

# American Attitudes on Marriage Equality: Findings from the 2008 Faith and American Politics Study

Analysis by  
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## Executive Summary

The following are the key findings on marriage equality from the 2008 Faith and American Politics Survey (FAPS):

**Same-sex marriage is not a high voting priority for Americans in 2008.** Among all Americans, same-sex marriage ranks last of ten issues. White evangelicals do not rank abortion or same-sex marriage in their top five most important voting issues.

**Younger Americans are much more supportive of marriage equality.** Almost half (46%) of young adults (age 18-34) support same-sex marriage, compared to less than a third (29%) of all Americans.

**Attitudes on same-sex marriage are shifting significantly among young people.** In 2006, the American Values Survey found that 37% of young adults (18-34) supported same-sex marriage. Two years later, almost half (46%) of young adults now support same-sex marriage, an increase of 9 points.

**Support for same-sex marriage is significant among some young religious Americans.** Among young (18-34) white mainline Protestants and Catholics, close to half (48% and 44% respectively) support same-sex marriage. Among young evangelicals (18-34), a majority favor either same-sex marriage (24%) or civil unions (28%), compared to a majority (58%) of evangelicals overall who favor no legal recognition of gay couples' relationships.

**Having close friends and family members who are gay or lesbian increases support for same-sex marriage.** Among Americans who are gay or lesbian or have a close friend or family member who is gay or lesbian, nearly half (48%) say they support same-sex marriage. Among those who have more distant relationships with gay or lesbian people (i.e. acquaintance, coworker), support drops to just 30%. And among those with no relationship with a gay or lesbian person support for same-sex marriage is only 14%.

**Addressing religious liberty concerns significantly increases support for same-sex marriage.** When asked whether they would support allowing gay couples to marry "if the law guaranteed that no church or congregation would be required to perform marriages for gay couples," support for legalized same-sex marriage climbed 14 points, from 29% to 43%.

**Religious groups that are more likely to hear negative messages about homosexuality are far more likely to oppose same-sex marriage.** White evangelicals, for example, hear much more negative messages about homosexuality than white Mainline Protestants. The difference between these two groups on support for marriage equality is stark. Nearly 6-in-10 (58%) white evangelicals say there should be no legal recognition for gay and lesbian couples, compared to only 26% of white mainline Protestants.

**Religious factors accounted for two of the top five most powerful independent predictors of views on marriage equality.** The top five most powerful independent predictors of support for same-sex marriage, in order of importance, were the following: relationship with a gay or lesbian person, view of the Bible, political ideology, age, and religious affiliation.

## Introduction

This report draws on data from the Faith and American Politics Survey (FAPS), conducted by Public Religion Research and sponsored by Faith in Public Life. The survey was designed to give an in-depth look at youth, religion, and politics leading up to the 2008 presidential elections.

The survey design contained several unique elements:

- The survey contained a large general population sample (n=2,000), combined with a large over sample of younger Americans 18-34 years of age. This design made FAPS the largest survey of younger Americans during the election cycle.
- The survey contained an extensive battery of questions on religious belief, behavior, practice, and affiliation, which enabled a close look at youth religiosity and its relationship to political attitudes and behavior.
- Finally, the survey contained a number of questions about marriage equality, including its importance as a voting issue, support for legalization, the relationship between support and other factors such as social relationships, religious liberty messages, and what people are hearing about in church.

This in-depth survey gives us a unique window into the relationship between marriage equality and religion in both the general population and among younger Americans. It points to an important connection for many Americans between affirming religious liberty and support for marriage equality and demonstrates some connections between what Americans are hearing in church about homosexuality and their support for marriage equality. Finally, this report offers some initial insights about the power of religious factors—such as views of the Bible, white evangelical affiliation, and religious attendance—as independent predictors of attitudes toward marriage equality.

