

# Why do People Support Civil Unions but Not Same-Sex Marriage?

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## Abstract

While a great deal of research has been conducted concerning public opinion about same-sex marriage, less attention has been given to public opinion about civil unions. A focus on civil unions is necessary, not only because of the practical, political implications of civil unions, but also because the inclusion of this “alternative” in the same-sex marriage debate provides a lens through which the “structural” and “pragmatic” theories of culture can be evaluated. This analysis shows that beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about homosexuality and same-sex couples are highly correlated and powerful predictors of attitudes about both same-sex marriage and civil unions. While this is interpreted as strong evidence for a structural theory of culture, a separate analysis of people who simultaneously oppose same-sex marriage but support civil unions suggests that the debate about legal recognition of same-sex relationships is more complex than either theory alone would predict.

Keywords—marriage, civil unions, homosexuality, culture, public opinion

## Introduction

As studies of American public opinion about same-sex marriage proliferate, fewer scholarly efforts have applied the same methodological and analytical rigor in assessing the cultural foundations of attitudes towards other social institutions that provide legal recognition to same-sex relationships, such as civil unions and domestic partnerships. This discrepancy is understandable because political discourse about same-sex relationships in the United States has reflected the actions and rhetoric of the two opposing ideological social movements on each side of the issue: the liberal wing of the LGBTQ rights movement that has utilized legal challenges in the judicial arena to challenge the prohibition against same-sex marriage and the conservative religious right that opposes all legal and social efforts to legitimize of homosexuality (Bernstein 2002; Gallagher and Bull 2001; Rimmerman, Wald, and Wilcox 2000; Stein 2001). Both the structure of the two-party political system in the United States and the norms and practices of journalists and mainstream news media organizations appear to reify and privilege this either/or conception of controversial political issues (Evans 2003; Gans 1979; Tuchman 1978).

However, there are important practical and theoretical reasons for scholarly research to move beyond this simple pro/con debate about same-sex marriage. As a practical matter, the history of *legislative* conflicts (as opposed to judicial conflicts) over same-sex marriage in states in the European Union and the United States has shown that other forms of legal recognition of same-sex relationships, such as civil unions and domestic partnerships, represent a viable compromise position between two polarized ideological extremes (Eskridge and Spedale 2006). Furthermore, existing polls show that there is more support for civil unions and domestic partnerships than for same-sex marriage (Brewer and Wilcox 2005; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2003). In short, these observations suggest that there are consequential differences between these two forms of legal recognition; failure to study attitudes towards civil unions and domestic partnerships would lead scholars to seriously misunderstand and misrepresent the debate about this issue.

Theoretically, scholarly research should address attitudes towards both civil unions and same-sex marriage, not only because the above observations show that there are politically significant differences between the two forms of legal recognition, but also because this issue provides insight into an important theoretical dilemma in cultural sociology. Two influential theories in cultural sociology offer competing explanations for how people develop attitudes towards any given issue. These two theories echo Sartori's (1969) observation that belief systems can be either "ideological" or "pragmatic." The first theory, which I will here call the "structural" theory, emphasizes the internal ideological structure and coherence of belief systems (Alexander and Smith 1993; Geertz 1973; Lakoff 2002; Levi-Strauss 1966; Sewell 1985). In this view, people's understanding of an issue like same-sex marriage is related to the structure of people's larger belief systems, and these structures act as constraints upon how individuals form attitudes. This theory would predict that people's attitudes towards same-sex marriage would be based in large part on their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about homosexuality: it would be illogical for someone who has negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians to support same-sex marriage. To the extent that this theory is correct, people's attitudes and beliefs should be ideologically consistent, and one's ability to form particular opinions is constrained by pre-existing beliefs, attitudes, and feelings.

The second theory, which I will here call the "pragmatic" theory, argues that belief systems are not as coherent and ideological as structural theorists propose. Rather, belief systems are composed of a variety of contradictory beliefs, attitudes, and feelings and that people draw from this collection as you would pick a tool out of a tool kit: to solve a particular problem or in response to a particular situation (Battani, Hall, and Powers 1997; Swidler 1986; Swidler 2001). This theory would explain attitudes about an issue like same-sex marriage as arising from people's social contexts in which they live and act. So rather than attitudes towards same-sex marriage arising from their beliefs about homosexuality or the meaning of marriage, the pragmatic theory might predict that attitudes towards same-sex marriage would be due to differences in people's social environments, such as the number of gay and lesbian couples they

know, or the social context in which they are asked for their opinion. Individuals do not hold just a single attitude or opinion, but rather construct an opinion from the ideas that are most immediately salient in their minds when prompted by an interviewer (Zaller 1992).

