact of various sorts and of the community context in which respondents live. Our findings

generally support the contact hypothesis, but – contra Overby and Barth (2002) – find little evidence of a contextual effect, results that are consistent with a categorization theory approach. Our data also include unusually specific information regarding types and extent of interpersonal contact, which permit 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

Personal Contact

The contact hypothesis makes simple assumptions and asserts a simple conclusion: negative affect and prejudicial behavior 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 of the contact hypothesis, focusing on black-white interaction, yielded very encouraging results (see, ***e.g.***, Stouffer, ***et al.*** 1949; and Deutch and Collins 1951). While some have argued that contact has ameliorative effects only under certain supportive conditions,[1] recent surveys of the relevant literatures have

[1] Devine (1995), for instance, concludes that at least nine conditions are necessary for contact to yield beneficial results: equal status, cooperation, institutional support from authority figures, intimacy, positive outcomes, non-stereotypicality, shared beliefs and values, and variety.

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; see also Forbes 1996).

Recently, work in several disciplines has extended the contact hypothesis beyond race and ethnicity to cover sexual orientation as well. Using convenience samples of student respondents, researchers such Glassner and Owen (1976), Gentry (1987), D'Augelli and Rose (1990), Whitley (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" (see, also Pagtolun-an and Clair 1986). These results have been largely confirmed by studies utilizing 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. [2]

Community Context

While inter-personal 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 geographical proximity to large black populations leads whites to

[2] See also Lewis (2006) for an examination of 27 national surveys taken since 1983 showing positive effects of contact. For a critique of this literature – including problems inherent with student convenience samples and experimental subjects, and endogeneity concerns with contact questions – see Overby and Barth (2002). We return to the endogeneity issue below.

manifest greater antipathy toward blacks, both in the South and elsewhere (among others see Blalock 1956, 1957; Matthews and Protho 1966; Black 1976; Giles 1977; Wright 1977; Kinder and Sears 1981; Giles and Evans 1985, 1986; Fossett and Kiecolt 1989; Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989; Giles and Buckner 1993; Giles and Hertz 1994; Glaser 1994; Taylor 1998; Baybeck 2006; Orey, Overby, and Hatemi, N.D.). These studies have generally shown that inter-racial 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.[3] 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 1996, 2001; Hood and Morris 1997, 1998; Tolbert and Grummel 2003) or null (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Citrin *et al.* 1990; Frendreis and Tatalovich 1997) effects for white attitudes toward Latinos and Asians, as well.

In contrast, and as mentioned above, recent work by Overby and Barth (2002) has 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, these authors find that respondents' feeling thermometer ratings of homosexuals are positively related to estimates of the size of the gay population in their "local community."[4]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 the Overby and Barth (2002)

[3] There are empirical studies that run counter to this general trend in the literature, including recently Carsey (1995), Voss (1996, 2000), and Voss and Miller (2001).

[4] As we will discuss more fully below, such respondent-provided estimates are necessary because there are no readily available objective measures of gay population density. As Overby and Barth (2002) note, their use of this subjective measure is based, in part, on productive use of similar measures in the racial attitudes literature, see particularly Sigelman and Welch (1993) and Powers and Ellison (1995). There is some hope that the Census Bureau's new American Community Surveys may eventually provide accurate and objective estimations of local gay population density.

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, due to concerns over endogeneity, Overby and Barth (2002) do not include measures of direct inter-personal contact in their analysis; indeed, their community context variable was conceived as an indirect measure of contact, at least in so far as it measures opportunities for interaction. It is unclear how context would fare in a multivariate model that also included good measures of inter-personal contact.[5]

The Relationship Between Context and 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 the members of that group from one's social context makes it impossible to have contact with them. However, while the preponderance of members of a social group in a community context certainly presents greater opportunity for interpersonal contact with those group members (what Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982 have termed the "availability hypothesis"), it certainly does not ensure that such contact will occur.

The literature discussed above has tended to either examine community context and interpersonal contact as completely independent phenomena or has assumed that they are one in the same. Either approach is 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

[5] In addition to extending Overby and Barth (2002) with more current data and including measures of both context and contact, the current study also examines a more policy-specific attitude, a point we address further below.