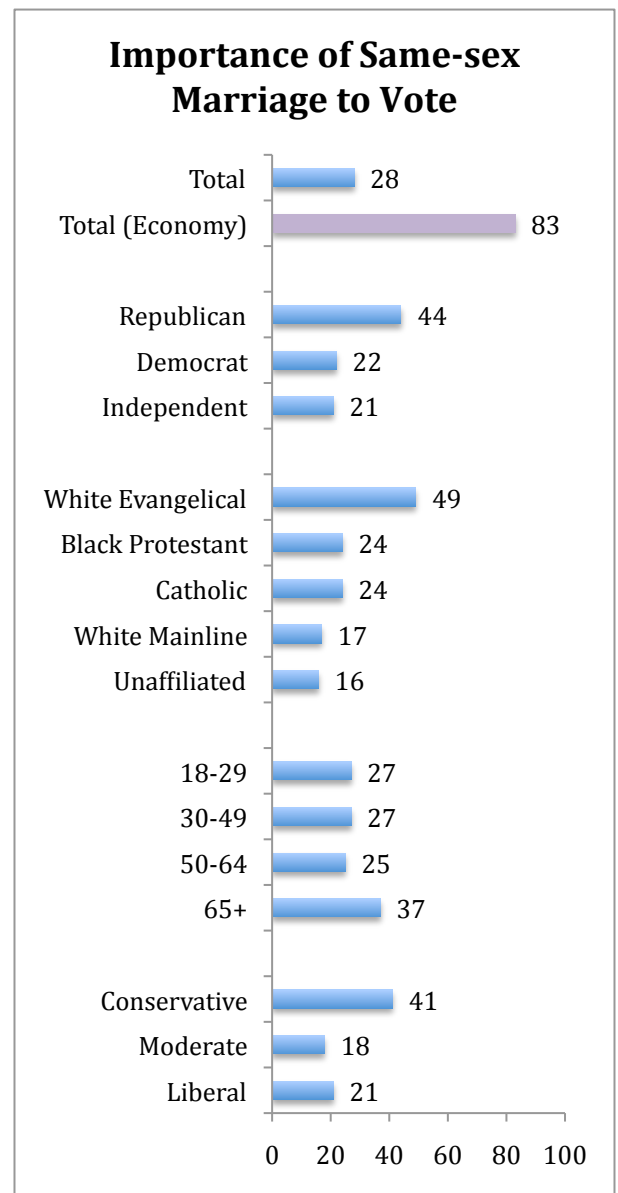
## Same-sex Marriage as a Voting Issue

Despite the prominent role that the issue of same-sex marriage played in the 2004 election, there was little evidence leading into the 2008 election that it would reprise its role this year.<sup>1</sup> In fact, *only about a quarter (28%) of Americans said that the issue of same-sex marriage would be a very important consideration in their vote*, compared to 83% who said the economy would be very important.

Republicans were twice as likely as Democrats and Independents to say that the issue would be very important to their vote (44% to 22% and 21% respectively). Conservatives were also about twice as likely as liberals and moderates to say that the issue would be very important.

Among religious groups, white evangelicals were by far the most likely to cast their vote on this issue. Nearly half (49%) of white evangelicals said same-sex marriage would be a very important voting issue, significantly more than Catholics (24%), Black Protestants (24%) white mainline Protestants (17) and the unaffiliated (16%). Interestingly, although Black Protestants remain opposed to same-sex marriage—48% said there should be no legal recognition at all for same-sex couples—the issue was not a political priority for them.

Opponents of same-sex marriage were much more likely to view the issue as important to their vote than those who support it. Less than 1-in-5 (19%) of Americans who said gay couples should be able to marry also said it would be a very important voting issue, while almost half (47%) of those who said there should be no legal recognition of a gay couple’s relationship thought same-sex marriage would be a very important voting issue.