The existence of civil unions and domestic partnerships as an alternative to same-sex marriage poses a significant challenge to structural theorists. While two ideologically consistent positions exist in this debate—support or opposition to both forms of legal recognition—there is also an apparently ideologically inconsistent position in the debate: opposition to same-sex marriage but support for same-sex civil unions. Initially, it would seem difficult for structural theorists to account for this ideologically inconsistent position. If one has negative views towards homosexuality or is a conservative evangelical or born-again Christian, for example, one would expect that he or she would oppose all forms of legal recognition of same-sex relationships. Without resorting to an explanation that people who hold the ideologically inconsistent position are simply confused, an explanation would have to emerge from the structure of people's attitudes and beliefs. Properly nuanced and specified, opposing same-sex marriage but supporting civil unions may in fact be an ideologically consistent position; but it is not obvious that this would be the case.

A more convincing explanation for why someone would oppose same-sex marriage but favor civil unions might be offered by pragmatic theorists, who begin with the assumption that people hold ideologically contradictory beliefs, attitudes, and feelings. From this theoretical point of view, people's attitudes may be weakly held; or they may be concerned about totally rejecting gay and lesbian couples altogether; or they simply might not want to sound like an "intolerant bigot" talking to a pollster on the telephone. It is also possible that people's feelings about same-sex marriage might be emotionally driven rather than logically thought through: they may be "grossed out" by homosexuality or intuitively "know" that marriage is between one man and one woman. For example, someone might oppose same-sex marriage because they are emotionally disturbed by homosexuality and unreflexively think of marriage as a sacred institution between one man and one woman; but they simultaneously might choose to support

civil unions because they happen to know someone personally who is gay or lesbian and in a long-term relationship and feel sympathy towards them.

Despite the apparently contradictory predictions of these two theories, as a number of scholars have pointed out, it would be a mistake to view these two theories as irreconcilable. Sewell (1999) argues that the two theories of culture presuppose each other, that culture must have at least a “thin coherence” for actors to be able to create new cultural meanings. Schudson (1989) argues that the task of cultural sociologists should be to determine the *conditions* under which the structural and the pragmatic theories of culture apply. Schudson argues that the “potency” of cultural objects can be analyzed in order to determine the degree of freedom that individuals have to do what they want with the cultural objects (or conversely, the degree of constraint that the cultural object exercises over the individual’s ability to interpret or use the cultural object). Other scholars have begun to analyze differences in the social structures of groups and institutions that are associated with the degree of ideological coherence of beliefs (Martin 2000; Martin 2002). In her study of same-sex marriage, Hull (2006) has shown how the practices and attitudes of same-sex couples about public commitment ceremonies are constrained by dominant cultural meanings about “marriage;” but at the same time, same-sex couples use such ceremonies to create new cultural meanings of “marriage.”

In this paper, I begin an examination of the how these two theories of culture apply to the same-sex marriage debate by analyzing survey data about same-sex marriage and civil unions. Analysis of survey data that include measures of beliefs, attitudes, and feelings, such as the data presented here, offers one simple measure of the internal coherence of people’s belief systems. To the extent the people’s beliefs, attitudes, and feelings are highly correlated with each other, we would have strong evidence that people’s attitudes towards this issue are constrained by their larger belief systems. Even though analysis of survey data cannot address the pragmatic theory of culture directly, we may see patterns in the data that point towards the non-ideological mechanisms at work in shaping people’s opinions: such as emotions, a pragmatic orientation

towards politics, the presence of weakly held or contradictory beliefs, or social contexts that cause people to produce certain opinions when they are asked to do so.

In this paper, first, I test the extent to which attitudes towards same-sex marriage appear to be due to demographic factors, whether or not someone knows a gay and lesbian person, and beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about homosexuality. Second, I use the same models to explain attitudes towards same-sex civil unions. Finally, I focus specifically upon people who are opposed to same-sex marriage but in favor of same-sex civil unions in order to examine who holds these apparently contradictory views and why. Taken together, the three analyses offer evidence about the ideological coherence of people's belief systems.

### Research Questions and Hypothesis

In this paper, I address three research questions regarding patterns of support and opposition to same-sex marriage and civil unions.

