SHOULD MARY AND JANE BE LEGAL? AMERICANS' ATTITUDES TOWARD MARIJUANA AND SAME-SEX MARRIAGE LEGALIZATION, 1988–2014

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Abstract Marijuana and same-sex marriage are two of the fastest changing and most widely debated opinion and policy issues in the United States. Research has examined public opinion on marijuana legalization and same-sex marriage legalization individually, but has neglected to examine these two issues together. We use General Social Survey data from 1988 to 2014 to compare four groups: (1) those who support neither; (2) those who support marijuana but not same-sex marriage legalization; (3) those who support marriage but not marijuana legalization; and (4) those who support both. This study provides four key findings: (1) marijuana and same-sex marriage attitudes have changed simultaneously; (2) most people hold these attitudes in tandem, and there has been a precipitous decline in the percentage of people who support legalizing neither and a remarkable increase in the percentage who support legalizing both; (3) attitudes toward both issues are liberalizing across all social and ideological groups, suggesting a society-wide redefinition of both behaviors as publicly accepted issues of individual autonomy; and (4) the support bases for marijuana and marriage legalization vary systematically by sociodemographic characteristics. We conclude that notions of individual autonomy may be increasingly important to the American public and their beliefs about what the government should regulate.

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Introduction

Marijuana and same-sex marriage are two of the fastest changing and most widely debated opinion and policy issues in the United States, but only one has been legalized nationwide. After the first state-level legalization of marijuana in 2012, four more states have legalized and 15 states have decriminalized marijuana; moreover, 24 states, in addition to the District of Colombia, now allow for medical marijuana. In 2015, 12 years after the first state-level legalization of same-sex marriage, the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage nationwide in their ruling on *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

Public opinion is implicated in policy decisions (Page and Shapiro 1983; Mishler and Barnum 1985; Marshall 1989; Sheehan 1996; Burstein 1998; Brooks and Manza 2006), especially when the issues involved are politically salient to the everyday lives of the public (Burstein 2003). As recent polls demonstrate, policy changes parallel similarly rapid changes in public opinion on marijuana and same-sex marriage legalization (Pew 2014a, 2014b). Scholars have studied Americans' changing views on marijuana (Nielsen 2010; Caulkins et al. 2012; Tate, Taylor, and Sawyer 2014; Toch and Maguire 2014) or views on same-sex marriage (Powell et al. 2010; Sherkat, de Vries, and Creek 2010; Sherkat et al. 2011; Baunach 2012; Schnabel 2016), but typically have not examined them in tandem. Because support for marijuana and same-sex marriage legalization have not been explicitly compared, we do not know how attitudes toward these issues have moved together over time, whether the people who support marijuana legalization are the same people who support marriage legalization, or what factors predict supporting one issue but not the other. In light of the rapid evolution of these issues, understanding the segments of the public that support legalization is relevant to public opinion and policy research, as well as stakeholders, policy makers, and politicians.

We use data from the General Social Survey to analyze these two rapidly-changing social issues in tandem. More specifically, we distinguish among four groups of people: (1) those who support legalization of neither marijuana nor same-sex marriage, (2) those who support marijuana but not same-sex marriage legalization, (3) those who support same-sex marriage but not marijuana legalization, and (4) those who support both. This study demonstrates that attitudes toward both marijuana and same-sex marriage have liberalized simultaneously and that most people hold similar views on both issues. Nevertheless, the support bases for these issues vary by sociodemographic and ideological characteristics. We conclude that notions of individual autonomy may be increasingly important to the American public and their beliefs about what the government should regulate.

Methods

We use General Social Survey (GSS) data ($n=4,079$) to examine and compare support for marijuana and same-sex marriage legalization (Smith et al. 2015). We use the years when both attitude measures were asked of the same people (1988, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014) and only use observations where respondents provided complete information on all covariates.¹ Our outcome measure is constructed from GSS measures of support for marijuana legalization and same-sex marriage legalization. The marijuana question asked: “Do you think the use of marijuana should be made legal or not?” Response options were (0) should not or (1) should. The same-sex marriage question asked: “Do you agree or disagree? Homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another.” Response options ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”² From the two individual attitude measures, we created our four category outcome measures: (1) support legalization of neither, (2) support legalization of marijuana but not same-sex marriage, (3) support legalization of same-sex marriage but not marijuana, and (4) support legalization of both.