outermost ring of this "circle of contact," providing opportunities for the more intensive types of interaction towards 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 a complex world (Turner 1982). In addition to promoting cognitive efficiency, such social categorization can have the additional benefit for individuals of protecting their self-esteem through elevating the positive attributes of their 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/her in-group membership. Because the interactions with members of the "out" group who are present in the broader community context are, by themselves, quite superficial, it creates the possibility that negative attitudes might result from this form of contact since stereotypes about the group, quite possibly negative in nature, will be what in-group members rely upon in processing information about the out-group.[6] 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"—towards personal interaction with members of the "out-group" can transform the intergroup dynamic and reduce prejudice against the group. However, to activate such "personalization," it is important that the interaction with the out-group members be consequential and, ideally, go beyond a single case to make it more difficult for any humanizing attributes to not be rationalized away as an atypical case (Brewer and Miller 1984; Hamburger 1994). Thus, relatively casual interaction with a gay work colleague might personalize gays and

[6] On the speed through which such stereotyping occurs in social settings where different groups are present, see Schaller (1991).

lesbians as a group but might not be potent 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 any negative views created through more disconnected social interactions. Thus, a number of circles between "community context" and such intimacy with the "out-group" express themselves in our vision of the relationship between the concepts of context and contact.

While Overby and Barth's findings about a positive relationship between a larger percentage of gays and lesbians in a community is important in that it seems to separate sexual orientation from race, ethnicity, and other categories where larger numbers of the "out-group" have activated negative responses, we hypothesize that any benefit from significant numbers of gays and lesbians in one's community will wash away once true interpersonal contact is brought into the picture. Moreover, we suggest that all contact will not perform the same in affecting attitudes about gays and lesbians and gay-related public policies, i.e. more intimate and more varied forms of personal contact will have the greatest impact in positively shaping attitudes about gays and lesbians.

South Carolina Constitutional Referendum

We examine the relative impacts of inter-personal contact and community context on attitudes toward homosexuality using data related to a 2006 referendum to amend the state constitution in South Carolina to prohibit same-sex marriages (SSM). Although SSMs had been made illegal in the state by a 1996 legislative statute,[7] 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, 28 of which have held public referenda aimed at restricting same-sex marriage rights. While Arizona's 2006 effort was rejected by the voters and

[7] "A marriage between persons of the same sex is void *ab initio* and against the public policy of this state" (*S.C. CODE ANN. §20-1-15*).

South Dakota's 2006 referendum passed only 52% - 48%, most have been decidedly lopsided, with the conservative side carrying two-thirds or more of the vote. This was certainly the case in South Carolina, where the amendment carried handily, by a 78 to 22 percent margin.

The campaign surrounding the referendum saw both sides acknowledging the impact that personal contact with gay and lesbians could have on the vote. One group that opposed 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, which supported the constitutional ban, recognized 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).[8]

While we recognize the dangers inherent in generalizing from data generated within a single state, we would note several reasons for doing so in the current instance. First, due to data limitations, a number of important exploratory studies (see, among others, Cain, Kiewiet, and Uhlaner 1991; Finkel, Guterbock, and Borg 1991; Abramson and Ostrom 1994), including those in the racial/ethnic relations (for example Voss and Miller 2001; Stein, Post, and Rinder 2000) and gay politics (Craig, *et al*. 2005) literatures, make use of single-state sampling frames. Second, our focus on attitudes toward an actual policy question – as opposed to more abstract measures such as feeling thermometers or attitudes toward more generic anti-discrimination questions – 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

[8] It is worth noting that over the past decade a number of groups supporting gay rights have emphasized gay families as the "face" gay America (Barth and Parry 2007; see also Conover 2005). As the ACLU's Lesbian and Gay Rights Project put it: "To change the thinking of America, national organizations like the ACLU, HRC, NGLTF, GLAAD, and others have to find stories of committed couples, show how society mistreats them as strangers, and get those stories out" (aclu.org/lgbt/relationships/12423res20041201.html). This strategy has prompted much criticism within the LGBTQ movement (see, among others, Harris 1997; Goldstein 2002).

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

Data for our analysis come from a telephone survey of adults in South Carolina undertaken between October 1st and October 23rd, 2006, in the weeks leading up to the November 7th referendum. The survey was conducted by the [authors' institution here], utilizing a random-digit sample of all households in South Carolina obtained from Survey Sampling International. Further randomization was accomplished within respondent households.[9]

The survey included a total of 85 questions that covered a wide variety of issues in addition to attitudes on the SSM referendum. These included questions related to assessments of state and national political and economic conditions, evaluations of state and national political leaders and institutions, a battery of questions related to religious and moral beliefs, and a standard set of demographic questions.