<sup>1</sup> Public Religion Research’s post-election survey, sponsored by Faith in Public Life in partnership with Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good and Sojourners, found that same-sex marriage ranked last in importance compared to issues like the economy, the war in Iraq and health care. Nearly half (48%) of all voters said the economy was the single most important issue in the election and only 1% said same-sex marriage was the single most important issue. For complete results to the post election survey, visit [www.publicreligion.org/research/?id=83](http://www.publicreligion.org/research/?id=83).

## Attitudes on Same-sex Marriage

A majority of Americans support either allowing gay couples to legally marry (29%) or form civil unions (28%). Less than 4-in-10 (37%) say that there should be no legal recognition of a gay couple's relationship. Americans who are unaffiliated with any particular religion are most supportive of same-sex marriage (53%), and white evangelical Protestants are least supportive (10%). A solid majority (58%) of white evangelical Protestants say that there should be no legal recognition of a gay couple's relationship. More than six-in-ten Catholics (61%) and white mainline Protestants (70%) support civil unions or same-sex marriage.

	Gay couples should be allowed to marry	Gay couples should form civil unions, not marry	No legal recognition of a gay couple's relationship	DK/Ref.	Total
Total	29	28	37	6	=100
18-34	46	23	29	3	=100
All White Evangelicals	10	27	58	5	=100
18-34	24	28	47	1	=100
All White Mainline	34	36	26	4	=100
18-34	48	26	24	2	=100
All Black Protestant*	27	20	48	6	=100
18-34*	29	26	41	4	=100
All Catholics	30	31	32	7	=100
18-34	44	23	25	7	=100
All Unaffiliated	53	25	18	5	=100
18-34	69	18	13	0	=100

\* N < 100

### Generational Differences

Younger Americans are significantly more likely to favor marriage for same-sex couples than are Americans as a whole. *Almost half (46%) of young adults (age 18-34) support same-sex marriage, compared to less than a third (29%) of all Americans.*

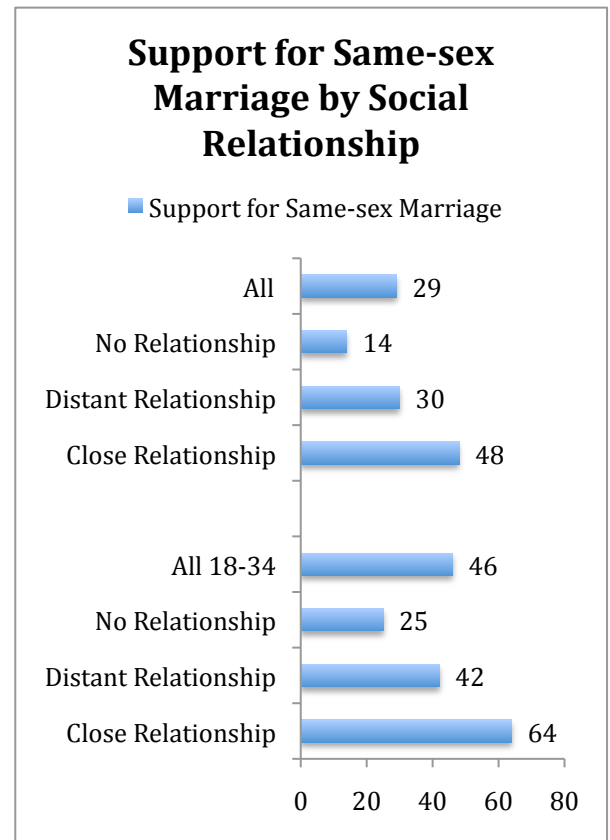
The generation gap on this issue is evident in every religious tradition as well. Younger white evangelicals are about 2.5 times more likely to favor same-sex marriage than white evangelicals overall (24% to 10%), and a majority of young evangelicals support either marriage or civil unions. Among young Catholics, 44% say gay couples should be able to marry, compared to just 30% of all Catholics. And

nearly 7-in-10 (69%) younger Americans who have no specific religion say that gay couples should be allowed to marry, compared to just 53% of Americans overall with no specific religious affiliation.