We consider attitude change and overall differences by the following sociodemographic and ideological factors: gender (female=1), race (white, Black, other), age (continuous), education (college=1), marital status (married/widowed=1), parental status (parent=1), region (South=1), party identification (Democrat, Independent [and other parties], Republican), religious affiliation (evangelical=1), and view of the Bible (book of fables, inspired word of God, literal word of God³).

We begin by examining the more basic, and arguably more important, question of how attitudes have changed over time, treating year as the key independent variable. After considering attitude change, we examine how key sociodemographic and ideological factors associated with marijuana attitudes or marriage attitudes individually relate to the attitudes in tandem. For these analyses, we present average marginal effects plots based upon multinomial logit models with binary controls for year (Williams 2012; Jann 2013; Long and Freese 2014). A multinomial logistic regression table is available in the online supplement, as are metrics and descriptive statistics for all measures.

1. We lose 78 observations due to missing data. Sensitivity analyses using multiple imputation demonstrate that missing data do not substantively alter the results.

2. To compare respondents who supported neither issue, who supported one and not the other, and who supported both, we created a dichotomous measure of support for same-sex marriage. We placed “neither agree nor disagree” with those not supporting same-sex marriage legalization because the fit statistics (Bayesian information criterion) preferred this dichotomization. We conducted sensitivity analyses to ensure that the results would not be substantively different with other specifications (e.g., if the “neither agree nor disagree” group were included with those who support legalization). Alternative specifications yielded substantively equivalent results for what predicts opposition to both issues, support for one but not the other, and support for both.

3. Other volunteered responses are included in the models, but not shown.

Results

ATTITUDE CHANGE

Figure 1 shows that levels of support for marijuana legalization and same-sex marriage legalization have changed rapidly, roughly paralleling one another and changing most quickly since 2008. Support for marijuana legalization more than doubled from 1988 (17.7 percent) to 2006 (38.4 percent). Support for same-sex marriage legalization almost tripled from 1988 (12.1 percent) to 2006 (35.6 percent). In 2012, slightly more than half of all Americans supported marijuana legalization (50.3 percent) and same-sex marriage legalization (50.6 percent). By 2014, almost three out of every five Americans supported marijuana legalization (57.4 percent) and marriage legalization (57.8 percent). Attitudes toward marijuana and marriage have changed with marked similarity. Such similarity in how these attitudes changed is unusual in public opinion research, especially when plotting raw data and not smoothing for time trends or otherwise adjusting the data.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of people in the four distinct attitude categories. In 1988, 15 times as many Americans opposed both (75.0 percent) as the number who supported both (4.9 percent). By 2006, there was a large

Figure 1: Changing American Attitudes toward Marijuana and Same-Sex Marriage. Mean support for marijuana and same-sex marriage legalization. N=4,079. Source: General Social Survey, 1988, 2006–2014.

Figure 2: Changing American Attitude Categories. Mean membership in four attitude categories: support neither, support marijuana legalization only, support same-sex marriage legalization only, and support both. N=4,079. Source: General Social Survey, 1988, 2006–2014.

drop in those who opposed both (down to 46.0 percent from 75.0 percent), and increases in all three of the other categories. By 2012, more Americans supported both marijuana and same-sex marriage legalization (33.5 percent) than opposed both (31.6 percent). In 2014, 41.8 percent of Americans supported the legalization of both, which is more than double the percentage who supported both in 2006, just eight years earlier.