Our principal dependent variable is based on respondent attitudes toward the SSM referendum. Respondents were asked: "This November, the citizens of South Carolina will be

[9] These efforts yielded a reasonably representative sample. For example, household median income for survey respondents was nearly identical to that reported in the 2000 Census when adjusted for inflation. Similarly, while the Census records 54.2 percent of South Carolinians as currently married and 9.2 percent divorced, for our respondents the numbers are 57.1 percent and 9.9 percent, respectively. As is common in telephone surveys, whites are slightly overrepresented in our sample compared to the state population, but the discrepancy is only 6.3 percent (74.7 percent versus 68.4 percent). The final data included the responses of 595 individuals who completed the survey, a sample size that is similar to other recent statewide analyses of minority politics (see, *e.g.,* Craig, *et al.* 2005; Stein, Post, and Rinden 2000).

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 indicated they favored the referendum (n = 435, 72.99 percent) were coded 1, those opposed (n = 141, 23.66 percent) 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?"[10] 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 non-response rate reported by Overby and Barth (2002) in their national sample.[11] 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).[12] Among those providing estimates, approximately three-quarters believe their local communities have gay populations of ten percent or less, while roughly one-quarter place the estimate above ten percent, with approximately five percent placing the estimate at 25 percent or higher.[13]

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[10] This is almost identical to the question wording used by Overby and Barth (2002): "What percentage of the residents in your local community would you say are gay or lesbian."

[11] As with the data reported by Overby and Barth (2002), non-responses appear to be more or less random. Dichotomizing the variable and regressing it against a range of demographic variables using a logistic regression estimator reveals that only gender and age are significant predictors of non-responses, with female and older respondents less likely to provide an estimate than male and younger respondents. In the multivariate results presented below, we recalculated the context variable, setting missing values to the variable mean. It is worth noting that we also analyzed our equations excluding missing data, which did not affect the significance or substantive interpretation of our variables of interest.

[12] This is roughly two percentage points higher than the Southern regional average estimate reported in Barth and Overby (2003).

[13] Perhaps the best objective estimate of the gay population size in South Carolina comes from the 2005 American Community Survey, which places the number at 3.8 percent.

We employ several measures of inter-personal contact with gays and lesbians. First, respondents were asked "Do you have any co-workers, 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.[14] 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 co-workers (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.[15] 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, placing each respondent in the appropriate category (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]).[16]

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[14] For comparison, similar recent surveys have reported that nearly two-thirds of respondents in California ("Greater Acceptance of Homosexual Relations" 2006) and nearly 55 percent of respondents in Arkansas personally know gays and lesbians (Barth and Parry 2007).

[15] This number comports well with recent results from an Arkansas survey, which found that 34 percent of respondents knew such same-sex couples (Barth and Parry 2007).

[16] The correlation between our community context measure and contact scale is modest, r = .12, posing no collinearity issues. Following the example of Stein, Post, and Rinder (2000), in preliminary analysis we initially included an interactive term calculated by multiplying our overall contact measure with the community context measure. As this variable never approached statistical significance and since its inclusion is not well justified by theory, we dropped it from the analysis we report here.

Previous studies in this area have expressed considerable concern over possible endogeneity in the relationship between reports of contact with homosexuals and attitudes toward homosexuality (Herek and Glunt 1993; Overby and Barth 2002). According to this argument, unlike race or ethnicity, which have physically obvious "markers," 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 interpersonal contact as an exogenous variable. First, unlike some previous research that employed 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?", emphasis added), 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, at least in part, 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 also 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 of gays over 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 34.7 percent of their respondents had contact with gays; similarly, Herek and Capitano's (1996) 1990-91 sample included 31.3 percent of respondents who acknowledged gay contact. In contrast, and as noted above, by 2006 a clear

majority of South Carolinians report having gay friends, acquaintances, co-workers, or family members.[17] 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 co-workers. Similarly, we believe that knowledge of stable gay couples is also not susceptible to issues of selective disclosure, since the nature of such relationships makes them more difficult to keep entirely "invisible" (Barth and Parry 2007).[18]

In addition to these independent variables of primary interest, we also have 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 coded 3, and those who could not or would not provide a response coded 2),[19] household income, education, race (self-identified Caucasians coded 1, non-Caucasians coded 2), party identification (coded on a standard seven-point scale from strong Democrat to strong Republican), age, political ideology (coded on a five point scale from very conservative to very liberal), political efficacy (based on a five-point scale derived from agreement with this statement: "Public officials don't care much

[17] Further indirect evidence of this can be inferred from recent American Community Surveys completed by the Census Bureau. As Gates (2006) notes, the 30 percent growth rate in the number of self-identified same-sex couples in the United States between 2000 and 2005 far outstripped the six 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." It is worth noting that the growth rate in self-identified same-sex couples in South Carolina was 39 percent, well ahead of the national average.

[18] Ultimately, decisions about causality are theoretical ones, and we believe our decision to consider interpersonal contact exogenous to attitudes toward SSM is justifiable on the grounds discussed above. We should note, however, that it also obviates reliance on sub-optimal 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 (see Bollen 1989 on identification difficulties in SEM).