#### **RQ1: How important are various demographic characteristics, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings in predicting support for same-sex marriage?**

Previous studies of American public opinion specifically regarding same-sex marriage have emphasized the importance of religion in shaping attitudes and have also noted the existence of significant differences due to political beliefs, gender, age, and education (Brewer and Wilcox 2005; Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006). Beyond demographic characteristics, there are a number of attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality that are closely related to attitudes about same-sex marriage. Wilcox and Wolpert (2000) argue that people's attitudes towards homosexuality are strong predictors of attitudes towards all LGBTQ issues, such as gays in the military and gay rights. Thus, predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality are also likely to be predictors of attitudes towards same-sex marriage.

In addition to the demographic and religious influences cited above, there are a number of important beliefs, attitudes, and feelings that powerfully shape people's attitudes towards homosexuality. These include: beliefs about the nature of homosexuality (Pew Research Center

for the People and the Press 2003; Wilcox and Wolpert 2000; Wood and Bartkowski 2004), belief in negative stereotypes about gays (Wood and Bartkowski 2004), measures of homophobia (Wood and Bartkowski 2004), implicit and explicit motivations regarding prejudice (Lemm 2006), belief in traditional moral values (Wilcox and Wolpert 2000), and emotional reactions towards homosexuality (Wilcox and Wolpert 2000). Research has also shown that sustained personal contact with gays and lesbians is associated with positive attitudes towards homosexuality (Herek and Glunt 1993; Lemm 2006; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2003; Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2006).

In this paper, I use weighted least squares (WLS) regression models to measure the influence of a number of demographic characteristics, the amount of personal contact with gays and lesbians, and a number of beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about homosexuality on people's attitudes towards same-sex marriage. Because previous research has emphasized the relationship between attitudes about homosexuality and attitudes about other LGBTQ issues, I hypothesize that:

**H1a: Positive feelings and liberal beliefs and attitudes about homosexuality will be the strongest predictors of attitudes towards same-sex marriage.**

It is logical that these beliefs, attitudes, and feelings that predict attitudes towards same-sex marriage are related to various demographic factors as well. I expect that these beliefs, attitudes, and feelings are best understood as intervening variables between demographic predictors and attitudes towards same-sex marriage. Therefore, I further hypothesize that:

**H1b: Measured demographic characteristics of survey respondents will not be significant predictors of attitudes towards same-sex marriage after attitudes and beliefs are added to the model.**

To the extent that these hypotheses are confirmed, this would constitute strong evidence that people's belief systems are ideologically coherent in relation to this issue. That is, people's freedom to form a concrete policy opinion about same-sex marriage is constrained by their associated beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about homosexuality.

After using these models to predict attitudes towards same-sex marriage, I will apply the same models to attitudes about civil unions.

**RQ2: How important are various demographic characteristics, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings in predicting support for civil unions?**

Existing research has shown that religious variables are less important in predicting attitudes towards civil unions and also that there is, in general, less opposition towards civil unions than towards same-sex marriage (Brewer and Wilcox 2005; Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2003). Attitudes towards civil unions have also been shown to be context-dependent: people are more likely to express support for civil unions *after* they have been asked for their opinion about same-sex marriage (Brewer and Wilcox 2005; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2003). Loftus (2001) shows that there is an important difference between Americans' beliefs about the *morality* of homosexuality and Americans' beliefs about whether or not gays and lesbians deserve to have *civil liberties* protected. For all of these reasons, we should expect that beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about homosexuality will not be as strongly related to people's attitudes about civil unions. Therefore, I hypothesize that:

**H2a: The models used to predict attitudes towards same-sex marriage will not perform as well in predicting attitudes towards civil unions.**

Because opposition to same-sex marriage is greater than opposition to same-sex civil unions, I further hypothesize that:

**H2b: Political ideology will be a stronger predictor of attitudes towards civil unions, and attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality will be weaker predictors of attitudes towards civil unions when compared with the models regarding same-sex marriage.**

To the extent that these hypotheses are confirmed, this would be evidence that people's belief systems are not as ideologically coherent as structural theorists would predict. If measured beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about homosexuality do not perform as strongly in predicting

attitudes towards same-sex civil unions, this would suggest that non-ideological factors would play an important role in shaping people's policy attitudes about this issue.