We examined whether attitudes are changing more quickly in some groups than in others, but found that a society-wide shift is occurring across the social groups listed in the methods section. We first considered means over time by subgroups, and all groups demonstrated the same general pattern: a substantial decline in support for neither and a substantial increase in support for both. We then examined interaction effects in two ways to test whether change was significantly different across groups: we interacted the covariates with a series of dummies for survey year, and then with a linear term for year. Both sets of analyses demonstrated similar attitude change patterns across the sociodemographic and ideological measures considered in this study, with the exception of age. As illustrated by the group means for age in [figure 3](#), younger people have become more likely than older people to support just same-sex marriage.

Figure 3: Changing American Attitude Categories by Age. Mean membership in four attitude categories: support neither, support marijuana legalization only, support same-sex marriage legalization only, and support both. N=4,079. Source: General Social Survey, 1988, 2006–2014.

In 1988, seven percent of those aged 18–45 and eight percent of those 45 or older supported same-sex marriage legalization without supporting marijuana legalization. From 2006 forward, younger people were more likely to support just marriage by about a 10-point gap. The narrowing of the gap to five points in 2014, however, suggests the possibility of a future convergence. Figure 4 shows the patterns by gender, which provides an example of the similar rates of change across groups. Women's and men's attitudes are shifting according to the same pattern, with small increases in support for legalizing just one but

Figure 4: Changing American Attitude Categories by Gender. Mean membership in four attitude categories: support neither, support marijuana legalization only, support same-sex marriage legalization only, and support both. N=4,079. Source: General Social Survey, 1988, 2006–2014.

not the other, a large increase in support for both, and a large decrease in support for neither.

Figure 5 presents the patterns by political affiliation, showing that each group is following the same general pattern. Although the change may appear to be a little slower among Republicans, the over-time patterns (as tested by interaction effects between affiliation and year) are not significantly different by political identification. Similar patterns appear among evangelicals and

Figure 5: Changing American Attitude Categories by Political Party Affiliation. Mean membership in four attitude categories: support neither, support marijuana legalization only, support same-sex marriage legalization only, and support both. N=4,079. Source: General Social Survey, 1988, 2006–2014.

biblical literalists in comparison to their counterparts, with what may appear to be slightly, but not significantly, slower attitude changes. The same overall pattern of decline in support for neither and increase in support for both operates across all groups examined in this study.

ATTITUDE DIFFERENCES BY SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Attitudes are changing at similar rates across groups, but there are important divides at any given point in time. Figures 6 and 7 present average marginal effects (AMEs)—which represent the mean effect of a one-unit change in a predictor on attitude configurations—for sociodemographic (figure 3) and ideological (figure 4) characteristics with 95 percent confidence intervals. We see that some sociodemographic factors are associated with greater support for one issue or the other. For example, women and men do not differ in their likelihood to oppose or support both marijuana and same-sex marriage legalization, but women are more likely to support just marriage and men more likely to support just marijuana. As another sociodemographic example, older people are more likely than younger people to oppose both marijuana and marriage legalization, and less likely to support just marriage or both in tandem.

Figure 6: Average Marginal Effects of Sociodemographics on Attitude Categories with 95% Confidence Intervals. Estimates from a model predicting support for marijuana and same-sex marriage legalization. Model includes the shown predictors and includes a series of binary controls for year. The figure displays the estimated average marginal effect of the sociodemographic factors on membership in the indicated attitude category. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. N=4,079. Source: General Social Survey, 1988, 2006–2014.

Figure 7: Average Marginal Effects of Ideological Factors on Attitude Categories with 95% Confidence Intervals. Estimates from a model predicting support for marijuana and same-sex marriage legalization. Model includes the shown predictors and controls for year (a series of binary measures), sex, race, age, education, marital status, parenthood, and region and population size of home. The figure displays the estimated average marginal effect of the ideological factors on membership in the indicated attitude category. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. $N=4,079$. Source: General Social Survey, 1988, 2006–2014.