[19] Since sexual orientation is, in the eyes of many, a more fluid concept than either race or ethnicity, we opt to include this variable on the right-hand side of our equations in the analysis reported below. However, we also ran the multivariate models below with only self-identified heterosexuals in the sample; the results are substantially identical for all variables of interest.

about what people like me think"; higher values indicate greater levels of efficacy), a question tapping overall satisfaction with "quality of life" in South Carolina (coded on a four-point scale from very satisfied to very dissatisfied), a measure of general political engagement ("How often would you say that you follow what is going on in government and public affairs?"; coded from "most of the time" to "hardly at all," with higher values indicating less engagement), religiosity (as measured by church attendance, on an eight-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"). From a social categorization perspective, these final two controls are particularly important because of the fact that in contemporary era, the religious right and gay liberation movements have been political foils for each other (Bull and Gallagher 1996).

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.

[Table 1 about here]

[Table 2 about here]

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 18-21 year old cohort) are significantly less supportive than their elders; the better educated are less supportive than those with less formal education. Republicans are monotonically more favorably disposed to the SSM marriage ban than are Democrats, although among Democrats the strength 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 of the amendment, while those who do not believe in 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, the few respondents who identified themselves as gay or lesbian were significantly less supportive of the ban than either heterosexuals or those who refused to answer the sexual orientation question.

Among our variables of primary interest, we find preliminary evidence of both a contextual and inter-personal contact effect, although the latter appears stronger, as we hypothesized. Among those respondents who were below the mean and mode in terms of their estimation of the gay population size in their communities, support for the ban was significantly higher than among those above the mean and mode, although even those in the latter group supported the measure by a more than two-to-one margin. Low levels of interpersonal contact show roughly the same relationship, with those who acknowledged knowing any gays or lesbians indicating roughly two-thirds support for the SSM amendment, while those with no inter-personal contact indicated over 80 percent support. Level, frequency, and diversity of contact, however, appear to make a substantial difference, with those scoring in the top two categories of our scale indicating bare majority support for and nearly three-quarters opposition to the measure, respectively.

To test the relative strengths of these relationships and to explore further the dynamics affecting attitudes toward gay marriage, we consider a multivariate, ordered logistic regression equation in Table 3.[20] After controlling for other powerful predictors of perceptions and

[20] In preliminary analysis, we also modeled the equations using a logit estimator and treating those respondents with no stated opinion as missing data. The results of the logit equations are substantively very similar to the ordered logit results we report here. Where appropriate several variables were recoded to make interpretation more intuitive and consistent with the direction of

behavior, interpersonal contact with gays and lesbians still exerts a powerful influence on attitudes toward the proposed constitutional amendment on same-sex marriages.[21] *Ceteris paribus*, as we expected, greater and more diverse types of contact with gays and lesbians is associated with significantly lowers 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. This indicates 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 make the impact of contact somewhat clearer, we have calculated predicted probabilities for attitudes toward the SSM amendment for various levels of inter-personal contact, holding all other variables at their means. As the summaries shown in Table 4 reveal, for an otherwise typical respondent, shifting levels of inter-personal contact with gays along the scale from 0 (no acknowledged gay and lesbian contact) to 5 (most intimate and varied contact with gays and lesbians) increases the likelihood of opposing the amendment from under 10 percent to almost 28 percent.

[Table 3 about here]

[Table 4 about here]

As social categorization theory would anticipate, there is no similarly sizable community context effect once we control for interpersonal contact. Indeed, after controlling for other variables in the initial model, the effect of community context is negative, indicating that respondents from neighborhoods with larger gay populations were more likely to support rather

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the dependent variable, where higher values indicate greater stated opposition to the SSM constitutional ban.

[21] 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.

than to oppose the SSM amendment, although the size of the effect is statistically indistinguishable from the null.[22]

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 re-ran 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 ordered logistical regression 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 summarizes 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 variable set to their mean.

[Table 5 about here]

Several aspects of these results warrant comment. First, all types of contact matter and have positive effects on support for gay rights. Regardless of whether respondents reported contact with co-workers, 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 co-workers have the most modest impacts ($p \leq .06$). Since these forms of contact are involuntary, albeit potentially very important in one's daily life, thet have more limited impact than more voluntary forms of interpersonal contact with gays and lesbians. Specifically, interaction with gay acquaintances is more robustly significant ($p \leq .025$), while having close gay friends and knowing homosexual couples in long-term relationships

[22] We also tested our model using another response item in the survey related to attitudes toward gay adoption: "do you approve or disapprove of a law that would allow a lesbian or gay man to adopt a child if the court found them fit in all other ways to become an adoptive parent?" Again, community context had no appreciable impact on attitudes, while the inter-personal contact scale had a statistically significant and substantively large positive effect.

have the largest independent effects ($p \leq .001$); in both of the latter cases contact of that sort more than doubled the predicted probability of opposing the SSM amendment.