*The Influence of Social Proximity*

Having a close relationship with a gay or lesbian person has a strong influence on support for same-sex marriage. *Nearly half (48%) of Americans who are themselves gay or lesbian, or who have close friends or family members who are gay or lesbian, say they support same-sex marriage.* Among those who have more distant relationships with gay or lesbian people (i.e. acquaintance or a coworker), less than a third (30%) support marriage equality. Americans who say they do not know anyone who is gay or lesbian are least likely to support same-sex marriage (14%).

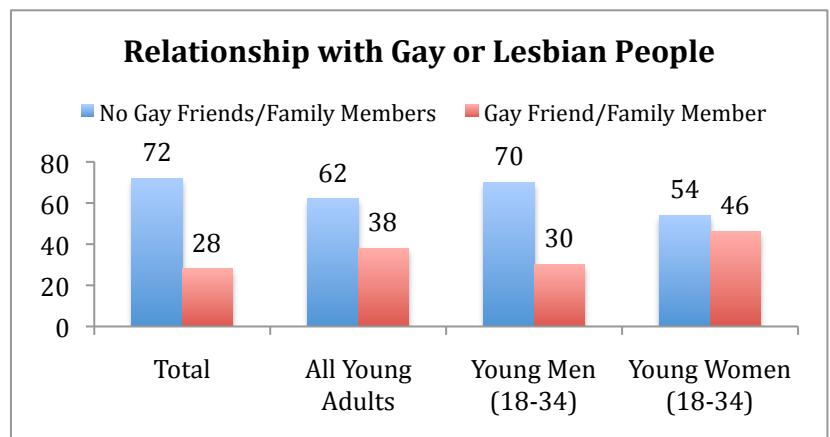
The same pattern is found among younger Americans. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of young adults who are themselves gay or lesbian, or who have close friends or family members who are gay or lesbian, support same-sex marriage, nearly 40-points higher than those who say they do not know anyone who is gay or lesbian (25%). Among young adults who have only more distant relationships with gay or lesbian people, support for same-sex marriage is about 4-in-10 (42%).



*Gender Differences in Social Relationships*

Young Americans, especially young women, are much more likely to have close relationships with gay or lesbian people.

Close to 4-in-10 (38%) young adults say they have a close friend or family member who is gay, compared to 28% of Americans overall. Nearly half (46%) of young women say they have a close friend or family member who is gay. Significantly fewer young men have gay friends or family members (30%). Not surprisingly, young women are also the most supportive of same-sex marriage; a majority (52%) says gay couples should be able to marry legally.



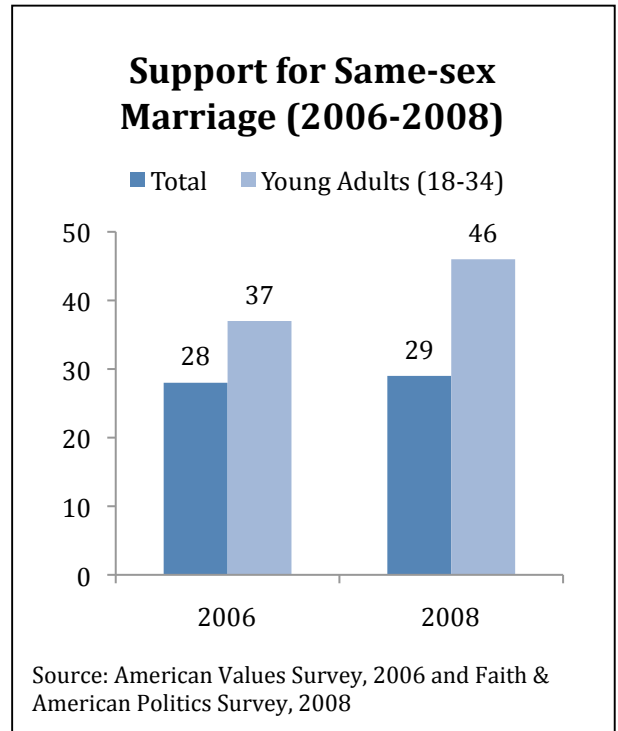


## Recent Shifts on Same-sex Marriage among Youth

We found dramatic movement on the issue of marriage equality among young adults over the past two years. In 2006, the American Values Survey found that 37% of young adults supported same-sex marriage. Two years later, almost half (46%) of young adults now support same-sex marriage, an increase of 9 points.