Finally, I will turn my attention to a specific subset of respondents: people who expressed opposition to same-sex marriage but support for same-sex civil unions. Using the independent variables in this study, I compare this group of people with the two groups of people who consistently oppose and consistently support both forms of legal recognition. Doing so will allow me to address the final research question:

**RQ3: What kinds of people oppose same-sex marriage but support civil unions, and why?**

To my knowledge, no scholarly research has asked this question. However, it seems plausible that people who both oppose same-sex marriage and support civil unions will be politically moderate. I hypothesize that:

**H3a: Compared to respondents who hold ideologically consistent beliefs about same-sex marriage and civil unions, people who oppose same-sex marriage but support civil unions will be more likely to hold moderate political beliefs and will be more likely to hold a mixture of liberal and conservative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality.**

How someone would justify being simultaneously against same-sex marriage but opposed to civil unions is not readily apparent. It would not appear to stem, for example, from particular beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about homosexuality, since the only difference between the two questions is in the form of legal recognition of same-sex couples that is in question. Thus, I hypothesize that:

**H3b: People who oppose same-sex marriage but support civil unions will offer different reasons for their opposition to same-sex marriage than those who oppose both forms of legal recognition. Specifically, they will be more likely to rely on the culturally traditional definition of marriage as between one man and one woman as the justification for their attitudes.**

To the extent that these hypotheses are confirmed, this will provide some evidence in favor of the pragmatic theory of culture. Not only would people's belief systems appear to be contradictory in that they hold a variety of liberal and conservative beliefs and attitudes, but people's explanations for their positions would be based on their "gut feeling" about what marriage "is," rather than a principled, logically coherent reason.

### Data and Methods

To test these hypotheses, I conducted a secondary analysis of data collected by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. Telephone interviews were conducted with a national sample of 1,515 adults on October 15-19, 2003. The results of the survey were weighted in order to reflect known population parameters, so the total (N) presented in some of these analyses are larger than the actual number of individuals interviewed. The survey questions focused primarily on current events, religiosity, and homosexuality. Because the survey included a wide variety of items intended to measure various attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality and same-sex marriage, the data collected from this survey provides a significant degree of insight into public opinion about the political controversy surrounding same-sex marriage and civil unions. This dataset enables the researcher to examine the relationship between demographic characteristics, attitudes and beliefs, and concrete policy positions in a way that sheds light on the two theories of culture described above.

The two main dependent variables in this analysis are support for same-sex marriage and support for civil unions. Respondents were first asked, "Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally," and the next question asked, "Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose allowing gay and lesbian couples to enter into legal agreements with each other that would give them many of the same rights as married couples?" The four answer choices were assigned values 1 (strongly oppose) through 4 (strongly favor). The order of the questions was reversed on one version of the survey. Because question

order was found to affect people's stated positions towards civil unions, I include a dummy variable to control for the effect of asking the civil union question first.

The first two research questions were addressed by estimating a series of five weighted least squares (WLS) regression equations for each of the dependent variables. The first model included only demographic characteristics of the respondents. Demographic variables include: sex, age, education, race (a dummy variable coded as white or not white), marital status (a dummy variable indicating whether or not the respondent is currently married), parental status (a dummy variable indicating whether or not the respondent is currently a parent or guardian of a child under age 18), income, political ideology, size of the city or town in which they live, and religiosity (measured in two ways: frequency of church attendance and whether or not the respondent identifies as a born-again or evangelical Christian). The second model added a measure of personal contact with gays and lesbians in the respondent's daily lives: a dummy variable indicating whether or not "you have a friend, colleague, or family member who is gay."

The third, fourth, and fifth models added a variety of measures of beliefs, attitudes, and feelings to the regression equations. The third model added four measures of cognitive beliefs about the nature of homosexuality. Respondents were first asked, "In your opinion, when a person is homosexual is it something that people are born with, or is it something that develops because of the way people are brought up, or is it just the way that some people prefer to live?" I used responses to create 2 dummy variables, indicating whether or not the respondent believes homosexuality is something people are born with and whether or not the respondent believes that homosexuality is due to the way people are raised. Additionally, respondents were asked, "Do you think a gay or lesbian person's sexual orientation can be changed or cannot be changed?" Lastly, respondents were asked, "Do you think it is a sin, or not, to engage in homosexual behavior?"

The fourth model added three measures of attitudes about the place of gays and lesbians in society. Respondents were asked to "completely agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or completely disagree" with the following statements (read in random order): "Gay and lesbian

couples can be as good parents as heterosexual couples,” and “Allowing gay and lesbian couples to legally marry would undermine the traditional American family.” The responses were coded from 1 (completely disagree) to 4 (completely agree). Additionally, respondents were asked, “Do you think more acceptance of gays and lesbians would be a good thing or a bad thing for the country—or that it would not make much difference either way?” Responses were coded from 1 (bad for country) to 3 (good for country).