In contrast to the attitude differentiation associated with some sociodemographic factors, the ideological patterns are more polarized: more conservative groups tend toward supporting neither issue whereas more liberal groups tend toward supporting both issues. Republicans, evangelicals, and biblical literalists are all more likely to be jointly opposed to same-sex marriage *and* marijuana legalization. Independents are more similar to Democrats than to Republicans on these issues. Likewise, those who see the Bible as inspired are more similar to those who see it as a book of fables than those who see it as literal. Political affiliation predicts comparatively higher support for marijuana legalization than same-sex marriage legalization, but, perhaps surprisingly, view of the Bible does not differentiate between marijuana (clearly not

mentioned in the Bible) and same-sex marriage (ostensibly mentioned in the Bible). This pattern suggests that biblical literalism, rather than simply indicating a more literal interpretation of actual biblical content, may function as a general proxy for black-and-white thinking on the legislation of morality.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined cleavages in Americans' attitudes toward marijuana legalization and same-sex marriage legalization. It compared levels of support over time and the groups of people who support neither, those who support one but not the other, and those who support both. The study provides four key findings: (1) marijuana and same-sex marriage attitudes have changed simultaneously; (2) most people hold these attitudes in tandem, and there has been a precipitous decline in the percentage of people who support legalizing neither and a remarkable increase in the percentage who support legalizing both; (3) attitudes toward both issues are liberalizing across all social and ideological groups, suggesting a society-wide redefinition of both behaviors as publicly accepted issues of individual autonomy; (4) the support bases for marijuana and marriage legalization vary systematically by sociodemographic characteristics.

As might be expected, strong support for legalization comes from both Democrats and people who see the Bible as a book of fables. Perhaps more surprisingly, Independents⁴ and those who see the Bible as the inspired but not literal word of God also demonstrate high levels of support for both issues. Even Republicans and biblical literalists, who at any given point in time are more opposed to legalization, are liberalizing at a rate similar to other Americans. As we showed, age is the only factor by which attitudes have changed at a significantly different rate over time. Why are seemingly disparate issues evoking similar ideological responses? Both marijuana and same-sex marriage legalization are related to individual liberty and what the government should and should not regulate. Therefore, the findings may reflect a broader shift in the public's support for maximizing individual freedom—or autonomy—and not regulating behavior that does not affect others (Hout and Fischer 2014). This study, focused on two key autonomy-related policy issues, speaks to the possibility of a wider liberalization (or maybe just libertarianization⁵) of American attitudes that should be examined in future research.

In 1988, most Americans wanted the government to regulate these issues, but in 2014 Americans wanted people to be able to choose for themselves

4. In 2014, both Democrats and Independents were about twice as likely to be in the group that supports both marijuana and marriage legalization than the group that supports neither.

5. The 2014 Libertarian platform uses an autonomy frame to state support for the legalization of both marijuana and same-sex marriage (Libertarian Party 2014).

whether these behaviors are right for them. After such society-wide shifts in social norms, law often follows in a responsive cycle: policy decisions frequently respond to public opinion, and such policy changes can then affect public opinion by legitimizing behavior in the eyes of many people (Page and Shapiro 1983; Burstein 1998, 2003). In both 2012 and 2014, the levels of support for marijuana and same-sex marriage legalization were virtually identical to one another, but this pattern may change. Wider legalization (and thus legitimization) of same-sex marriage than marijuana could cause marriage attitudes to change more quickly than marijuana attitudes, especially if marijuana is only available medically or remains mostly or completely illegal in many states. Alternatively, the national top-down legalization of same-sex marriage could produce a backlash similar to when the Supreme Court legalized abortion (Granberg and Granberg 1980). While acknowledging such a possibility, we suspect that, similar to the growth in support that followed the legalization of interracial marriage, the nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage may result in higher levels of public support (Barnum 1985).