*Over the last two years, the generation gap has nearly doubled.* In 2006, younger adults were 9-points more likely to support same-sex marriage than Americans overall (37% to 28% respectively). In 2008, this gap between younger adults and the general public has grown to 17-points.

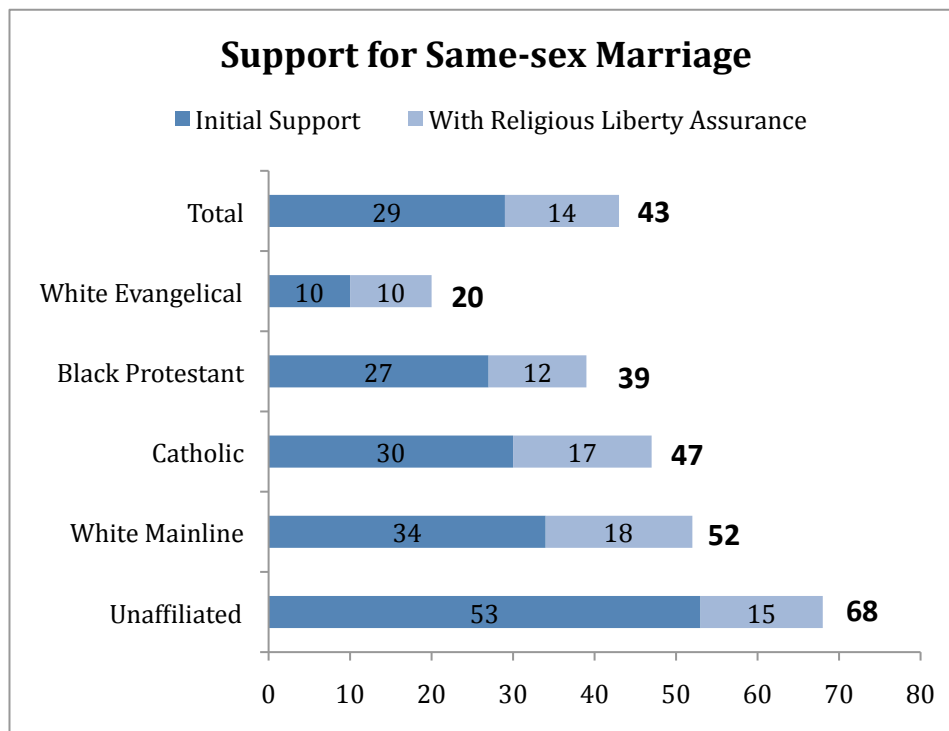
Among young Americans, these trends are mostly due to shifts in support from civil unions to marriage. Between 2006 and 2008, there were no differences in the proportion of young adults who say there should be no legal recognition for gay couples. Support for civil unions during the last two years actually declined (from 33% to 22%) as greater number of young Americans expressed support for full marriage equality.



## The Importance of Affirming Religious Liberty

Although support for same-sex marriage falls short of a majority, providing respondents with an assurance about religious liberty dramatically increases support. Initially, less than a third (29%) of Americans say they support same-sex marriage. However, when asked whether they would support allowing gay couples to marry “if the law guaranteed that no church or congregation would be required to perform marriages for gay couples,” support for legalized same-sex marriage increased 14 points to 43% among all adults and to 60% among younger adults.