The fifth model added two measures of people’s feelings about gays and lesbians. The first measure is an index of two questions, whether the respondent has a “very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable” opinion of gay men and lesbian women. While there were differences between opinions of gay men and opinions of lesbian women, the two items were highly correlated ( $r = .88$ ). Whether the item about gay men or lesbian women was asked first was alternated; responses were coded from 1 (very unfavorable) to 4 (very favorable). Additionally, respondents were asked whether “it doesn’t bother you to be around homosexuals” or “it makes you uncomfortable to be around homosexuals.” Responses were coded as a dummy variable indicating whether or not the respondent is uncomfortable around homosexuals.

To test the third research question, as the dependent variable, I grouped all respondents according to their responses to both dependent variables, omitting the trivial number of people who expressed support for same-sex marriage but opposition to same-sex civil unions. The result was a categorization of respondents into three groups: those who oppose both same-sex marriage and civil unions, those who support both same-sex marriage and civil unions, and those who oppose same-sex marriage but support civil unions. I used a series of one-way ANOVA tests and cross-tabulations to compare these three groups, using the same independent variables in the five models above. Separately, I also analyzed responses to an open-ended question that was asked only to people who said they either oppose or strongly oppose same-sex marriage: “What would you say is the MAIN reason you object to allowing gays and lesbians to marry?” These

comparisons allow me to determine what is distinctive about the group of people who hold this apparently “ideologically inconsistent” set of attitudes and how one might explain their opinion.

## Results

The results of the analysis predicting support for same-sex marriage are presented in Table 1. Model 1, which includes only demographic characteristics of respondents, shows that women, young people, unmarried people, liberals, people who live in or near larger cities, and people who are less religious are more likely to support same-sex marriage. The addition (Model 2) of a measure of whether or not the individual knows someone who is gay or lesbian does not change the model.

**Table 1: Support for Same-Sex Marriage**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Male	-.129***	-.123***	-.080***	-.042*	-.042*
Age	-.136***	-.133***	-.104***	-.033	-.012
Education	.052	.042	-.035	-.050*	-.072***
White	.022	.026	-.010	-.012	-.011
Married	-.060*	-.061*	-.092***	-.034	-.027
Parent	-.023	-.024	-.008	.000	.018
Income	.023	.025	.018	.023	.011
Political Liberalism	.210***	.209***	.060*	.002	-.002
City Size	.128***	.126***	.085***	.040	.037
Church Attendance	-.152***	-.146***	-.053*	-.016	-.008
Born-again or Evangelical	-.245***	-.242***	-.072**	-.039	-.033
Gay Friend Colleague Family		.049	-.023	-.060**	-.089***
Born Gay			.120***	.037	.021
Brought Up Gay			.062*	.086***	.070***
Can't be changed			.063*	.003	-.002
Homosexuality a Sin			-.499***	-.325***	-.301***
Good Parents				.255***	.200***
Undermine Traditional Family				-.141***	-.133***
Acceptance of Gays Good for Country				.234***	.172***

Opinion of Gays and Lesbians					.184***
Uncomfortable					-.054*
Civil Union Question Asked First	-.024	-.021	-.021	-.069***	-.073***
Constant	2.031***	1.967***	2.928***	2.019***	1.880***
df	12/1024	13/1024	17/1024	20/1024	22/1024
Adjusted R-squared	.253	.254	.470	.606	.624

Regression coefficients are standardized.

\* p<=.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

In Model 3, the addition of cognitive beliefs about homosexuality significantly mediates the influence of demographic predictors; this model shows that the largest predictors of support for same-sex marriage are disagreement that homosexuality is a sin and the belief that homosexuality is something you are born with. In Model 4, the addition of attitudes about gays and lesbians in society further improves the predictive power and reduces the influence of demographic predictors. People who believe that same-sex couples can be just as good parents as heterosexual couples, who disagree that same-sex marriage will undermine the traditional family, and who believe that more acceptance of gays and lesbians will be good for the country are more likely to support same-sex marriage. In Model 5, the addition of feelings about gays and lesbians continues to improve the predictive power and reduces the influence of demographic predictors.