Discussion and Conclusions

Public attitudes toward gays and lesbians as a group and toward policy issues related to homosexuality remain relatively unplumbed. In this study, we have added to the growing literature in this area by examining attitudes among South Carolinians toward a 2006 referendum that enshrined a ban on same-sex marriages in the state constitution. While we are reluctant to draw definitive conclusions from a sampling frame limited to one state on one issue, we do think our findings offer important insights, several of which we highlight here.

First, as the contact and social categorization literature has stressed, inter-personal interaction matters. Even after controlling for a wide variety of demographic conditions and attitudinal predispositions, knowing gays and lesbians displays a statistically significant and substantively important impact on respondents' 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 reported levels of gay contact (scores of 5 on our scale), support for the same-sex marriage ban still stood at nearly two-thirds. Contact makes a difference, but its effect is not definitive.

Second, again in keeping with the social categorization theory literature, the type of contact matters. We think there are several dimensions here that are important. 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.[23] 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 inter-group contact often occurs at the workplace than other venues (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1991) and that strong black-white co-worker 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 also conditions the effect.

Third, community context makes little difference in attitudes toward gay marriage once more intense and consequential contact is controlled for. Unlike Overby and Barth (2002), we find no appreciable ameliorative effect from living in communities with larger estimated 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 impact in black-white relations, where the inter-group cultural gap is widest (Forbes 1997). The minimal finding here (and a possible narrowing of the effect since Overby and Barth's [2002] data were collected a decade ago) suggests that despite the much ballyhooed

[23] Again we would caution some restraint in interpreting these effects. Even among respondents with close gay friends, a majority (54 percent) indicated they approved of the amendment. Among respondents who know gay couples in marriage-like relationships, almost 60 percent nevertheless favored the constitutional ban. On this point we would sound a much more cautionary tone than Egan and Sherrill's (2006) conclusion that "[i]f current trends hold, marriage bans would fail – or just barely pass – in many of the states that have yet to hold such referenda."

"culture wars," the cultural gap between straight America and gay America is simply not large enough to trigger a contextual reaction.[24]

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 like South Carolina and at least where the policy at issue is one like 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 inter-personal contact with more finely grained questions about the nature, extent, and intimacy of interaction, and their impact on other forms of policy matters.

[24] See Egan and Sherrill (2006) on demographic similarities between lesbian-gay-bisexual voters and the general public in the 2006 electorate.

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

	Percent Supporting
Gender	
Male	74.15
Female	72.27
Race	
White	73.26
Non-White	72.00
Age	
<21	62.07
21-30	73.44
31-54	72
55-65	71.55
>65	78.12
Education	
< high school	86
high school or GED	78.95
some college	69.44
two-year college degree	71.43
bachelor's degree	71.63
post-graduate 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

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

	Percent 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	87.5
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 Inter-Personal Contact	
0	80.37
1	86.89
2	74.74
3	66.67
4	53.33
5	27.27

Table 3

Opposition to South Carolina SSM Amendment

Ordered Logistic Regression Analysis

Variable	
Gender	0.32
	(.27)
Sexual Orientation	0.95**
	(.40)
Family Income	-0.09
	(.07)
Education	0.18*
	(.10)
Race	-0.30
	(.33)
Partisan Identification	-0.31***
	(.07)
Political Ideology	-0.35***
	(.13)
Church Attendance	-0.25***
	(.06)
Religious Fundamentalism	-1.09***
	(.30)
External Political Efficacy	0.27**
	(.11)
Dissatisfaction with life in South Carolina	-0.13
	(.18)
Political Disengagement	0.44***
	(.14)
Gay Community Context	-0.002
	(.01)
Gay Interpersonal Contact Scale	0.31***
	(.07)
Rho_1	6.29
	(1.37)
Rho_2	6.60
	(1.38)
N	495
LR χ^2	145
	($p \leq .0000$)
Pseudo-R^2	.22

Table 4
Impact of Gay Inter-personal Contact

Level of Inter-personal 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

Cell entries are predicted probabilities based on various levels of inter-personal contact with gays and lesbians, setting all other variables in the ordered logistic regression model (taken from Table 3) equal to their mean value.

Table 5

Effects of Interpersonal Contact Type

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

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

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