Among the general population, this increase was most pronounced among white mainline Protestants, who moved from one-third (34%) support to majority (52%) support. Among younger adults, the movement was largest among Catholics, who increased their support 20 points, from 44% to 64%.



## Predicting Support for Same-sex Marriage

To further examine the role of religion in predicting attitudes toward same-sex marriage, we conducted a multivariate logistic regression analysis. The model included basic demographic variables known to be associated with attitudes on LGBT issues: age, education, gender, political ideology and relationship with a gay or lesbian person. We also included a number of relevant religious variables, including frequency of worship attendance, view of the Bible, and formal religious affiliation.

The top five most powerful independent predictors of support for same-sex marriage, in order of importance, were the following: relationship with a gay or lesbian person, view of the Bible, political ideology, age, and religious affiliation.

When holding all other factors constant, people who were gay or lesbian, had a close friend or family member who was gay or lesbian were four times more likely to support same-sex marriage than those who did not know any gay or lesbian person (Odds Ratio=0.25). After social relationships, biblical literalism was the most powerful independent predictor of support for marriage equality. Americans who believe that the Bible is the literal word of God were more than three and a half times less likely (OR=0.27) to support same-sex marriage than those who do not take the Bible literally.

Political ideology and age were also powerful independent predictors. Self-identified conservatives were about three and a half times less likely to support same-sex marriage than liberals (OR=0.28). Political moderates were about half (OR=0.55) as likely as liberals to support same-sex marriage. Americans age 65 or older were three times less likely (OR=0.33) to support same-sex marriage than Americans under age 35.

	Est.	Std. Error	Odds Ratio	Sig.
Constant	-2.414	0.232	0.09	0.000
Age 65+	-1.111	0.22	0.33	0.000
Age 50-64	-0.74	0.177	0.48	0.000
Age 35-49	-0.589	0.162	0.55	0.000
Age 18-34*	0 <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--
HS or Less	-0.088	0.168	0.92	0.600
Some College	0.136	0.159	1.15	0.391
College Graduate*	0 <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--
Male	-0.6	0.129	0.55	0.000
Female*	0 <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--
Married	-0.309	0.137	0.73	0.024
Unmarried*	0 <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--
Bible, Literal	-1.294	0.167	0.27	0.000
Bible, Not Literal*	0 <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--
Attend, Weekly or more	-0.813	0.185	0.43	0.000
Attend, Monthly/Yearly	-0.093	0.164	0.91	0.572
Attend, Seldom/Never*	0 <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--
Conservative	-1.283	0.17	0.28	0.000
Moderate	-0.593	0.149	0.55	0.000
Liberal*	0 <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--
White Evangelical	-1.08	0.233	0.34	0.000
White Mainline	-0.327	0.205	0.72	0.111
Black Protestant	-0.227	0.269	0.80	0.398
Catholic	-0.452	0.19	0.64	0.017
Other Christian	-1.133	0.354	0.32	0.001
Non-Christian	0.713	0.383	2.04	0.063
Unaffiliated*	0 <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--
No Gay Relationship	-1.382	0.164	0.25	0.000
Distant Gay Relationship	-.046	0.145	0.63	0.002
Close Gay Relationship*	0 <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--

\* Denotes reference category

Finally, religious affiliation—specifically white evangelical Protestant affiliation—was also a powerful predictor. White evangelical Protestants were about three times less likely (OR=0.34) to support same-sex marriage as the religiously unaffiliated. Other Christians—a small category that includes Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and ethnic Protestants—were also about three times less likely (OR=0.32) to support same-sex marriage as the unaffiliated.

Finally, two remaining variables, religious attendance and gender, also proved to be strong independent predictors of views on same-sex marriage. Respondents who attended worship services weekly or more were about half as likely as those who seldom or never attend services to support same-sex marriage. Holding other factors constant, men were about half as likely as women to support same-sex marriage.

In our model, educational attainment was not a significant predictor of support for marriage equality for gays and lesbians at the  $p=0.05$  level of significance.