Overall, liberal beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about homosexuality are indeed the strongest predictors of support for same-sex marriage, thus confirming Hypothesis 1a. Hypothesis 1b also receives support in this analysis, since demographic measures mostly lose statistical significance in the full models. The predictive power of beliefs, attitudes, and feelings is so strong that some of the demographic variables (most notably, education and personal contact with gays and lesbians) reverse their signs and become predictors in the opposite direction. This is most likely due to the high correlations among predictors in the models. In fact, a factor analysis (not shown) of all attitudes, beliefs, and feelings in Models 3-5 suggested a one-factor solution, which indicates that the beliefs, attitudes, and feelings are indicative of a common, underlying worldview.

This pattern of results provides strong evidence in favor of the structural theory of culture. Policy attitudes towards same-sex marriage appear to be strongly related to a number of highly correlated beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about homosexuality. In addition, the models appear to leave relatively little room for factors related to one's social context to directly influence attitudes towards same-sex marriage.

**Table 2: Support for Civil Unions**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Male	-.120***	-.103***	-.040	-.010	-.014
Age	-.188***	-.178***	-.169***	-.096***	-.080***
Education	.133***	.109***	.027	.027	.007
White	.082**	.091***	.055*	.048*	.050*
Married	-.069*	-.071*	-.105***	-.061**	-.056*
Parent	-.027	-.033	-.013	-.020	-.007
Income	.010	.020	.016	.031	.017
Political Liberalism	.162***	.157***	.017	-.037	-.042*
City Size	.133***	.127***	.099***	.056**	.053**
Church Attendance	-.231***	-.216***	-.121***	-.088***	-.078***
Born-again or Evangelical	-.190***	-.183***	.003	.027	.030
Gay Friend Colleague Family		.146***	.079***	.034	.009
Born Gay			.152***	.057*	.040
Brought Up Gay			-.001	.020	.004
Can't be Changed			.130***	.070**	.066**
Homosexuality a Sin			-.416***	-.256***	-.236***
Good Parents				.275***	.230***
Undermine Traditional Family				-.089***	-.076***
Acceptance of Gays Good for Country				.230***	.177***
Opinion of Gays and Lesbians					.171***
Uncomfortable					-.026
Civil Union Question Asked First	-.065*	-.056*	-.065**	-.105***	-.104***
Constant	2.302***	2.083***	2.900***	1.776***	1.595***
df	12/1044	13/1044	17/1044	20/1044	22/1044
Adjusted R-squared	.276	.295	.491	.620	.634

Regression coefficients are standardized.  
\* p<=.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

How do the above results compare with attitudes towards civil unions? Table 2 shows both a striking similarity to the models used to measure attitudes towards same-sex marriage and thus represents strong evidence against Hypotheses 2a and 2b. In fact, all five models perform better in predicting support for civil unions than they did in predicting support for same-sex marriage! The reason that the models predicting attitudes towards civil unions perform so much better than the models predicting attitudes towards same-sex marriage is not immediately clear. It may be due to differences in overall level of support in the dependent variable, or it may be due to some unmeasured difference in the factors that predict support for the dependent variables. Whatever the case may be, the models predicting support for civil unions also provide strong evidence in favor of the structural theory of culture: cognitive beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about homosexuality appear to be ideologically related to people’s concrete policy attitudes towards civil unions as well as towards same-sex marriage.

Finally, I examine the group of people who simultaneously oppose same-sex marriage and support civil unions. As Table 3 demonstrates, a non-trivial portion of all respondents either favor or strongly favor civil unions while opposing or strongly opposing same-sex marriage. Of the overall sample, 13.4% of respondents hold this apparently ideologically inconsistent position (approximately 1/5 of all people who express some level of opposition to same-sex marriage). This is a large enough group of people that it is implausible that these respondents are simply confused; there must be some reason that they hold these views.

**Table 3: Support for Same-Sex Marriage and Civil Unions**

		Support for Civil Unions		Total
		Oppose or Strongly Oppose	Favor or Strongly Favor	
Support for Same-Sex Marriage	Oppose or Strongly Oppose	79.5% (585)	20.5% (151)	100.0% (736)
	Favor or Strongly Favor	1.8% (7)	98.2% (385)	100.0% (392)
Total		52.5% (592)	47.5% (536)	100.0% (1128)

Note: Data from “Form 1” only, in which people were asked the question about same-sex marriage first.