Although marijuana and same-sex marriage legalization attitudes are changing at similar rates across groups, the overall cleavages provide interesting puzzles that future research could explore. For example, are people who support legalization for one issue but not the other on their way to supporting both? Or, alternatively, are there people who will continue to support legalization for one issue but not the other because they view them as inherently distinct moral issues? Some possibilities are suggested by the systematic patterns of who is more likely to fall into these categories. Women are more likely than men to support the legalization of same-sex marriage only, and men are more likely to support the legalization of marijuana only. These patterns could be due to men perceiving social threats in same-sex relationships that are less salient for women (e.g., homosexuality as a threat to masculinity; Pascoe 2007; Willer et al. 2013), and women perceiving social threats in marijuana that are less salient for men (e.g., marijuana as a threat to family life; Yamaguchi and Kandel 1985; Eagly et al. 2004). Although it is possible that many of the men who support just marijuana legalization and the women who support just same-sex marriage legalization are on their way to supporting both, these issues could have foundationally different sociopolitical meanings for different social groups and thus evoke consistently divergent attitudinal responses.

American support for the legalization of marijuana and of same-sex marriage is about as high as the percent of votes for Reagan in his 1984 landslide reelection. Reagan's 58 percent of the popular vote has not since been matched by any presidential candidate. Politicians who seek public support will need to carefully navigate their stance on these policy issues, which we suspect will be supported by even higher proportions of the American public in the years to come.

Appendix

Data

The data presented in this article were taken from the General Social Survey (GSS) website (<http://gss.norc.org/>). The GSS is a consistently repeated nationally-representative survey of the United States fielded by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. AAPOR RR5: 1988, 77.3%; 2006, 71.2%; 2008, 70.4%; 2010, 70.3%; 2012, 71.4%; 2014, 69.2%.

The target population of the General Social Survey is adults (18+) living in households in the United States. From 1972 to 2004 it was further restricted to those able to do the survey in English. From 2006 to present it has included those able to do the survey in English or Spanish. Those unable to do the survey in either English or Spanish are out of scope. Residents of institutions and group quarters are out of scope. Those with mental and/or physical conditions that prevent them from doing the survey, but who live in households, are part of the target population and in scope. In the reinterviews, those who have died, moved out of the United States, or who no longer live in a household have left the target population and are out of scope.

The vast majority of GSS data is obtained in face-to-face interviews. Computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) began in the 2002 GSS. Under some conditions when it has proved difficult to arrange an in-person interview with a sampled respondent, GSS interviews may be conducted by telephone.

Question Wording

MEASURES USE TO CONSTRUCT DEPENDENT VARIABLE

Do you think the use of marijuana should be made legal or not?

☐ Should ☐ Should Not

Do you agree or disagree? Homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another.

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neither agree or disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Sociodemographic Factors:

Sex — CODE RESPONDENT'S SEX. Male; Female.

Race — CODE WITHOUT ASKING ONLY IF THERE IS NO DOUBT IN YOUR MIND. What race do you consider yourself? White; Black; Other.

Age — Date of birth has been recoded into actual age.

Education — Less than high school; High School; Associate/Junior college; Bachelor's; Graduate

Marital status — Are you currently married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married? Married; Widowed; Divorced; Separated; Never married.

Children — How many children have you ever had? Please count all that were born alive at any time (including any you had from a previous marriage). (Zero through seven, eight or more)

Region of interview — New England; Middle Atlantic; East North Central; West North Central; South Atlantic; East South Central; West South Central; Mountain; Pacific.

SRC new belt code — SRC (SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN) NEW BELT CODE: Central city of 12 largest SMSAs; Central city of remainder of the 100 largest SMSAs; Suburbs of 12 largest SMSAs; Suburbs of the remaining 100 largest SMSAs; Other Urban – counties having towns of 10,000 or more; Other rural – counties having no towns of 10,000 or more.

Ideological Factors:

Party identification — Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what? Strong Democrat; Not very strong Democrat; Independent, close to Democrat; Independent – Neither, No response; Independent, close to Republican; Not very strong Republican; Strong Republican; Other party, refused to say

Religion — What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion? Protestant [ASK DENOM]; Catholic; Jewish; None; Other [SPECIFY RELIGION AND/OR CHURCH AND DENOMINATION]; Buddhism; Hinduism; Other Eastern Religions; Muslim/Islam; Orthodox-Christian; Christian; Native American; Inter-Nondenominational.

Religiosity — Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible?

The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word; The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available online at <http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/>.

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