## What Americans are Hearing About Homosexuality in Church

Americans who belong to different religious traditions are exposed to dramatically different messages during worship services. More than two-thirds (67%) of white evangelical and black Protestants say their pastor speaks out about the issue of homosexuality. Catholics and white mainline Protestants are least likely to hear about homosexuality (37% and 43% respectively).

### *Negative Messages More Common*

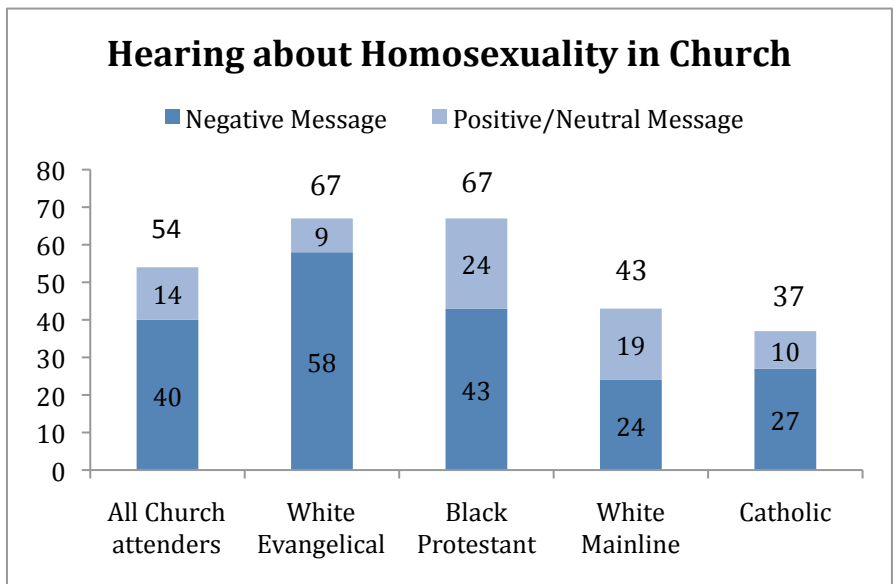
Overall, Americans who hear about the issues of homosexuality at their places of worship are much more likely to hear their clergy speak out negatively on the issue. When clergy speak about the issue of homosexuality, *American churchgoers are 10 times more likely to hear their clergy say homosexuality should be discouraged than to hear it is something that should be accepted (40% to 4% respectively).*

However, the messages Americans hear also vary considerably by religious tradition. White evangelical Protestants are much more likely to hear negative messages from church leaders about homosexuality than white mainline Protestants or Catholics. Among the roughly two-thirds (67%) of white evangelicals who hear about homosexuality in church, 86% report that their pastors say it ought to be discouraged. In contrast, among the roughly 4-in-10 (43%) mainline Protestants who hear about homosexuality in church, 56% report hearing negative messages. Interestingly, although Catholics are less likely to hear about homosexuality in church, they are much more likely to hear a negative message than white mainline Protestants. Less than 4-in-10 (37%) Catholics say they hear about homosexuality in church, however nearly three quarters (73%) of those who do report that the message is negative.

### *The Link Between Attitudes and Messages in Church*

Not surprisingly, there are strong correlations between what people in the pews are hearing from their clergy and their views on issues. A majority (58%) of white evangelicals report hearing negative messages about homosexuality in church, more than any other religious tradition. White evangelicals are also most likely to oppose any legal recognition for gay and lesbian couples (58%).

In contrast, white mainline Protestants are among the least likely to hear negative messages about homosexuality in church (24%), and they are also the least opposed to



legal recognition for gay and lesbian couples (26%). Although Catholics are less likely overall to hear about homosexuality in church, they are significantly more likely to hear negative messages than white mainline Protestants and more likely to oppose legal recognition (32% to 26% respectively).

These correlations suggest a clear relationship between hearing negative messages about homosexuality in church and views on same-sex marriage.