Using the independent variables identified in the models above, I performed a series of one-way ANOVA tests and cross-tabulations (analyses not shown) in order to compare this “inconsistent” group of people with both groups who “consistently” answered the questions about same-sex marriage and civil unions. Following Hypothesis 3a, I assumed that the inconsistent group would occupy a “middle” position between the consistently liberal and the consistently conservative groups for most variables. For most variables, this was the case, thus providing support for Hypothesis 3a. For example, as illustrated in Table 4, the group who supported civil unions only was more likely to rate themselves as politically moderate, and less likely to rate themselves as very liberal or very conservative than the appropriate comparison group.

**Table 4: Political Views, by Support/Opposition for Same-Sex Marriage and Civil Unions**

	Mean* (s.e.)	Very Conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very Liberal	Total (N)
Oppose Both	2.43 (.038)	11.4% (63)	47.7% (264)	29.5% (163)	9.0% (50)	2.4% (13)	100% (553)
Support Civil Unions Only	2.75 (.060)	1.4% (2)	37.8% (54)	46.9% (67)	13.3% (19)	0.7% (1)	100% (143)
Support Both	3.17 (.047)	1.9% (7)	22.1% (83)	40.3% (151)	28.8% (108)	6.9% (26)	100% (375)

Note: Data from “Form 1” only, in which people were asked the question about same-sex marriage first.

\* Scale of 1 (Very conservative) to 5 (Very liberal).

This pattern of results proved to be true for all beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about homosexuality, with only two exceptions. First, people who support civil unions only are less likely than either of the other two groups to say that homosexuality resulted from the way people were brought up (as opposed to the two alternative views: homosexuality is something people are born with, and homosexuality is simply the way some people choose to live). This is unlikely to be a substantively significant finding. Second, people who support civil unions only did not differ statistically from people who oppose both same-sex marriage and civil unions in their belief that allowing same-sex couples to get married would undermine the traditional family. This suggests that this group of people might oppose same-sex marriage because of their belief in the “traditional” definition of marriage and family.

Looking at the demographic characteristics of this group, however, shows that people who support civil unions only resemble the consistently liberal group more than the consistently conservative group. There were no statistical differences between the consistently liberal group and the inconsistent group in terms of gender, age, education, size of the city in which they live, and identity as a born-again or Evangelical Christian; but on all these measures, these two groups were significantly different from the consistently conservative group. Similarly, people who support civil unions only were like the liberals but unlike the conservatives in their likelihood of knowing someone personally who is gay or lesbian. Thus, these results show that people who oppose same-sex marriage but support civil unions more closely resemble liberals in their demographic profiles but hold moderate-to-conservative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality.

Table 5 presents the reasons that respondents gave for why they oppose same-sex marriage. Overall, the main reasons that people oppose same-sex marriage appear to be moral/religious: almost 50% said that same-sex marriage is morally wrong, a sin, or against their religious beliefs. A comparison of the reasons given by people who support civil unions with the reasons given by people who oppose both marriage and civil unions, however, shows important differences among these groups of people. It is more common for people who favor civil unions to rely on the heterosexual or procreative definition of marriage as their reason for opposing same-sex marriage, compared with people who also oppose civil unions. Similarly, people who support civil unions are less likely to say that same-sex marriage is morally wrong, compared with those who oppose civil unions. This provides at least moderate support for Hypothesis 3b.

**Table 5: Reasons People Oppose Gay Marriage, by Level of Support for Civil Unions**

		Support for Civil Unions		Total
		Oppose or Strongly Oppose	Favor or Strongly Favor	
Why Oppose Gay Marriage	Definition of marriage is only for a man and a woman	15.9% (91)	26.6% (38)	18.0% (129)
	Purpose of marriage is to have children	3.8% (22)	7.7% (11)	4.6% (33)
	Not natural / Not normal	8.9% (51)	7.7% (11)	8.7% (62)

Morally wrong / A sin / The Bible says	33.5% (192)	17.5% (25)	30.3% (217)
Against my religious beliefs	17.0% (97)	20.3% (29)	17.6% (126)
They don't have stable, long-term relationships	0.3% (2)	2.8% (4)	0.8% (6)
Opens the door to other immoral behavior	2.1% (12)	2.8% (4)	2.2% (16)
It's just wrong / I just don't agree with it	12.4 % (71)	7.7% (11)	11.5% (82)
Other	3.3% (19)	4.2% (6)	3.5% (25)
Economic/legal problems	0.0% (0)	0.7% (1)	0.1% (1)
Bad for children	2.6% (15)	2.1% (3)	2.5% (18)
Undermines traditional family	0.2% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.1% (1)
Total	100.0% (573)	100.0% (143)	100.0% (716)

Note: Data from "Form 1" only, in which people were asked the question about same-sex marriage first.

## Discussion

This analysis of attitudes towards same-sex marriage and civil unions has shown strong evidence in favor of a structural theory of culture. While the analysis of this type of data is not a useful test of the pragmatic theory of culture, it can at least provide a simple measure of the coherence of particular attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. Specifically, this analysis shows that individuals' specific policy attitudes towards same-sex marriage are strongly related to their beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about homosexuality, and the influence of demographic variables once these beliefs, attitudes, and feelings are taken into account is minimal. This suggests that people's beliefs, attitudes, and feelings act, to a greater or lesser degree, as ideological constraints on their formation of other attitudes. Surprisingly, these findings were confirmed when analyzing attitudes about same-sex civil unions. While I expected the models to perform more poorly when predicting attitudes towards civil unions, they actually performed better than towards same-sex marriage, the dependent variable for which they were intended. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of respondents reported consistent attitudes towards both forms of legal recognition of same-sex relationships.

Altogether, these results might be interpreted to show that the debates about same-sex marriage are occurring between two polarized camps of people, each with coherent, incompatible

belief systems. On one hand, people who oppose same-sex marriage believe that homosexuality, and any legal and social legitimation of homosexuality, is wrong; on the other hand, people who support same-sex marriage believe that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality and that equal access to legal and social recognition of same-sex relationships would be a good thing for society. These findings appear to bolster an outlook on American politics that explains a number of current political controversies as the result of a conflict between two incompatible and irreconcilable worldviews. Most commonly known as the “culture wars” thesis, this view has received some empirical support (particularly around issues of gender, sexuality, and abortion), and a number of causal mechanisms have been identified that would cause a polarization in attitudes towards certain political issues (Davis and Robinson 1996; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Evans 2003; Hunter 1991). The culture wars thesis is particularly plausible when backed by a structural view of culture.

Nevertheless, the empirical evidence in favor of this culture wars thesis is highly qualified. These same studies find that Americans’ political attitudes are *not* becoming more polarized over time for *most* issues. Indeed, the patterns of political discourse encouraged by the two-party political system and the news media, which I discussed at the beginning of the paper, are probably leading observers to believe that political disagreements are more ideologically irreconcilable than they are in reality. As Evans (1996) convincingly argues, because individuals have a large variety of status group memberships of any number of combinations, it is unlikely that any individual will always find themselves on the same “side” of every issue as someone else. Thus, people’s beliefs, attitudes, and feelings may not be as systematically and ideologically coherent as they might seem.

The analysis of the group of people who simultaneously oppose same-sex marriage and support civil unions supports this contrary point of view. This sizeable minority of respondents tends to hold moderate-to-conservative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality, but they resemble liberals in a number of demographic characteristics and in their level of personal contact with gays and lesbians. Their opposition to same-sex marriage seems to be based more

on a traditional heterosexual definition of marriage and less on religious or moral opposition to homosexuality, per se. Indeed, this analysis shows that the belief that legalizing same-sex marriage would undermine the “traditional American family” does not prevent someone from also simultaneously believing that legal recognition of same-sex relationships would be good for the country. The fact that this group of people resembles liberals in some respects and conservatives in others suggests that their beliefs, attitudes, and feelings are ideologically inconsistent, and that their support for civil unions may represent a pragmatic desire to balance conflicting views by giving some rights, but not total equality, to gays and lesbians.

Thus, both the structural theory and the tool-kit theory of culture receive some support in this analysis. But because of the limited insight into each theory of culture that can be gained from public opinion analysis, this analysis leaves much to be desired. Future research should go beyond the analysis of public opinion data in order to provide a more definitive and convincing analysis of how these two theories of culture can help explain policy attitudes. In particular, a study of the *processes* by which people form policy attitudes in their everyday lives is required. People’s attitudes and beliefs, after all, are not property of isolated individual brains but are constructed in particular social contexts. Only an analysis of this process of attitude formation can capture the extent to which structural and pragmatic theories of culture each contribute to a scholarly account of how policy attitudes are formed. A methodology that is sensitive to both the ideological and non-ideological mechanisms of opinion formation is required in order to evaluate how variations in cultural objects, social structures, and group contexts affect opinion formation.

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