## Conclusion

One key insight that runs through our analysis is this: *religion matters for marriage equality*.

Three insights are particularly worth highlighting:

- There is a strong correlation between what Americans hear in church and their views on marriage equality.
- For a significant number of Americans who do not initially support marriage equality, emphasizing that no law ensuring marriage equality will impinge on the religious liberty of churches and other places of worship moves them to support marriage equality.
- Finally, it is difficult to overemphasize the importance of the findings of the regression model predicting support for marriage equality. Even after controlling for a other factors, three of the top six most powerful independent predictors of views on marriage equality were religious factors: views of the Bible, white evangelical religious affiliation, and religious attendance.

The analysis in this report provides clear evidence that if we want to understand American attitudes toward marriage equality, we must also grasp the complexity of Americans' religiosity and its relationship to the issue.

### **ABOUT THE FAITH AND AMERICAN POLITICS SURVEY**

The Faith and American Politics Survey was designed and conducted by Public Religion Research ([www.publicreligion.org](http://www.publicreligion.org)) and sponsored by Faith in Public Life ([www.faithinpubliclife.org](http://www.faithinpubliclife.org)). Results of the survey were based on telephone interviews conducted by professional interviewers under the direction of Opinion Access Corporation. The survey includes a national sample of 2,000 adults, 18 years of age and older, and an oversample of 974 respondents ages 18-34. The oversample of young adults included 200 interviews of cell phone users. The survey was conducted from August 28 to September 19, 2008.

The margin of error for the national sample is +/- 2.5% at the 95% confidence interval. The margin of error for respondents age 18-34 (N=1251) is +/- 3.0% at the 95% confidence interval.

The complete findings of the Faith and American Politics Survey, including the survey report, questionnaire, and a recording of the press conference from its initial release in mid-October are available online: <http://www.publicreligion.org/research/?id=37>

### **ABOUT PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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*President, Public Religion Research*

Dr. Jones is a leading scholar and consultant at the intersection of religion and politics. He is the author of *Progressive & Religious: How Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist Leaders are Moving Beyond the Culture Wars and Transforming American Public Life* ([www.progressiveandreligious.org](http://www.progressiveandreligious.org)). He sits on the national steering committee for the Religion and Politics Group at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and is an active member of the Society of Christian Ethics and the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). He is also a regular columnist for Beliefnet.com and the online magazine ReligionDispatches.org. Dr. Jones' work is frequently featured in the media and has appeared in U.S. News & World Report, Newsweek, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, USA Today, MSNBC.com, National Public Radio, and others.

Previously, Dr. Jones served as an affiliated scholar at the Center for American Progress and as the founding director of the Center for American Values in Public Life at People for the American Way Foundation. Prior to his work in Washington, he was assistant professor of religious studies at Missouri State University. He is also the author of *Liberalism's Troubled Search for Equality: Religion and Cultural Bias in the Oregon Physician-assisted Suicide Debates* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) and numerous articles. Dr. Jones holds a Ph.D. in religion from Emory University, and a M.Div. from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

### **Daniel Cox**

*Director of Research, Public Religion Research*

Dan brings extensive experience in surveying religious groups in the United States. Prior to joining Public Religion Research, Dan worked as a Research Associate at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, where he was involved with all aspects of public opinion survey research, including designing survey questionnaires, performing data analysis and authoring survey reports. In 2007, Dan was part of the core research team for the groundbreaking Religious Landscape Survey, a large public opinion survey on religion and politics that interviewed over 35,000 Americans. Dan specializes in youth politics and religion, and his work has appeared in numerous national news and religious publications including the New York Times, ABC News, CNN, Newsweek, World Magazine, the Dallas Morning News, and the Orlando Sentinel.

Dan holds an M.A. in American government from Georgetown University, where he focused on youth, religion and public opinion, and holds a B.A. in political science from Union College.

Dan is an active member of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR).